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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

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AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

This new translation of an undisputed classic aims to be both accurate and readable. Tocqueville's subtlety of style and profundity of thought offer a challenge to readers as well as to translators. As both a Tocqueville scholar and an award-winning translator, Arthur Goldhammer is uniquely qualified for the task. In his Introduction, Jon Elster draws on his recent work to lay out the structure of Tocqueville's argument. Readers will appreciate *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* for its sense of irony as well as tragedy, for its deep insights into political psychology, and for its impassioned defense of liberty.

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Tocqueville: The
Ancien Régime and the
French Revolution*

TRANSLATED BY
ARTHUR GOLDHAMMER

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JON ELSTER
Columbia University



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Introduction by Jon Elster</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
<i>Bibliographical Note</i>	xxix
<i>Chronology</i>	xxxix
Foreword	1
Book I	
I.1 Contradictory Judgments of the Revolution at Its Inception	11
I.2 That the Fundamental and Final Purpose of the Revolution Was Not, as Some Have Thought, to Destroy Religious Authority and Weaken Political Authority	15
I.3 How the French Revolution Was a Political Revolution That Proceeded in the Manner of Religious Revolutions, and Why	19
I.4 How Almost All of Europe Had Exactly the Same Institutions, and How Those Institutions Were Crumbling Everywhere	22
I.5 What Was the Essential Achievement of the French Revolution?	26
Book II	
II.1 Why Feudal Prerogatives Had Become More Odious to the People in France Than Anywhere Else	31

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

II.2	Why Administrative Centralization Is an Institution of the Ancien Régime and Not, As Some Say, the Work of the Revolution or Empire	39
II.3	How What Today Is Called Administrative Tutelage Is an Institution of the Ancien Régime	47
II.4	How Administrative Justice and the Immunity of Public Officials Were Institutions of the Ancien Régime	55
II.5	How Centralization Was Thus Able to Insinuate Itself among the Old Powers and Supplant Them Without Destroying Them	59
II.6	On Administrative Mores under the Ancien Régime	62
II.7	How France, of All the Countries of Europe, Was Already the One in Which the Capital Had Achieved the Greatest Preponderance over the Provinces and Most Fully Subsumed the Entire Country	71
II.8	That France Was the Country Where People Had Become Most Alike	76
II.9	How Men So Similar Were More Separate Than Ever, Divided into Small Groups Alien and Indifferent to One Another	80
II.10	How the Destruction of Political Liberty and the Separation of Classes Caused Nearly All the Maladies That Proved Fatal to the Ancien Régime	93
II.11	On the Kind of Liberty to Be Found under the Ancien Régime and Its Influence on the Revolution	102
II.12	How, Despite the Progress of Civilization, the Condition of the French Peasant Was Sometimes Worse in the Eighteenth Century Than It Had Been in the Thirteenth	112
Book III		
III.1	How, Toward the Middle of the Eighteenth Century, Men of Letters Became the Country's Leading Politicians, and the Effects That Followed from This	127
III.2	How Irreligion Was Able to Become a General and Dominant Passion in Eighteenth-Century France, and How It Influenced the Character of the Revolution	136
III.3	How the French Wanted Reforms Before They Wanted Liberties	143

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

III.4	That the Reign of Louis XVI Was the Most Prosperous Era of the Old Monarchy, and How That Very Prosperity Hastened the Revolution	152
III.5	How Attempts to Relieve the People Stirred Them to Revolt	160
III.6	On Some Practices That Helped the Government Complete the People's Revolutionary Education	166
III.7	How a Great Administrative Revolution Preceded the Political Revolution, and on the Consequences It Had	170
III.8	How the Revolution Emerged Naturally from the Foregoing	179
	Appendix: On the <i>Pays d'état</i> , and in Particular Languedoc	187
	<i>Notes</i>	197
	<i>Index</i>	271

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution (AR) is one of the best and best-known works of history ever written. Some might object that it does not really belong to the genre of history, as it contains no narrative. In the opening sentences of the work, Tocqueville himself asserts, “This book is not a history of the French Revolution, which has been recounted too brilliantly for me to contemplate doing it again. It is rather a study of that Revolution.” As he also explains in the Foreword, he intended to write a second volume that would include a narrative of the Revolution itself. His drafts for that volume are absorbingly interesting, and I shall say a bit about them later.

The possible objection can be sustained only if one has a needlessly purist conception of historical writing. French historians in the twentieth century often contrasted the *histoire de la longue durée* with the *histoire événementielle*, the long-term study of institutional and cultural change with the short-term narrative of actions and events. *AR* certainly spans a long period, from Charles VII in the fifteenth century to the years immediately before the Revolution. Tocqueville shows, for instance, how a resourceful *nobility* slowly turned into an impotent *aristocracy*, and how the towns gradually lost their independence until only a hollow shell remained.

