

## Chapter 6

# Tocqueville's pride

In view of Tocqueville's criticisms of philosophy, it may seem paradoxical and presumptuous to call him a philosopher. But he calls himself a "new kind of liberal," and he sets forth a new liberalism that he has rethought. In *Democracy in America* he criticizes materialist philosophy for encouraging democracy's habit of finding nothing in life but material pleasure and for depriving it of the pride excited by religion. In *The Old Regime* he criticizes rationalist philosophy for seeking systems of reform without caring about liberty. It is not hard to see the two philosophies as aspects of the modern political philosophy that is the source of liberalism: materialism for the sake of reform rather than resignation to the inevitable, and rationalism for the material improvement of life rather than contemplation. Now in the *Recollections* [*Souvenirs*] Tocqueville displays the pride he wants to add to liberalism, his own somewhat rueful pride, in an account of the Revolution of 1848 in France, which he witnessed and acted in. It is an account of failure, so hardly a triumph of pride. But it is also instructive to philosophers who fancy themselves statesmen and to citizens who let themselves be inspired by philosophers.

### For myself alone?

Tocqueville's *Recollections* differs markedly from his two other major works and was composed in between them, in 1850–51. At the beginning he says he has been "removed momentarily

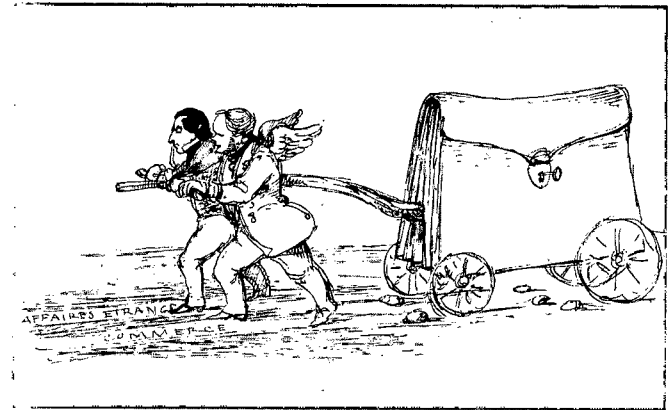
from the theater of affairs" and is unable to pursue any continued study because of his health. In October 1849 he had been forced to resign his office as Minister of Foreign Affairs, the highest and last post he was to hold in politics, which he held only for five months; then, in March 1850, he spat up blood for the first time, the sign of the disease that was to claim his life nine years later. He is alone now, "in the midst of my solitude," he says dramatically in the manner of Rousseau, and he decides to retrace the events of 1848 and to "paint the men" he saw taking part in them. This is not at all to be "a work of literature," like his other books, written for an audience; it is "for myself alone" (*pour moi seul*). And the *Recollections* was indeed shown but to a few friends, and published not during his lifetime but only in 1893 by the permission granted in his will.

This writing, Tocqueville says, will be a "mirror" in which he looks at his contemporaries and himself, not a "painting" destined for the public. His only goal is to procure "a solitary pleasure" for himself, to "contemplate alone" a true portrait of society and to see "man in the reality of his virtues and vices, to understand his nature and to judge it." So that his words may be sincere, he must keep them "entirely secret." Here is an emphatic distinction between looking in a mirror by himself—what he will do—and making a painting for others, which he will not do. And yet he has already said that he will "paint" the men he has seen, and in the next paragraph he speaks again of the events he wants to "paint." Moreover, in the rest of the book he goes on to "paint" men and events in his most brilliant style, not at all for his own amusement only. Though in a letter he describes the work as "daydreaming" (*revasserie*), he in fact consulted other actors and checked documents to verify his memory as well. Why the equivocation in his intended audience for this work?

The *Recollections* is indeed a painting, but for the next generation. Its many striking portraits of individuals are the distinctive feature of this work—by contrast to the other two books, which study

causes and mention individuals only to illustrate generalizations. Here, starting with his mordant analysis of King Louis-Philippe, the reader is treated to one memorable, epigrammatic sketch after another of individuals not in command of events but victimized by their faults and sometimes by their virtues. Neither family (his sister-in-law) nor friend (J.-J. Ampère) is spared, and near the end of the book comes a devastating portrait of President (soon to be Emperor) Louis Napoleon as half an old conspirator, half an epicurean lover of easy pleasures. To publish these delights during his lifetime would have been the soul of indiscretion and would probably have cost him his liberty, but to record them for the next generations enables Tocqueville to show how practical politics actually works. In *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime*, he extols the practice of political liberty; here he shows it at work—or rather, shows it failing to be established in France.

