



The Thought of de Tocqueville

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The Thought of de Tocqueville

Review of Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford, 1962: Clarendon Press), *History* 50 (1965), 199–206



Alexis de Toqueville by Théodore Chassériau, 1850 (Versailles)

The title of this book is a just description of its contents. Mr Lively's exposition of Tocqueville's ideas about society may claim to be fuller, clearer and more detailed than any that exists in the English language today. Historians and sociologists may complain that too little attempt has been made to relate Tocqueville's ideas to the social and political circumstances and discontents in which they were conceived; historians of ideas may wonder whether the paternity and milieu of his ideas have been sufficiently investigated; philosophers may be tantalised by excessively brief and tentative analyses of central social and political concepts and by excessive caution in the author's comments on the value or, more particularly, the internal coherence of Tocqueville's views. But these are tasks which Mr Lively has not set himself; these omissions do not detract from his success in doing what he aimed to do: to expound and examine what Tocqueville thought and said. I can render the reader no better service than to attempt to indicate the topics with which he deals and his treatment of them.

Mr Lively begins with a short vignette of Tocqueville's personality. He [200] makes an excellent case for supposing that Tocqueville's lifelong reluctance to commit himself wholly to any cause or party was due to painful pride – a desire to preserve an unsullied inner image of himself as a man of total integrity, even if this involved the choice of political impotence as the price for avoiding squalid compromises and opportunism for the sake of power or success. Mr Lively paints Tocqueville as an 'alienated' nobleman who claimed that no political group in France satisfied his ideals and, like many weak persons, compensated himself by pronouncing harsh judgements on stronger, less scrupulous and more successful men of action. The views of this frustrated, fastidious, timorous, aloof, uncomfortable writer remain relevant and original, because he attained to a degree of sceptical objectivity that enabled him to note and analyse permanent characteristics and long-term social and political tendencies, with a squeamish distaste for the indignities of the day-to-day conflict that was a substitute for a perhaps unattainable impartiality. Moreover, he was an unsurpassed observer; and his very fears and weaknesses (on which his equally gifted contemporary Herzen commented with some acidity in his own autobiography) led him to take cover on the sidelines, a safe, if somewhat craven, position which his short and unsuccessful debut as a Minister of the Second Republic did little to alter. In describing

Tocqueville's opinions Mr Lively displays one of the most admirable characteristics of a scholar – genuine respect for the views of his subject. He resists the fashionable tendency to reduce every explicit belief to psychological compulsions or ineradicable prejudices or rationalisations of interests bound up with a writer's origins or social situation or other roots reaching into subconscious depths. It is a great relief to find no amateur sociology or psychology in a work of this kind: but instead, scrupulous regard for what Tocqueville actually said and wrote, with due regard for the nuances of his sensitive, impressionable and civilised mind.

Mr Lively regards the passion for liberty as Tocqueville's *idée maîtresse*. Liberty for Tocqueville is not so much something negative – the absence of obstacles to the realisation of the possible desires of men – as capacity for positive choice, without which there is no moral life. Liberty for him is not (despite their similarities) what it is for Mill, the opportunity for the rich spontaneous development of the greatest possible number of human potentialities, nor simply a precondition of material or intellectual progress or of the discovery of the truth; it is rather, as it is for Kant, an end in itself, an absolute value: 'He who seeks in liberty anything other than itself is destined for servitude.' Even though it may have been Tocqueville who taught Mill to speak about the cramping effect of social convention and of the pressure of democratic majorities, yet the supreme goal for him was not the creation of the *uomo universale* of the Renaissance – much as he admired him – but the sheer capacity for the exercise of genuine choice, choice as such. The greatest danger of modern times for him was that men might refuse to [201] choose, might abdicate, prefer security and happiness to the moral obligation of exercising the right of self-determination. Mr Lively makes an excellent case for supposing that what Tocqueville cared for most deeply was not equality of rights or even resistance to despotism but a certain kind of moral character; what he feared most was not oppression but apathy – the voluntary shuffling off of his responsibilities by the individual. Tocqueville is very far from being an anarchist, even in some ideal sense: he believes that freedom needs restraints but is not identical with restraint; that too much love of order (which equality seems to him to entail) is evidence of inner slavery. Determinism is still more dangerous: whatever the natural or historical limitations upon men's freedom of action, this freedom exists; the belief that it does not, itself (he thinks) makes for