In addition to being a study of the *longue durée*, *AR* can be read as a work of *structural analysis* and as *social science*. Since the expression “structural analysis” can be understood in many ways, I need to explain how I use it. Imagine a house of cards subject to occasional gusts of wind. Although one cannot tell *when* a gust will be strong enough to make the structure crumble, nor *which* card will be the first to fall, one can say with “moral certainty,” beyond a reasonable doubt, *that* the house will fall.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Similarly, it has been said that the 2007 subprime mortgage crisis was “an accident waiting to happen.” We can understand the title of the final chapter of *AR* – “How the Revolution Emerged Naturally from the Foregoing” – along the same lines. As I shall explain, Tocqueville argued that the absolute monarchy had, in fact, become a house of cards. The exact trigger of its collapse was contingent, but by (say) 1750 the occurrence of *some* triggering event was a moral certainty.

In a letter to W. Borgius from 1894, Friedrich Engels wrote, naively, “That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own war, had rendered necessary (*nötig*), was an accident; but that, if a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc.” Tocqueville did not espouse this teleological form of necessity. Had he written in German, he would have said that the occurrence of some event that would trigger the Revolution was *notwendig* rather than *nötig* – causally necessary rather than needed. At the same time, he intended to go on, in the second volume, to study the particular triggering events.

As does any work of history, *AR* invites the question: Did the author *get it right*? On a number of specific factual matters, he did not. As Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff show in *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléance of 1789*, Tocqueville offered many unsupported generalizations about the grievance books that the three estates prepared on the eve of the Revolution. In his essay on Tocqueville in *Interpreting the French Revolution*, François Furet finds many sins of commission and omission in Tocqueville’s treatment of the period before 1750, but endorses the famous “Tocqueville effect” (see the following paragraph) regarding the immediate prerevolutionary period. As he observes, Tocqueville was simply much more knowledgeable about the recent past than about the distant past.

Be this as it may, we can benefit immensely from *AR* because of its powerful causal arguments, which transcend the specific time and place to which Tocqueville applied them. It is, in fact, a work of social science. As is true of other classical works of history, such as the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber or *Bread and Circuses* by Paul Veyne, it offers *exportable causal mechanisms* that are by now part of the toolbox of the social scientist. The best known is probably the “Tocqueville

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

effect” – revolutions occur when conditions are improving, not (as Marx sometimes asserted) when they are going from bad to worse. A related fruitful idea is that of the ineffectiveness of both moderate repression and moderate concessions as responses to social unrest. Equally important in a more general perspective is the idea of “pluralistic ignorance” – the apparent consensus that arises when few people believe in a given doctrine, but most people believe that most people believe it. (This idea was already present in *Democracy in America*.) Finally, one can cite the idea of “second-best” political systems – one evil can offset another, so that if one of them is removed, the overall performance of the system will suffer. I shall return to the way these ideas are deployed in *AR*.

If we read *AR* as a work of social science, it is tempting to ask some slightly anachronistic questions. Was Tocqueville a rational-choice theorist? Was he a functionalist? Did he espouse methodological individualism or holism? How can we situate him with respect to other great social thinkers such as Marx, Durkheim, or Weber? Although one could probably give reasonably meaningful answers to these questions, I shall address them only indirectly. In my opinion, the central task Tocqueville set for himself in *AR* was to explain the Revolution in terms of the *political psychology of the class struggle*. In his analysis of the run-up to the Revolution, Tocqueville, like many Marxist writers, emphasized the triangular struggle among nobility, peasantry, and bourgeoisie. Unlike them, however, he gave center place to symbolic and subjective aspects of the conflicts rather than to objective economic relations. I cite some examples in the next section.

AR is also a work of social science in its extensive use of the comparative method. Tocqueville wanted to explain not only why the Revolution occurred in France but also why no similar upheaval took place in England and Germany. Within France, he wanted to understand why it first erupted in the region around Paris rather than elsewhere. In his cross-country as well as within-country analyses, he deploys the psychological method just described to argue that even though exploitation and oppression were objectively lighter in the revolutionary areas, the burdens were *perceived* to be heavier in these regions.

To set out the structure of *AR* and its relation to the planned second volume, it may be useful to adopt Lawrence Stone’s terminology in *The Causes of the English Revolution*, where he distinguishes *preconditions*

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

(1529–1629), *precipitants* (1629–39), and *triggers* (1640–2). If we apply the schema to *AR*, we can say, in line with my earlier remarks, that the preconditions made the Revolution possible, while the precipitants made it necessary in the sense that some events or actions would predictably occur to trigger it. The preconditions, discussed in Book II, were established over the period from 1439 to 1750. The precipitants, the topic of Book III, developed from 1750 to 1787. The triggering events, discussed in the notes for the planned second volume, occurred from 1787 to 1789.