More than that, Tocqueville shows himself at work, or rather in failure. He himself is a man of letters in politics, like those he denounces in *The Old Regime*. Now he shows how far the man of letters can go in guiding politics, how much he depends on chance, how greatly he depends on the cooperation of mediocrities with whom he must work. This is the mirror aspect of the *Recollections* working in harmony with, but also in contrast to, the painting aspect, for when he looks at himself he sees a painter who is both in politics and above it as an instructor. At the end of *Democracy in America*, he says he had striven to enter into the point of view of God in order to judge between democracy and aristocracy. But he also said that God, unlike men, sees singular events as well as generalities. Here he looks at humanity from the side of individuality, for events are singular because individual human beings are diverse. The philosopher in politics, like the men of letters in eighteenth-century France, is inclined to think that general truths can be systematically applied to produce permanent improvement in human affairs. Thus a general truth can command obedience from particular circumstances and force them to do its will.



9. A sketch by Tocqueville of himself and his colleague Lanjuinais yoked to the ministry.

Tocqueville shows in his *Recollections* that this obedience will not occur. He puts himself in a situation, the 1848 Revolution in France, where he, a man of letters or a philosopher, wanted to control events but was unable to do so. Of course he opposed the theoreticians, above all the socialists, who wanted that revolution, and he did not claim to represent “philosophy” or indeed anything but himself. But in opposing the Revolution he took upon himself the role of counter-philosopher, who brings out the perversity of presuming philosophers. The 1848 Revolution overthrew the monarchy of Louis-Philippe, a result that Tocqueville vainly opposed, and then established a republic weakened by partisanship, in whose government he joined responsibly but not eagerly. The republic was in turn overthrown by Louis Napoleon in 1851, who reestablished Napoleon’s empire, now become a mild, democratic despotism combining administrative centralization and bourgeois complacency. The 1848 revolutionaries did not get what they wanted, but neither did Tocqueville. He saw the worst of his predicted fears realized and was close enough to the crucial events to offer his own example of the impotence of a thinker. By

not publishing his *Recollections* of these events until much later, he allows us to see inside his mind and to judge as he did, seeing these events unconcealed by the soothing platitudes required to please an audience of contemporaries.

Tocqueville gives a critical example of the failure of his advice. Though hardly an enthusiast for the monarchy, he believed it was better for France to maintain a constitutional monarchy with an elected assembly than to risk having a republic with an elected president that would open the way for a successor to Napoleon—the very thing that happened. The monarchy was overthrown by a violent invasion of the constitutional assembly (the Chamber of Deputies) by an armed mob on February 24, 1848. This event legitimated the right of a mob in Paris to act in the name of the French people and to use revolutionary violence against the constitution, and in reaction, it later drove the middle class and peasants into supporting Louis Napoleon to protect their property against that threat.

Tocqueville



10. A mob storms a barricade during the 1848 Revolution in France. Tocqueville both foretold and opposed the Revolution but did not succeed in preventing it.

Tocqueville, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, was there on that day and tells of it in the *Recollections*: as the mob gathered he looked around for someone who could attempt to pacify the mob and fixed on Alphonse de Lamartine, poet, historian, and at that moment the most popular politician in the assembly. Tocqueville went to him and whispered in his ear that “we shall be lost” if you do not stand up to speak now. Lamartine refused; he would do nothing that might save the monarchy or risk his popularity. He spoke later, but too late, and the chance for safety was lost. A small troop of National Guards arrived, Tocqueville says, also a half-hour too late. Tocqueville was where he needed to be, but his advice was not taken and the result “changed the destinies of France.” This is a drama somewhat contrived, perhaps, but with a purpose. It shows the limitations on the political scientist’s advice, on possible reform, and on the blessings of political liberty. In the other two published books, Tocqueville praises the accomplishments of politics in America and condemns the lack of them in France, but the work unpublished in his lifetime ends with the sardonic statement that after two hard-earned successes in foreign affairs, the cabinet he belonged to fell. In that work he lets the constraints on politics, on the durability of political liberty, be known—but a long time later.