authoritarianism: any doctrine according to which men propose, but some other agency wholly determines, what occurs – whether this is the physical or social structure of the universe, or the inevitable march to victory of a chosen class or race or Church – disposes men to give up and let themselves be dictated to. Thus Hegel and Buckle are taken severely to task for breeding obedience to a despotically organised array of facts: because some processes cannot be averted, it does not follow that experience consists of nothing else; because limits to freedom exist, it does not follow that within them men are not powerful and free. Mr Lively makes out a convincing case for Tocqueville's unyielding libertarianism against those who argue that his professed belief in the possibility of a political science entails acceptance of determinism. Mr Lively rejects this and argues that for Tocqueville political science is both analytic and a guide to action: it acts like a compass which points to unalterable facts, but does not compel even the most rational to one unique course of action. Some excellent pages follow on Tocqueville's sceptical empiricism: at the heart of which lies his belief that 'frenetic and unreasonable passion for certainty' was 'an intellectual disease'; Tocqueville boldly rejected the great rationalist dogma that 'the world was full of demonstrable truths, and it was only a question of looking carefully to see them'. Mr Lively dwells on Tocqueville's distrust of all general rules: they were at once indispensable and treacherous; so, indeed, were historical analogies; nothing could be a substitute for direct confrontation with a concrete situation. Models were useful – indeed, his own treatment of American democracy has frequently been attacked (by Bryce notoriously) for being over-stylised, a child of an a priori theory, invented to deal not with American but with French problems. Mr Lively defends Tocqueville against such criticism with skill and moderation. He distinguishes the theoretical and concrete components in Tocqueville's thought; and points out, against the historians' traditional distrust of ideas, the obvious truth that without an edifice of theoretical preconceptions, fact gathering – observation, accumulation, detected, scientific probing – is sterile, indeed, absurd.

[202] Having established Tocqueville's position on liberty and objective science, Mr Lively comes to the heart and centre of Tocqueville's doctrine – his views on equality. He points out that Tocqueville does not clearly distinguish social, economic, political

or intellectual equality, and supposes this to be deliberate, since for Tocqueville these concepts interpenetrate. Tocqueville's equality is a cluster of 'notions and sentiments' which bind a society, not a social or economic category, or a set of explicit beliefs, but a pattern of behaviour, something not dissimilar to Herder's *Nationalgeist*; matter not so much for intellectual history as for social psychology: an outlook and form of life which, in the country which exhibits it most conspicuously – the United States – enters into collision with a rival pattern, that of individual liberty. This conflict occurs in the region of *moeurs* – *mores* – for which there is notoriously no English equivalent. Mr Lively emphasises Tocqueville's awareness of the real power of ideas; like his contemporary Heine, he understood that dreams, ideals, aspirations, ideas generated, it may be, by visionaries or philosophers, but simplified or distorted in the thought of ordinary men, can influence society far more profoundly than the ripe wisdom of statesmen. For Tocqueville ideas 'are to the social body what the life force is to the human body'; while they may originate in social conditions, they acquire an independent power of their own that is at once strong and impalpable; they enter into mysterious combinations with economic forces, institutions, non-ideological factors of various kinds, and exercise a fearful influence which it is an occupational weakness of practical men to underestimate. Mr Lively gives an admirable account of Tocqueville's analysis of the way in which ideas, *mores*, political actions blend into the peculiar critical mass which exploded in the revolutions of his time: in particular of the part played by radical social ideas in causing the events of 1848. We are left in no doubt that Tocqueville radically disagreed with Marx in supposing ideologies to be epiphenomena of underlying social and economic processes – that, rightly or wrongly, he regarded them as factors powerful in their own right, causes of change or stability. So for example, he was fascinated by the 'deferential' character of English society, and declared that unless the imagination of the English broke 'this fetter', no revolution would occur in that country: 'It is ideas that stir up the world, not blind needs' – even though ideas may be merely 'interests acting and speaking'. When Namier claimed Tocqueville as an ally in his disparagement of the power of ideas, he was, as Mr Lively clearly demonstrates, mistaken.