The preconditions of the Revolution can be summarized in some words spoken to Napoleon by the poet François Andrieux: “On ne s’appuie que sur ce qui résiste” (You can lean only on what offers resistance). In a nutshell, Tocqueville claimed that the successive French kings were so successful in reducing the nobility and the bourgeoisie to a state of political impotence that when Louis XVI needed their help to resist the Revolution, they had nothing to offer: “Nothing was left that could obstruct the government, nor anything that could shore it up” (p. 124). Only in the West of France, where the nobles had resisted the summons of the king to come to the court, did they come to his assistance: “The letter of one intendant who responded to the query has survived. He complains that the nobles of his province are pleased to remain with their peasants rather than fulfill their obligations at court. It is worth noting that the province in question was Anjou, later known as the Vendée. The nobles who are said to have refused to do their duty toward the king were the only ones in France who would later take up arms in defense of the monarchy” (pp. 113–14).

An important reason for the weakness of the nobles was their isolation from the bourgeoisie that followed from their tax exemption. Tocqueville claimed that “of all the ways of distinguishing men and marking class divisions, unequal taxation is the most pernicious and the most apt to add isolation to inequality, rendering both incurable” (p. 85). Because they were not subject to the same taxes, the two classes had few common interests and few occasions to take concerted action. Although Tocqueville does not use the phrase “divide and conquer,” it is very clear from his analyses that this was the strategy he imputed to the kings: “Nearly all the unfortunate defects, errors, and prejudices I have just described owe either their origin, duration, or development to the skill that most of our kings have had in dividing men in order to govern them more absolutely” (p. 124).

Yet the fact that party C may benefit from a falling-out between parties A and B is not by itself proof of intentional *divide et impera*. There is always the possibility of an accidental third-party benefit, *tertius gaudens*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

In fact, Tocqueville does not offer any proof of the more intentional or Machiavellian thesis. His actual explanation of the origin of the tax exemption of the nobles relies on a quite different mechanism. He asserts that the “cowardly” nobility accepted tax exemption as a bribe to allow the king to impose new taxes without calling a meeting of the Estates General. “I dare to affirm that on the day the nation, tired of the interminable disorders that had accompanied the captivity of King John and the dementia of Charles VI, allowed kings to levy a general tax without its consent, and when the nobility was cowardly enough to allow the Third Estate to be taxed provided that it remained exempt – on that day the seed was sown of practically all the vices and abuses that ravaged the Ancien Régime for the remainder of its existence” (p. 94). As an additional explanatory factor, Tocqueville notes that when Charles VII first established the *taille* (a land tax) on a national basis, it would have been dangerous to impose it on the nobles: “When the king attempted to levy taxes on his own authority for the first time, he realized that it would be necessary initially to choose one that did not appear to fall directly on nobles, because in those days they constituted a class that stood as a dangerous rival to the monarchy and would never have tolerated an innovation so prejudicial to themselves. He therefore chose a tax from which they were exempt: the *taille*” (p. 95).

Moreover, one could hardly ask the nobles to pay a tax that was likely to be used against them. In his notes for the second volume, Tocqueville quotes from Turgot, the minister of Louis XVI: “Under Charles VII one began to mount a permanent paid militia, and it was in this period that the *taille* was established on a permanent basis.” He adds that “since the purpose of the paid troops was to subdue the nobles or at least to circumvent them, it was quite natural that, in order to pave the way for the transition, they were not themselves asked to provide the money to be used against them.” This straightforward explanation does not support the story according to which the kings granted tax exemptions to the nobles in order to undermine their political power. In fact, to complicate matters, Tocqueville at one point reverses the causal chain by asserting that the exemptions were a “consolation” for the loss of power: “In the eighteenth century in England, it was the poor man who enjoyed the tax privilege; in France it was the rich man. There, the aristocracy took the heaviest public responsibilities on itself so that it would be allowed to govern; here it retained the tax exemption to the end to console itself for having lost the government” (p. 94).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Even before being exempted from the *taille*, the nobles had enjoyed tax immunities. The novel element was that they were also exempted from the duty to raise troops that had justified the tax exemption. They were “relieved of the very onerous obligation to make war at their own expense, yet their immunity from taxation had been maintained and in fact expanded considerably. In other words, they retained the indemnity while shedding the burden” (pp. 77–8). This amounted to a breach of an *implicit contract*. Without the obligation of public service, the nobility lost its energy and became a mere ornament: “One might say that the limbs gained at the expense of the body. The nobility less and less enjoyed the right to command, but nobles more and more claimed the exclusive prerogative of being the principal servants of the master” (p. 84). The double exemption from raising troops and from paying taxes was a *poisoned gift* – with the added twist that its long-term effect was to harm the donor as well as the recipient, for “on ne s’appuie que sur ce qui résiste.”

The public service that the nobles had traditionally performed included not only the raising of armies for the king but also the provision of public goods to the local peasantry, notably law, order, and famine relief. When they ceased to perform these tasks, they broke a *second implicit contract*, this time with the peasantry: “If the French peasant had still been subject to the administration of his lord, feudal dues would have seemed far less unbearable to him” (p. 37). Just as the royal militia replaced the nobles in their military function, so did the royal *intendant* and his *subdélégué* replace the *seigneur* in his administrative function. And just as the tax exemption fueled the envy of the bourgeois for the nobles, so did the withdrawal of the nobles from local administration fuel the hatred the peasantry felt for them.¹

There is one gap in this otherwise admirably tight argument: Why, how, and when did the *intendant* (or his *subdélégué*) take the place of the *seigneur* in local administration? Virtually all references to the *intendant* in *AR* are to his functions in the eighteenth century, and there is no mention of the creation of the office in the sixteenth century. A divide-and-conquer explanation might be that the successive kings deliberately undermined the local power of the nobles by luring them to the court.