Tocqueville's pride

## Socialism

Democracy does not fare well in the *Recollections*. Tocqueville says that in writing this work he wants to “keep the liberty to portray [paint] without flattery,” and since he does not praise the justice of democracy in it as he does in *Democracy in America*, one might have to infer that he was flattering democracy in that book. When he exposed the petty bombast of political discussion in America, he contrasted it with the power of a “great orator discussing great affairs in a democratic assembly,” but in this work he confesses:

I have always thought that mediocre men, as well as men of merit, have a nose, a mouth, and eyes, but I have never been able to fix

in my memory the particular form of these features in each one of them. I am constantly asking the names of these unknowns whom I see every day, and I constantly forget them... I honor them, for they lead the world, but they bore me profoundly.

This is not the attitude of a statesman eager or able to please. Beyond this unintended disdain lies Tocqueville's judgment that "socialism will remain the essential character and most fearsome remembrance [*souvenir*]" of the 1848 Revolution. For a long time the people had been gaining power, and it was inevitable that, sooner or later, they would confront the privilege of property as the main obstacle to equality. Socialism would seem to be the next stage of the democratic revolution that he made the theme of *Democracy in America*. His appraisal of the 1848 Revolution as socialist contrasts markedly with Karl Marx's verdict in his pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), who condemned it as a petty bourgeois farce. Marx was obliged to fit his disappointment into his theory of history, which he did by remarking that when history repeats itself (as his authority Hegel had said), it is as farce after a tragedy. The tragedy was the French Revolution of 1789, and by "tragedy" Marx meant not the Terror of 1793 but the Thermidor reaction against it. Tocqueville follows his appraisal with an opposite reflection on the general disgust with socialism in 1848, saying that it may return because the future is more open than men who live in each society imagine. He of course regarded property, especially petty bourgeois property, as necessary to political liberty, while Marx was hostile to it just because it sustained the delusion of political liberty.

Socialism to Tocqueville is a combination of passion in the people and illusions in men of letters, with their "ingenious and false systems," a later generation of those he will denounce in *The Old Regime*. The literary spirit in politics consists in seeing what is ingenious and new more than what is true, in preferring an interesting tableau to a useful one, in showing oneself sensitive to actors who play and speak well regardless of the consequences of

the play, and in deciding on the basis of impressions rather than reasons: all things he saw in his friend, the literary scholar Ampère, and perhaps would have seen in the surlier character of Marx.

The illusions of system, ridiculous in themselves, are not harmless in practice, yet Tocqueville has greater admiration for those who might revolt than for careless theorists of revolution. With more of the "painting" of individuals featured in the *Recollections*, he presents a tableau from his household contrasting his porter (not named) and his valet, Eugene. The porter was an old soldier of bad reputation in the neighborhood, a little loony, a good-for-nothing who spent all his time in a bar when he was not beating his wife—in sum, a socialist by birth or temperament. During the insurrection of June 1848, this man went around one day with a knife threatening to kill Tocqueville when he next saw him. But when Tocqueville returned in the evening, the porter did nothing and showed he had meant all along to do nothing. During revolutions, Tocqueville remarks, people boast of imaginary crimes just as in ordinary times they boast of imaginary good deeds. Eugene, however, was a soldier in the National Guard on the other side, who with great calm continued to perform his duties as valet while serving in the army of repression. He was not a philosopher but had the equanimity of one. Nor was he a socialist, but if socialism had won out, he, with his lack of restiveness and facile adjustment, would have become one. Achieving socialism calls forth qualities of spiritedness that will disappear under socialism.

