

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# Tocqueville on Socialism and History

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My purpose here is to consider Tocqueville's understanding of socialism. It may well be the case that the authority of Tocqueville has never been stronger than it is today, while the authority of socialism is weaker now than it has been since the time of Tocqueville. As a political actor, Tocqueville opposed socialism. He also did so as a political theorist, but with an appreciation of its greatness and the theoretical strength of its challenge. He suggested, in fact, that the cause of human liberty would suffer in the absence of that challenge. In the name of Tocqueville, liberals ought to reflect upon the case for socialism more seriously than they characteristically do. It reveals how problematic and difficult the defense of human liberty is in our time.

From a theoretical perspective, Tocqueville's understanding of socialism reveals his most fundamental debt to Rousseau. Tocqueville's indebtedness to Rousseau has often been recognized, although mostly in terms of the similarity of their political solutions to the problems of democracy.<sup>1</sup> This practical debt has often been overstated. Tocqueville, for example, emphatically did not reduce religion to civil religion. Nor did he attempt to reduce the particularity of modern individuality to the general will.<sup>2</sup> But Tocqueville did understand the history of the West or of humanity in essentially the same way as Rousseau described it in his *Discourse on Inequality*. It is in light of that history's account of the movement away from natural order and goodness, toward human disorder and misery that Tocqueville accounted for socialist revolution.

Tocqueville's understanding of socialism, and especially the relationship between socialism and bourgeois liberalism, is found mostly in his *Souvenirs*. There he writes that socialism was the theory or "philosophy," or "the most essential feature," of the Revolution of 1848. He also says that "[i]t is no part of the plan of these *Souvenirs* to inquire into what gave" the revolution "this socialist character." But then he asserts that socialist revolution "should not have surprised the world as much as it did," and goes on to explain why.<sup>3</sup>

It turns out that explaining why the revolution occurred, to the surprise of almost everyone but Tocqueville, and why it was, necessarily, a socialist one, is essential to the *Souvenirs*. Tocqueville's purpose in writing them, he says, is to give himself a "solitary pleasure," one that comes from "understanding and judging" human, particularly political, affairs. This pleasure comes partly from seeing a "true picture," and partly from knowing that one's understanding and

judging is truly superior (S, p.4). Tocqueville says that one purpose of his recollections is to show himself the superiority of his political science, of his “understanding and judging of human, particularly political, affairs” (S, p.4).

#### TOCQUEVILLE’S PREDICTION

Tocqueville provides two pieces of evidence in the first chapter of the *Souvenirs* that he, alone, predicted the coming of revolution in the midst of bourgeois enervation and tranquility. He was able to do so, in part, because he had no interest in the perpetuation of that middle-class regime. He was contemptuous of its efforts to reduce public life to an “ingenious mechanism,” and “gently to drown revolutionary passion in the love of material pleasure” (S, pp.11–12).

The bourgeois or middle-class regime was openly and selfishly exclusive. It was ruled by the “Haves,” those with property. Their purpose was to have more. The result was “a rapid growth in public wealth” created by a government that became indistinguishable from a “trading company.” The ruling class exploited government for its economic interest, ignoring the interest of both “the people,” or those with little or no property, and the aristocrats, who remained devoted to virtue and political life for their own sake. Political life and “political passion” virtually disappeared, because they had no outlet (S, pp.5, 12–14, 73).

Tocqueville’s contempt, even hatred, for that regime came from his partisanship on behalf of greatness, a political or aristocratic perspective. He knew he needed political life to live well. So strong was this need that his contempt did not cause him to withdraw from the bourgeois political stage. But he could not take its “petty” distinctions or interests seriously enough to act well. He became doubtful and indecisive, and anxious and lacking in self-confidence. His mind was extremely disordered in the bourgeois world, and he says it pained him to remember it. His condition became miserable or hateful to himself. What moderated his doubtful anxiety, he says, was political passion, and no political issue was interesting or “great” enough to arouse his passion (S, pp.77–85).