Some ideas for Tocqueville were more central than others – for instance, the craving for freedom, justice, virtue: these belong to the

nature of man, to his core, and their weakening is identical with dehumanisation. Other ideas, for example 'honour', depend on passing social conditions that alter in time and space. This is not the same kind of distinction as that which Marxists make between 'base' and 'super[203]structure'. For Tocqueville, there is a perpetual interplay of determined and undetermined (changeable) factors; of social and physical conditions, ideas, trends, conscious and unconscious forces, some permanent, some ephemeral, some institutionalised, others afloat in men's minds and behaviour. In America free habits create free institutions: in France, free institutions should – if all goes well – create free habits. There is always some freedom of choice; his intimate correspondent Gobineau is taken to task for supposing that race or any other factor preconditions everything. Mr Lively places Tocqueville in the tradition of Montesquieu, Burke and Constant as against the materialists and scientific determinists. Tocqueville, like Montesquieu, is anxious to get the balance right: the eighteenth century overestimated the power of swift reforms; we underestimate it; they were over-confident; our malady is passivity, pessimism, a lack of confidence in our own will and virtue. Tocqueville's doctrine is voluntaristic; to look upon his realism as in line with Durkheim's sociological determinism is, if Mr Lively is right, a major fallacy.

The author gives a good if somewhat uncritical account of Tocqueville's view of democracy, in particular of his fear of democratic equality (not of political democracy) as likely to sap originality and pride and liberty. After quoting the celebrated passage in *Democracy in America* about industrious sheep, Mr Lively caps this with Tocqueville's speech in the National Assembly directed against 'the right to work', over which the radical left had suffered so crushing a defeat. Mr Lively's exposition is, as always, just and clear; but he is apt to leave the field too much to his hero. His references to the conditions that led to the demands which Tocqueville thought so sinister – the poverty and impotence of the masses, the degrading nature of work in the factories – are too cursory; it is perhaps a little artificial to say so little about these – for us today cardinal and decisive – factors, because they were not conspicuously present on Tocqueville's mind. And can we be so sure that they were not? Mr Lively deals faithfully with Tocqueville's obsessive awareness of the dangers of rule by majorities – their tendency to be despotic, unstable, irrational, hostile to self-criticism,

uninformed, and so on; and his simultaneous insistence that this is better than minority rule, better than any oligarchy, for there is no other method of giving the masses that political education that alone can make them enlightened, rational, tolerant. Tocqueville is forever trembling that organisation will overwhelm freedom, that liberties will be trampled upon, since this would suffice to make life valueless. Valueless for whom? A recent writer has reminded us that it is Tocqueville who wrote:

When the world was full of men of great importance and extreme insignificance, of great learning and extreme ignorance, I turned aside from the latter to fix my observation on the former alone, who gratified my sympathies. But [204] I admit that this gratification arose from my own weakness [...]. Such is not the case with that Almighty and Eternal Being, whose gaze necessarily includes the whole of created things [...].

We may naturally believe that it is not the singular prosperity of the few, but the greater well-being of all, which is most pleasing in the sight of the Creator and Preserver of men. What appears to me to be man's decline, is to His eye advancement [...]. A state of equality is perhaps less elevated, but it is more just; and its justice constitutes its greatness and its beauty.¹

So, for the sake of justice the freedom prized by the civilised sceptic may have to – should morally – be given up. This is not anti-egalitarian cant, and is far more fearless and honourable than anything in Burke or Constant and the other defenders of a threatened culture: and more agonised. Mr Lively does not, it seems to me, allow quite enough for this deeply divided strain in Tocqueville.

Mr Lively is at his best in describing Tocqueville's tough-minded opposition to the notion common to the central currents of Western political thought – Christian, utilitarian, authoritarian and anarchist alike – that there is a single public interest, not identical with sectional interests which pervert public policy. For Tocqueville, all

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York etc., 1841: J. & H. G. Langley etc.), vol. 2, book 4, chapter 8, 353–4; quoted by George Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies* (New York, 1963: The Free Press of Glencoe), 234.

interests are sectional: he may be thinking of Rousseau and the Jacobins, but every monistic theory of politics is incompatible with his position; if separate interests are intrinsic to mankind as such, the purpose of statecraft is to balance them, not destroy or unify them or help them towards any ultimate Hegelian *Aufhebung*. This is a far more clear-cut position than any ever adopted by Mill; we are not surprised to discover that Tocqueville believes in the exercise of rights even in immature communities, even though this may at first lead to a certain degree of chaos, for otherwise men will never learn to stand and respect reciprocal liberties. Hence his opposition to paternalism and colonialism, every form of rule by outsiders no matter how benevolent. What he fears most is apathy: the great, indeed the greatest, merit of free governments is that they 'allow men to become temporarily weary of their liberty without losing it': he said this in 1836 and it is at the centre of his thought thereafter.