¹ The reader may be confused by Tocqueville’s occasional tendency to use “hatred” and “envy” as if they refer to the same emotion. They do not: The urge of hatred is to destroy the hated person; that of envy is to destroy the envied object, not its possessor. In the analysis of a revolution that began by destroying privileges and ended by killing the privileged, this distinction is obviously important.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

Tocqueville, however, explicitly rejects this idea. He notes that “the nobility’s abandonment of the countryside has often been attributed to the specific influence of certain kings and ministers, notably Louis XIV and Richelieu” (p. 113), but objects that “We must nevertheless beware of attributing the desertion of the countryside by what was then the leading class of the nation to the direct influence of certain kings. The primary and persistent cause of this desertion was not the will of certain individuals but the slow and steady operation of certain institutions. Proof of this can be seen in the fact that when the government wanted to counter the evil in the eighteenth century, it could not even slow its progress. As nobles lost their political rights without acquiring others in their place, and as local liberties disappeared, the emigration of nobles increased. There was no longer any need to lure them from their homes because they no longer wished to stay in them. Country life had become insipid for them” (p. 114). The alleged “proof” is not one, however, since the fact that the kings tried unsuccessfully to reverse the trend later does not prove that the trend was not originally due to their initiative. In fact, the phrase that “there was no longer any need to lure them from their homes” implies that it had been necessary at some point in the past. The details of the process remain obscure, however.

Whatever ambiguity there may be concerning the importance of intentional royal action in Tocqueville’s account of the decline of the nobility, there is none whatsoever in his explanation of the decline of the towns: “Louis XI had curtailed municipal freedoms because he feared their democratic character. Louis XIV did not fear them but destroyed them nonetheless. Proof that this was the case can be seen in the fact that he was willing to sell these freedoms back to any town that could pay for them. In fact, his intention was not so much to abolish as to trade in them, and if he did abolish them, it was done as it were inadvertently, as a purely expedient financial policy” (pp. 47–8). In other words, the king abolished municipal freedom by putting offices up for sale, but from his point of view the revenue he could raise from letting towns buy their freedom back was just as good. For the towns, the choice was between political decline and financial ruin. Make-believe autonomy did not work: “The people, who are less easily fooled by the mere semblance of freedom than one might imagine, everywhere lost interest in town affairs and lived as strangers within their own town walls” (p. 49).

In his analysis of the fragmentation of the prerevolutionary bourgeoisie, Tocqueville broke new ground. Referring to the obsessive striving for

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

priority (*préséance*) in guilds and professions, he asserts that “each of the thousand small groups of which French society was composed thought only of itself. . . . What is stranger still, moreover, was that all these men who remained so aloof from one another had become so similar that, had they been forced to change places, they would have been unrecognizable. More than that, anyone capable of sounding the depths of their minds would have discovered that all the petty barriers that divided these very similar people from one another struck them as both inimical to the public interest and hostile to common sense; in theory they already adored unity. Each of them clung to his own particular status only because others distinguished themselves by theirs, but all were ready to meld into a single mass, provided that no one else could claim any advantage for himself or rise above the common level” (pp. 91–2). This illustrates the mechanism of pluralistic ignorance. The fragmentation of the bourgeoisie took place because each group believed, *wrongly*, that all others wanted only to promote their particular interests.

With the decline of the nobility and of the towns, and the isolation of the various bourgeois elements from one another, the preconditions for the Revolution were in place. Among the precipitants, the most important is encapsulated in the “Tocqueville effect,” the idea that subjective discontent (and hence the likelihood of revolution or rebellion) and objective grounds for discontent can be inversely related to each other. Tocqueville offers two synchronic versions and one diachronic version of the paradox. At the beginning of Book II, he asks why the Revolution occurred in France rather than in Germany, given that feudal burdens were lighter in France. Somehow, “their yoke seemed most unbearable where in fact its burden was lightest” (p. 31). The resolution of the paradox is that in Germany the nobles still performed the administrative functions that justified their appropriation of feudal benefits.

In Book III, Tocqueville notes that another synchronic version of the paradox could be observed within France itself: “The parts of France that were to become the principal center of that revolution were precisely those where progress was most evident” (p. 156). The areas in Île-de-France where the Revolution would break out enjoyed greater personal freedom and lower taxes than the Western lands that would be the bastion of the counterrevolution: “If one studies what remains of the archives of the former Île-de-France district, it is easy to see that it was in the regions around Paris that the old regime reformed itself soonest and most profoundly. . . . Nowhere, by contrast, did the old regime maintain

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

itself better than along the Loire, toward its mouth, in the marshes of Poitou and the moors of Brittany. It was precisely there that civil war flared up and spread and that the most durable and violent resistance to the Revolution occurred. Thus, one might say that the better the situation of the French became, the more unbearable they found it" (pp. 156–7).