Bourgeois life makes aristocrats or partisans of political “greatness” miserable. Their desires cannot be reduced to “the peaceful, regular movements of a machine.” Tocqueville’s miserable aristocratic detachment allowed him to see that the contempt the aristocrats felt for bourgeois selfishness was also shared by the “people,” the industrial workers. His personal disorder allowed him to perceive that, despite the absence of “visible disorder,” “disorder had penetrated far into men’s minds” (S, pp.11–13).

To some extent, the cause of this disorder was the exclusion of the people from property. Had they, like the rural peasants, been included among the

“fraternity” of property owners, perhaps their minds or opinions and passions could have been much more readily regulated (S, pp.87, 95). The extremity of the bourgeois rulers’ selfish exclusivity was stupid and self-destructive. But Tocqueville does not root the revolution simply in the people’s poverty. He did not see them, as Marx did, as revolutionaries once they were reduced to nothing economically.

#### HUMAN PROGRESS AND REVOLUTION

Tocqueville says the revolution was surprising because no one had noticed “that for a long time the people had been continually gaining ground and improving their condition, and that their importance, education, desires and power were all constantly growing.” They were “growing” in all those qualities which are distinctively human. Tocqueville also says that their prosperity increased, but not as quickly as their desires expanded (S, p.75).

As the people become more distinctively human, their minds become more “restless.” This mental restlessness mixes with and inevitably causes “ferment in their desires.” This mixture makes desire and mental restlessness interdependent (S, p.76). Restlessness expands desire, and the new desire arouses more restlessness. The desires of human beings expand more rapidly than their ability to satisfy them. The people become better off, objectively or quantitatively, but they experience themselves as more discontented or miserable.

This paradox that improvement in conditions produces discontent accounts for Tocqueville’s most celebrated contribution to political science, the so-called revolution of rising expectation. He says in the *Old Regime and the Revolution* that “popular discontent” increases when conditions improve, and when conditions improve revolution is most likely. He acknowledges that “[t]his may seem illogical—but history is full of such paradoxes” (OR, p.176).

#### DISORDER AND HISTORY

History is “illogical” because it is the record of human distinctiveness, of the human movement away from the natural standards of logic or impersonal consistency or regularity and contentment. It becomes, over time, more illogical, as the mind becomes more disordered and restless, and as human action becomes more extreme or “feverish” in response to growing discontent (cf. DA, p.536 with S, p.11). History is full of paradoxes because it is the record of what Tocqueville calls, in *Democracy in America*, the brute with the angel in him (DA, p.546). The human condition is the incoherent mixture of brutish and angelic qualities. History is the record of human beings becoming progressively more aware of and dissatisfied with this disordered or diseased condition. The

condition itself, as a result of this growth in self-consciousness, becomes more disordered. Revolution, Tocqueville says, is caused by this “malady of men’s minds” having become too extreme (S, p.35).

This understanding of human distinctiveness or history as an essentially “feverish” disorder is an old one. It is present in Plato’s *Republic*, perhaps the first account of the mind or soul’s growing disorder as it moves toward the chaotic individualism of democracy, a movement that produces the disorder of relativism, then apathy, and finally tyranny.<sup>4</sup> It is also present in Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, where human beings, over time, move away from natural order and toward their self-created disorder by making themselves progressively more human.<sup>5</sup> History, for Rousseau, is the growth of self-consciousness, restlessness, and misery (*Discourse*, especially n. i).<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville’s account of the paradoxical history of the restless mind and its discontents is most fundamentally indebted to Rousseau.

The movement of the history of the West, for Tocqueville, is from instinct to calculation, sublime illusion to realistic selfishness, material poverty and weakness to prosperity and power, political oppression to liberty, and contentment to misery. It is from what human beings have been given by nature to what they have made for themselves. This movement is also from aristocracy to democracy through the mind’s skeptical or doubtful destruction of the prideful beliefs that support human distinctiveness.