The 1848 Revolution was not intended by the theorists whose theories called for a reform that could only be accomplished by revolution. Nor was it foreseen except by Tocqueville in a manifesto in October 1847 and in a warning speech in the Chamber of Deputies on January 27, 1848, a month before the event. "Do you not sense—what should I say—a breeze of revolution in the air?" he exclaimed. Taking up in the *Recollections* a theme of his other two books, he distinguishes general causes from particular

accidents and finds six of each in the making of the Revolution. Men of letters fasten on general causes, particularly those "absolute systems," which he says he hates, "narrow in their pretended grandeur and false in their air of mathematical truth." Political men, by contrast, living in the midst of daily events, attribute everything to incidents in which they are involved. Tocqueville states that many historical facts have occurred by chance, or by such a mixture of secondary causes as amounts to chance, but that chance does nothing that has not been prepared in advance. The preparation in general causes can be foreseen, perhaps, only by a genius like Tocqueville, not with uncanny foresight but because his extraordinary vision is not obscured by the delusion of a system that diminishes all causes and every chance to a theory that is his, as if he were in charge of the universe. The literary spirit in politics is that of a tyrant, and the best check against it is the stubbornness of fact, sustained by the unpredictability of chance.

## Chance and greatness

To the extent that chance determines, so far can human virtue intervene, for chance is what could have been otherwise and virtue requires scope for action. When virtuous people act, they replace what would have happened by chance, or by the mediocre actions of those not virtuous. So virtue has the intent of "banishing" chance, as Tocqueville says in *Democracy in America*. But virtue also presupposes chance so as to be able to replace it. In the deterministic, scientific systems Tocqueville rejects there is room for neither chance nor virtue. Virtue is not virtue if it is compelled; it must be voluntary, the virtuous person must be free. Virtue is the best indicator of liberty because a bad use of liberty, for example the corruption in French government under the monarchy of Louis-Philippe, is likely to be compelled, not free—as in this case by the passion for material enjoyments that so characterized that regime.

Yet Tocqueville is not a virtue salesman, touting his product as the only true liberty. His new kind of liberalism does not take the

way of Kant toward a universal, categorical moral law that will express and guarantee liberty. Looking at actual individuals in the *Recollections*, he is impressed with the limits of human virtue. It is in the first place rare, and it is divided into public and private virtues so that an individual may have one set without the other, even that one set gets in the way of the other. Honesty is the virtue most in supply, but when action is required, a "bold rascal" may be worth more than an honest man. Democrats hardly ever fail to mix "nonsense" with their honesty. Madame de Lamartine Tocqueville found to be a woman of "true virtue," but to her virtue "she added almost all the defects that can be incorporated in it and that without changing it make it less agreeable." In *Democracy in America* he said that the "idea of rights is nothing other than the idea of virtue" in politics, but he does not discuss rights in the *Recollections*.

Instead, Tocqueville dwells on the distinction between petty and great; the bourgeois monarchy that was overthrown, the republic of socialism that was threatened but never accomplished, and the second Napoleonic empire were all triumphs of the petty over the great. Throughout Tocqueville's writings greatness is the inspiration of liberty, and greatness can be said to be the main feature of his "new kind" of liberalism. The desire for greatness is the motive that justifies and ennobles democratic patriotism, even democratic imperialism and colonialism.

Much attention has been given recently to Tocqueville's writings on Algeria endorsing French colonialism, a position thought to injure his reputation as a friend of democracy. But he approves of French colonialism in Algeria (of course without the use of slavery) as the expression of a desire for greatness necessary to dignify democracy above the assertion of a mediocre universal equality. He agrees with his friend John Stuart Mill that "civilization" is above "barbarism," though they might have quarreled over whether the superiority goes so far as to justify despotism, as Mill said in his book *On Liberty*. Still, the

distinctness of democratic nations and the consequent glory of democratic patriotism point to the possibility of colonialism, should any of them develop a "civilizing mission" (not a phrase of Tocqueville's). The solution today is to drop the distinction between civilization and barbarism, thus transforming civilization into "culture." Cultures are all equal, and so the idea of multiculturalism today has nothing to say about greatness. Multiculturalism then becomes comparable to globalization, both of them apolitical in their intent to override political divisions, and thus hostile to Tocqueville's insistence on political liberty, requiring distinct political bodies. Insofar as political liberty is inspired by the desire for greatness, it risks embarking on enterprises to do good for others when the beneficiaries might have preferred to do good for themselves.