The mechanism behind this synchronic paradox is not quite clear. As we saw, the nobles of Vendée were "pleased to remain with their peasants" and hence generated more loyalty than absentee landlords did. At the same time, the feudal burdens on the peasantry in these regions were heavier than in the Île-de-France. The net effect of these two mechanisms could presumably go either way. Yet I believe the reason why Tocqueville so unambiguously states that the better-off were more discontented is that he confused the synchronic and the diachronic paradoxes. In the continuation of the last-cited passage, he goes on to restate the paradox in what is probably the most famous statement in the whole work: "It is not always going from bad to worse that leads to revolution. What happens most often is that a people that put up with the most oppressive laws without complaint, as if they did not feel them, rejects those laws violently when the burden is alleviated. The regime that a revolution destroys is almost always better than the one that immediately preceded it, and experience teaches that the most dangerous time for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform" (p. 157).

This is obviously a diachronic statement, presented, misleadingly, as equivalent to the synchronic one that immediately precedes it. If we focus on the diachronic paradox, we can approach it as part of the larger question of how governments respond to an actual or predictable crisis. Broadly speaking, we may distinguish four responses: preemption, concession, moderate repression, and severe repression. Wisdom dictates preemption – meeting popular demands before they are formulated, or granting more than is demanded. In a letter to Lord Radnor on May 26, 1848, Tocqueville asserts that "the only way to attenuate and postpone [the] revolution, is to do, before one is forced to do it, all one can to improve the situation of the people." Both Louis XV and Louis XVI were sorely lacking in this quality of mind. Moreover, as we shall see shortly, even preemptive measures may backfire.

Severe repression, for its part, requires a decisiveness that was also absent. Although Tocqueville does not mention the well-known aversion of Louis XVI for spilling the blood of his subjects, he does cite the more general tendency of the eighteenth-century monarchy to be *fortiter in*

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

modo, suaviter in re: “In the eighteenth-century monarchy, the forms of punishment were terrifying but the penalties was almost always moderate. One preferred to frighten rather than harm, or, rather, one was arbitrary and violent out of habit and indifference, and mild by temperament” (p. 169). Although the comment refers to criminal justice, it also applies to the preference for moderate over severe repression. The administration was left, therefore, with the alternatives of concession and moderate repression.

It is a fundamental Tocquevillian idea that *half-measures tend to work against their purpose*. When you try to get the best of both worlds you often get the worst of both. Consider first moderate repression: “At the beginning of a revolution such measures [granting no real liberties but only their shadow] always fail and merely inflame the people without satisfying them” (p. 133). Or again: “The half-measures that were imposed on the enemies of the Church at that time did not diminish their power but rather increased it. . . . Authors were persecuted just enough to elicit complaint but not enough to provoke fear. They were subjected to enough restraint to provoke resistance but not to the heavy yoke that might quell it” (p. 139).

Consider next concessions or moderate reform. As we saw, Tocqueville claims that a people “that put up with the most oppressive laws without complaint, as if they did not feel them, rejects those laws violently when the burden is alleviated.” For each demand that is granted, more will spring up until the capacity of the system to absorb them is broken. Yet we have to ask: *Why* does one concession generate the demand for more? Generally speaking, it could be because it induces a change in the *beliefs* of the citizens, in their *preferences*, or in both.

On the one hand, the granting of a demand may provide new information about the resolve of the administration, and support the belief that further demands will also be met with a positive response. (For a contemporary example, consider how the nonintervention by the USSR after the first free elections in Poland in June 1989 signaled to the opposition in Hungary that intervention was unlikely there as well.) In *AR* Tocqueville does not appeal to this mechanism, but in the notes for the second volume he cites it to argue that the recall of the Parlement of Paris in September 1788 was a point of no return for the monarchy. “The king . . . recalled parlement and rescinded the stamp law and the territorial tax. . . . If the king wished to remain the king of the old monarchy, this was precisely what he should not have done. From that moment on, all sorts of concessions were indispensable.”

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

On the other hand, reforms that satisfy a given desire may at the same time cause dormant or latent desires to appear on the horizon. This was Tocqueville's main answer: "The evil that one endures patiently because it seems inevitable becomes unbearable the moment its elimination becomes conceivable. Then, every abuse that is eliminated seems only to reveal the others that remain, and makes their sting that much more painful. The ill has diminished, to be sure, but sensitivity to it has increased" (p. 157). Once the first evil has been removed, other evils will appear as removable and therefore as intolerable. A cognitive change (the evil is not inevitable) triggers a motivational change (it is intolerable). Although Tocqueville is often cited as arguing that the improvement of conditions cause subjective expectations to rise even faster, this is not an accurate rendering of his views. His argument was that an objective improvement today makes people feel subjectively worse off *today*, not that it generates expectations that will make them feel frustrated tomorrow.