Mr Lively skilfully unwinds what is empirical and what is a priori in Tocqueville: on the one hand, he believes in the supreme importance of *mores* – an empirical growth to be empirically studied and used; men can be moulded only along the grain: this makes him a suspicious democrat, a reluctant egalitarian. On the other hand his notions both of liberty and of justice are a priori ideals: it matters less who governs than how much government there is and how just it is. The curtailment of liberty in the interests of efficiency frightens him; here he stands in the tradition of Montesquieu, Constant and his contemporary Sismondi. Restrictions on liberty may be necessary to save life, but it is idle to maintain that a cripple is a healthy man: centralisation of government (which he perceived to be inevitable) is less fatal than that of administration. Dicey thought that he misrepresented administrative law: in the [205] course of his rebuttal of this charge, Mr Lively once again illuminates Tocqueville's central conception of man as a being both civilised and active, whose essence lies in freely choosing between possibilities: without this there is neither liberty nor justice.

Every political doctrine embodies a vision of man in terms of which alone it can be truly understood. Tocqueville sees man neither as a happy cooperator with his fellows, nor as a hero, nor as a blindly aggressive, semi-bestial being only just kept, by stern government and the fear of punishment, from tearing others and himself to pieces, nor as a calculating utilitarian, nor as a pleasure-seeker, nor as a part of a mystic body of the faithful penetrated by the Divine

Spirit, nor as primarily a producer or consumer, above all not as the docile child of the state which guarantees the supply of his basic needs. His notion of man is closer to that of Kant and secularised Protestantism, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and the supreme value of self-determination, to which paternalism and leading strings are a greater danger than cruelty or neglect or chaos.

Mr Lively is somewhat chary of analysis; when he permits himself to uncover the different senses and applications of one of Tocqueville's key concepts – liberty, for instance – his treatment is a model of clarity, skill and good sense. He does this too seldom: yet the need for it, in Tocqueville's case, is great. Mr Lively's exposition of his author's views on the rule of law, on juries, on the superiority of English institutions, valuable as it is, might, perhaps, have yielded place to a discussion of such central problems as the conflict in Tocqueville of the ideals of liberty as independence and equality as justice: or his assumption that without class differentiation variety – the salt of life – must be extinguished or reduced. Is individual variety incompatible with a classless society? Are Marx and Herzen, Kropotkin and Tawney totally mistaken? Mr Lively does not say. On the other hand his comments on Tocqueville's views on religion are original and indispensable: particularly on his effort to believe that the Roman Church was not bound to be anti-democratic, a conclusion fed by his fear of the consequences of the bitter anti-clericalism of the French liberals of his day. Tocqueville's attitude to religion appears to have been, on the whole, utilitarian: it is a social cement, a safety valve for passions that might otherwise feed a revolutionary torrent dangerous to individual liberty; it is a proper channel for natural passions, which, however, it must not be allowed to dam up too strongly: a mild Erastian position, somewhere between Spinoza and Durkheim, a purely pragmatic or ethical approach with a grasp of the role of social myths.

Tocqueville's political ideas are scattered through his works; he was not a systematic theorist, nor a man given to (or even a connoisseur of) general ideas, nor a thinker of sufficient range and depth to cut across many fields of human thought and for that reason to be called philosophical. He is an observer of genius, who clothed his *aperçus* in [206] epigrams and aphorisms and sudden, arresting, short-range generalisations; but he seldom, if ever, stirs thought with the force and boldness of a Hobbes or a Hume, or a Rousseau; he has not the systematic brain or moving moral

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directness of Mill: still less does he open windows in literally unfathomable depths like Hegel and Marx. Great and ambitious thinkers often exaggerate passionately. Tocqueville is highly original without seeking to build a system, and without ever raising the tone of his voice. Mr Lively, by surveying, collecting and organising these scattered lights, has performed a very notable service for students of Western political life in general and of nineteenth-century thought in particular. My only major criticism of this book is that it should have been more ambitious and cut deeper – something of which the author is eminently capable. But it is ungenerous to complain that an admirable piece of work is not something else that its maker did not set out to accomplish. Mr Lively attributes to Tocqueville social insight and a conceptual imagination. He possesses both qualities himself; and has written a book which, if it is likely to please students of ideas more than philosophers or historians, is none the worse for that.

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Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 8 January 2023