If Tocqueville is a new kind of liberal because he always has his eye on human greatness, why does he remain any kind of liberal? Is not greatness inescapably aristocratic, so that with greatness always in view he is not really a liberal at all—to say nothing of a democrat? To answer, one may compare him with Aristotle, who cannot be accused of being a liberal. Tocqueville agrees with Aristotle that man is by nature a political animal. He never repeats Aristotle's definition, but he clearly abandons the liberal alternative to it, first found in Hobbes, that man is by nature free and comes under politics only by consent to an artificial sovereign. Where then does he depart from Aristotle?

The departure can be seen precisely in the idea of human greatness that Tocqueville advances as distinct from virtue and human goodness in Aristotle. For Aristotle the good is sovereign because everything we humans aim at we *think* is good, and Aristotle extends this human view to all nature. But the sovereignty of the good is what Hobbes, the first liberal, denies. He posits that all of us desire self-preservation, the good we have in common, but we use our self-preservation in diverse ways to pursue goods we diversely opine to be good. There is no

single highest good, but only a distinction between the minimum universal good, self-preservation, and the various goods we pursue according to our opinions. In politics, this makes for the fundamental, liberal distinction between the state, which secures the minimum good, and society, where we differ and live in what is today called pluralism.

Tocqueville takes this liberal route, following Hobbes and departing from Aristotle and classical political thought generally. But, agreeing with Aristotle, he holds on to the soul, and he speaks of "degraded souls." Liberalism frowns on the soul because it joins the minimal good of preservation to the maximum goal of the good life. A degraded soul would be one at a considerable distance from the good life, quite distinct from the liberal view that a self has merely made its own choice to live as it pleases, that its worth cannot be measured by a single, allegedly true notion of the good life. But instead of the "good life" Tocqueville speaks of "greatness." What difference does this make?

Greatness is not in nature but is attributed especially to humans *by* humans; it refers to greatness in the view of humans, or as Tocqueville says, "human greatness." It is in part variable and arbitrary, but the aspiration to greatness and admiration of it are in human nature. Only humans make judgments of what or who is important, and greatness is what humans consider important. It is distinguished from many merely useful things that are good and therefore are part of "goodness" but may be unimportant. Greatness is possible without virtue, as he says of Napoleon that he "was as great as one can be without virtue." With virtue one might be greater, but virtue is rare. Greatness is rare too, but being what humans consider important, which they do in various, often conflicting ways, it is more diverse than virtue, hence more compatible with political liberty. All have some notion of what is great, as what they look up to. But there is no necessary unity or consistency to "great" as there is to "good." That is why it would be rejected as sovereign by the classical thinkers. Greatness is

also an accomplishment of practice, not theory. When Aristotle described the great-souled man, he was speaking of the realm of moral virtue in practice, as opposed to the intellectual virtue of a philosopher. Philosophers may have their notion of the greatness of the whole of nature, but they would use it to disparage the things most men consider great. Tocqueville remains with most men on this point. His distrust of philosophy is revealed in his insistence on greatness. Perhaps he has a hidden philosophy somehow akin to Aristotle's to justify his neglect of philosophy, a philosophy in defense of politics. But for the most part he finds it necessary to defend politics through disparagement of philosophy, for the liberal philosophy he knew was now the greatest danger to liberty and liberalism.

## References

### Preface

For the phrase "new kind of liberal," see AT's letter to Eugène Stoeffels, July 24, 1836, and for analysis of it, see Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987). On AT's influence, see Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998, orig. 1967), François Furet, *In the Workshop of History*, chap. 10 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Translations of AT's *Democracy in America* (hereafter *DA*): Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, trans. and eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (New York: Library of America, 2004). Many of his letters can be found translated in Roger Boesche, ed., *Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). A sampling of current scholarship on AT is in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, Cheryl B. Welch, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

### Chapter 1

The soundest biography of AT is André Jardin, *Tocqueville, A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988); more recent is Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville, A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). On the "great lottery of paternity," see AT's letter to his brother Edouard, September 2, 1840, and the somewhat different view in his letter to Louis de Kergorlay, November 11, 1833.