Chapter 5 of Book III does not address the "Tocqueville paradox" as usually understood but another paradoxical effect of the initiatives of *AR*. Here Tocqueville discusses preemptive measures to alleviate the misery of the people in the years immediately before the Revolution. However wise the measures themselves may have been, the wisdom of the way they were proposed was highly questionable. The privileged classes publicly stated their own responsibility for the plight of the peasantry, as if their intention was to create disturbances rather than to prevent them: "This was to inflame each and every individual by enumerating his woes and pointing a finger of blame at those responsible, thereby emboldening the victims by revealing the small number of authors of their woes, piercing their hearts to the quick, and setting them ablaze with greed, envy, and hatred" (p. 164). Adding insult to the perception of injury, they also used contemptuous language when referring to the individuals they intended to help as if the latter were unable to understand what they were saying: "What is rather peculiar, moreover, is that, to the striking expressions of interest that the people inspired in them, they occasionally added public expressions of contempt. . . . The provincial assembly of Haute Guyenne, while warmly pleading the cause of the peasants, called them 'coarse and ignorant creatures, troublemakers, and uncouth, undisciplined characters.' Turgot, who did so much for the people, expressed himself in largely similar terms" (p. 163). The precipitants of the Revolution thus included preemptive no less than reactive attempts to improve the situation of the population.

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

As I noted, in *AR* Tocqueville does not discuss the triggers of the Revolution. In his notes for the second volume we find, however, a number of insightful comments on the dynamics of the Revolution. I shall briefly summarize three of them.

Tocqueville emphasized the enormous importance of events in the Dauphiné (around Grenoble). In 1788, the immensely influential assembly in Vizille achieved an unprecedented unity of action among the three orders: “The assembly of Vizille was in a sense a material and visible sign to all that this new union had taken place and showed what effects it might have. This was the last time that an event in a remote corner of a tiny province in the Alps proved decisive for all of France. It brought to the attention of all what had been visible to only a few, showed everyone where power lay, and thus decided the victory in an instant.” An effect (or a sign) of their unity was the adoption of the system of “cross-voting” in electing deputies to the Estates General. In this system, deputies for a given order were chosen jointly by members of all three orders. Tocqueville asserts that the Estates General might have found it easier to agree if this electoral system had been universally adopted: “If the vote in common had to be adopted, it is unfortunate that what was done in Dauphiné was not done everywhere, because there the deputies of all three orders were chosen by all three orders, and this might have favored an accord.” Yet the spearheading effect of the Dauphiné, though important, was blunted by the nonadoption of cross-voting in almost all other electoral districts.

In the notes for the second volume, Tocqueville argues, once again, that the half measures Louis XVI took against the courts of the Ancien Régime (the parlements) and the Estates General had the effect of accelerating the Revolution. In its struggle against the parlements, the government was “employing violence to the point of irritation but never pushing it to the point of fear.” Tocqueville also refers to the “attitude of power mixed with incomplete violence and disdain.” Fatally, “to raise hopes of voting by head [in the Estates General] and yet not authorize it was to spur the Third Estate to attack and allow the privileged to resist.” As the king left the situation shrouded in uncertainty, each side could self-servingly and self-deceptively believe that it would be resolved in its favor. After the attempt on June 23, 1789, by Louis XVI to impose his will on the assembly, the latter “irritated and aroused rather than demoralized by this mild pressure from the government, increasingly adopted the attitude of being in charge.”

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Tocqueville also discusses the suicidal fragmentation of the elites. After citing complaints in the grievance books of the clergy over the trespassing of the lords on the property of their tenants, he adds that “several other grievance books [of the clergy were written] in the same spirit and with the same bitterness of peasants become curés. Later on we will see the clergy come in for similarly strong abuse from the nobility. The two orders had yet to learn to make common cause.” In his notes to himself, Tocqueville wrote that “when I come to the era of class warfare, show clearly how dizzying the disintegration was. It was not just the bourgeoisie that made war on the nobility but the lesser nobility that attacked the greater, the lower clergy the higher.” Whereas previously the conflicts within and between the privileged orders had benefited the government, they now became so virulent as to bring it down: “Nothing serves more to . . . fuel despotism [than] the hatred [and] jealousy of the various classes. But with the proviso [that] this hatred and envy are nothing more than a bitter and tranquil emotion, just enough to prevent people from helping one another but not enough to spur them to fight. There is no government that will not collapse once violent clashes between the classes have begun.”

The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution is not merely an historical study of the preconditions and the precipitants of a world-historical event. It is also the expression of Tocqueville’s personal philosophy, notably his obsession with *liberty* as the overriding political value. Published in 1856, it was written under Louis Napoleon’s Second Empire, which Tocqueville detested for its oppression of civil and political freedom. In the planned follow-up volume, Tocqueville also intended to discuss Louis Napoleon’s uncle, the first Napoleon. Whereas Tocqueville felt only contempt for the nephew, he expressed both great admiration for Napoleon’s gifts and utter revulsion for the ways he used them to crush liberty.

According to Benjamin Franklin, “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” Substituting wealth for safety, Tocqueville would agree. He would also make a stronger statement: Those who give up liberty for the sake of wealth will *obtain* neither: “[I do not] think that a genuine love of liberty ever arises out of the sole prospect of material rewards, for that prospect is often barely perceptible. It is indeed true that in the long run liberty always brings comfort and well-being and often wealth to those who are able to preserve it. At times, however, it temporarily hinders the use of such goods. At other times despotism alone can ensure their

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

fleeting enjoyment. Those who prize liberty only for the material benefits it offers have never kept it for long” (p. 151). The benefits of freedom are essentially by-products of the love of freedom for its own sake.

Tocqueville was acutely aware of this difference between universal rights and liberties on the one hand and irregular privileges on the other. Modern conceptions of rights imply that if anyone is free to do X or has the right to do X, then everyone has the right or freedom to do X. In the Ancien Régime, by contrast, one could enjoy only “a kind of irregular and intermittent liberty, always limited by class distinctions, always bound up with the idea of exception and privilege, which allowed people to defy the law almost as much as the exercise of arbitrary power and seldom went so far as to guarantee to all citizens the most natural and necessary rights” (p. 111). Although “limited and twisted . . . disorderly and unwholesome” (p. 111), it was nevertheless a second-best defense against the arbitrary despotism of the royal administration. Albeit in perverse and pathological forms, the Ancien Régime did contain some checks on absolute power: “This bizarre and flawed constitution of public functions served as a substitute for any kind of political guarantee against the omnipotence of the central government. It was an irregular and badly constructed dike that dispersed the government’s force and blunted its impact. . . . The irregular intervention of the courts in government, which often disrupted the orderly dispatch of the public’s affairs, thus served at times to safeguard liberty. It was a great evil that limited a still greater one” (pp. 103, 108).

The Revolution broke down all these barriers to centralization and absolutism. After it had run its course, “centralization was salvaged from the ruins and restored. And because it was raised up again, while everything that had once kept it in check still lay in ruins, what suddenly emerged from the entrails of a nation that had just overthrown the monarchy was a power more extensive, more minute, and more absolute than our kings had ever exercised” (p. 183). The tragedy of the Revolution lies in the fact that its main actors, in their admirable struggle for freedom, created the conditions for a more repressive regime than the one they had brought down.

The fascination that Tocqueville’s book will always exercise on readers owes a great deal to the seamless way in which the historical analysis is overlaid with this sense of tragedy. The attraction is further heightened by Tocqueville’s exquisite use of irony. To bring home his point that the elites openly expressed their contempt for those whose woes they

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

sincerely wished to alleviate, he cites “Mme Duchâtelet, who, according to Voltaire’s secretary, was quite comfortable disrobing in front of her servants, in view of the absence of incontrovertible proof that valets were men” (p. 162). To illustrate the hypocrisy of the noblemen, he recounts that they “generally addressed the intendant simply as ‘Monsieur,’ but in their petitions I noted that they always addressed him as ‘Monseigneur’ (My Lord), just as the bourgeois did” (p. 169). The amused references to the indignation of the wigmakers at the award of priority to the bakers in the general assembly and to the willingness of the privileged orders to “forgo the benefits of unequal taxation” as long as they could maintain the “appearance” of exemption (p. 163) provide other examples among many. Moreover, the reader is constantly startled by the epigrammatic formulations in which Tocqueville often encapsulates key ideas. Reading him is a feast of the mind.

It remains to be said that Tocqueville also knew revolutions from the inside, as it were. During the 1830 July Revolution, he observed the revolutionary violence as a semiparticipant observer. Writing to his fiancée and future wife Marie Mottley on July 30, he expressed his horror at seeing “the French endlessly cutting each other’s throats.” Later, he played a very active political part during the Revolution of 1848. Although he had no military function, he was a close observer of the battles and skirmishes taking place in the streets and even inside parliament, as when the crowd invaded the Assemblée Nationale (of which he was a member) on May 15. His absorption in the events was existential. In March 1849, he complained to a friend that “now that properties and life are no longer at stake, I cannot interest myself in anything. This is the evil of revolutions, which, like gambling, create the habit of emotions and make us love them for their own sake, independently of the gain.”

His *Recollections*, covering the period from 1848 to 1851, is chock full of vignettes and acute insights. Let me mention two of them. At one point, he notes that the revolutionary codes of honor “tolerate murder and allow devastation, but theft is strictly forbidden.” Also, he observes that Lamartine tried “to dominate the Mountain without quenching the revolutionary fires, so that the country would bless him for providing security, but would not feel safe enough to forget about him.”

Each observation has an echo in the notes for the second volume of *AR*. In the correspondence between the deputies from Anjou and their constituencies, on which he relied heavily (and perhaps too much), he notes the following statement from July 13, 1789: “In the tumult the prisoners

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978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

of common crimes escaped; the people opposed their release, declaring that criminals were not worthy to mix with the makers of liberty. . . . If an armed man committed something vile, he was immediately taken to prison by his comrades." He comments that "this is particularly French." From the same correspondence, he cites another letter from July 1789 from the deputies to their constituents, saying that "we must temper the movement of the violent passions without smothering a salutary fermentation," as an illustration of his own claim that "the national assembly wanted to limit the fire and was afraid of extinguishing it."

There is little doubt that Tocqueville's personal exposure to revolutionary events shaped and informed his study of the Revolution. He probably had a better understanding of the dynamics of revolution than anyone before or since.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Tocqueville's first study of the French Revolution, "The social and political state of France before and after 1789," was translated by John Stuart Mill and published in the *London and Westminster Review* in 1836.

The French text of *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* can be consulted in the two major modern editions of Tocqueville's works: in Volume II.1 of the *Oeuvres Complètes* (Gallimard, 1953) and in Volume III of the *Oeuvres* (Éditions de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 2004). (It can also be found online at http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/De_tocqueville_alexis/ancien_regime/ancien_regime.html.) The former has a valuable Introduction by Georges Lefebvre, perhaps the preeminent historian of the Revolution. In Volume II.2 of the *Oeuvres Complètes* and in Volume III of the *Oeuvres*, readers can find slightly different versions of Tocqueville's notes for the planned second volume of the *AR*.

Tocqueville claimed that in preparing *AR* he had worked only with primary sources, because he found it painful to read what others had written on the subject. The best study of these sources is Robert T. Gannett, *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for The Old Regime and the Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 2003). Tocqueville had, however, read the histories of the Revolution by Jules Michelet and by Adolphe Thiers. More important influences, because more

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Bibliographical Note

“Tocquevillian” in their approach to the Revolution through political psychology, were probably Joseph Droz, *Histoire du règne de Louis XVI* (1839) and Madame de Staël, *Considérations sur la Révolution Française* (published posthumously in 1818). Broader aspects of the genesis and the reception of the work are discussed in Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French* (University Press of Virginia, 1998). A unique perspective on the work is offered in Robert Palmer, ed., *The Two Tocquevilles, Father and Son: Herve and Alexis De Tocqueville on the Coming of the French Revolution* (Yale University Press, 1997).

In *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), François Furet situates (as did Lefebvre) Tocqueville in the historiography of the Revolution. Some of Tocqueville’s specific claims are assessed in John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) and in Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

Social scientists have also addressed Tocqueville’s ideas in *AR*, notably “the Tocqueville effect.” In “Toward a Theory of Revolution” (*American Sociological Review* 27, 1962), James Davies proposed a synthesis of Marx and Tocqueville. Raymond Boudon offers a simple formal model of the Tocqueville effect in “The Logic of Relative Frustration,” in *Rational Choice*, ed. Jon Elster (Blackwell, 1986). Tocqueville’s pioneering insights into pluralistic ignorance are highlighted in Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Chronology

- 1805 Born in Paris on July 29.
- 1814/15 Restoration of the French monarchy.
- 1828 Meets Marie Mottley, whom he married in 1835.
- 1829 Attends lectures on French history by Guizot.
- 1830 July Revolution and accession of Louis Philippe.
- 1831–2 Travels in the United States with Gustave de Beaumont, officially to study the American penitentiary system.
- 1833 Publication of *Du système pénitentiaire aux Etats-Unis et de son application en France* (American translation published the same year).
- 1835 Publication of the first volume of *De la démocratie en Amérique* (English translation published the same year).
- 1835 Travels in England and Ireland.
- 1837 Runs for election to the Chamber of Deputies, but loses in the second round.
- 1838 Elected to the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques.
- 1839 Runs for election again and is elected in the first round. He will be constantly reelected until 1849.
- 1840 Publication of the second volume of *De la démocratie en Amérique* (English translation published simultaneously).
- 1841 Travels in Algeria.
- 1841 Elected to the Académie Française.
- 1846 Travels in Algeria.
- 1848 Predicts a revolution in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies on January 27.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Chronology*

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| 1848 | Outbreak of the February Revolution on February 22. Fall of the July Monarchy and creation of the Second Republic. |
| 1848 | Elected to the Constitutional Committee of the newly elected Constituent Assembly. |
| 1848 | Opposes Louis Napoleon in the presidential campaign. Louis Napoleon elected president with 74 percent of the vote. |
| 1849 | Appointed foreign minister in a cabinet presided over by Odillon Barrot. Louis Napoleon dismissed the cabinet after five months. |
| 1850 | First signs of tuberculosis. Begins working on his <i>Souvenirs</i> of the 1848 Revolution (first published in 1893). |
| 1851 | Louis Napoleon stages a military coup d'état on December 2. Tocqueville is arrested along with 200 protesting members of the National Assembly and held in jail for two days. He retires from politics. |
| 1852 | Louis Napoleon proclaims the Second Empire and takes the title of Napoleon III. |
| 1852 | Begins research and writing for <i>L'ancien régime et la Révolution</i> . |
| 1856 | Publication of <i>L'ancien régime et la Révolution</i> (English translation published simultaneously). |
| 1859 | Dies on April 16. |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TOCQUEVILLE: THE ANCIEN RÉGIME
AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