Human beings, over time, become more human or historical or self-conscious and less natural or subordinated to instinct or merely brutish desire. Passion leads the imagination to produce prideful belief to limit self-consciousness in the service of the natural desire for happiness or contentment. But, over time, the mind’s restlessness frees itself from even most of that (DA, pp.482–87). Human existence, eventually, becomes unendurable, and human beings self-destruct. History is the emergence, growth, and self-destruction of humanity. Tocqueville thought he lived in a revolutionary or spectacularly self-destructive time, one in which extreme restlessness and madness were more common than ever before (cf. DA, pp.535, 538 with OR, p.157).

### *Popular History*

Tocqueville gives his most detailed and most clearly Rousseauian account of human progress in his “Memoir on Pauperism.” In feudal times, he begins, everyone was relatively content because no one, by contemporary standards, had comfort. The people, in their slavish condition, were particularly content:

Their means of subsistence was almost always assured; the interest of the master coincided with their own on this point. Limited in their desires as well as their powers, without anxiety about a present or future that was not theirs to choose, they enjoyed a kind of vegetative happiness. It is as difficult for civilized man to understand its charms as it is to deny its existence.<sup>6</sup>

The people's minds were not restless. They lacked anxiety about their futures. Their simple desires were easily satisfied, because they were not mixed with mental restlessness or anxiety. They were weak and oppressed, but they had no reason to mind. They lacked the qualities that Tocqueville associated with human liberty or greatness. They were, in his mind, almost literally vegetables.<sup>7</sup> Their happiness or contentment was natural or subhuman. It goes without saying that had the people in feudal times been exposed to socialist doctrine they would not have been aroused.

"Each century," Tocqueville goes on, "extends the range of thought" and "increases the desires and powers of man" ("Memoir," p.7). As history or civilization progresses, human beings become more powerful and knowledgeable, more anxious and restless, and more miserable. They become, from a human perspective, more free. But their existence also becomes, because it is more free from natural order, more contingent or subject to chance.

"[C]ivilized man," Tocqueville observes, is far from being satisfied by what is readily available, by "brute" or "natural" satisfactions alone. Hence he is "infinitely more exposed to the vicissitudes of destiny than savage man." Because "[h]e has expanded the range of his needs," he "leaves himself open to the hazards of fortune." Tocqueville makes the Marxian observation that the more civilization progresses, the more common poverty or the perception of extreme deprivation becomes. He goes further and observes that the more human beings become powerful or conquer nature, the more they become subject to chance ("Memoir," pp.7-10).

The "industrial class," the people created by this "irresistible movement of civilization," becomes especially subject to chance and to impoverishment. Both "the poor and the rich . . . conceive of new" or unprecedented "enjoyments," which become "needs." At a certain point, these human needs cannot be met by "cultivation of the soil" alone. To meet them, a growing portion of the agrarian population must be diverted to industry. Those men who "left the plow for the shuttle and hammer" and "moved from the thatched cottage to the factory . . . were obeying the immutable laws which govern the growth of organized society."

They, properly speaking, "speculate on the secondary needs of human beings," not on subsistence but comfort and luxury. The satisfaction and even existence of "secondary needs" depend upon society's prosperity or good fortune, but economic reversals do occur. The coming of such "unfortunate circumstances can lead the population to deny itself certain pleasures to which it would ordinarily be attracted." Such circumstances, which are far beyond the industrial worker's control or comprehension, throw him not only out of work but toward "misery and death." Displaced from the land, he cannot fall back upon it to meet his primary or subsistence needs ("Memoir," pp.7-10).

The industrial workers' existence is particularly contingent or unsupported and so restless and anxious. Tocqueville attempts to ennoble their plight by

comparing it, implicitly, to the restless daring of the American entrepreneur he describes in *Democracy in America*: “I consider the industrial class as having received from God the special and dangerous mission of securing the material well-being of others by its risks and dangers” (“Memoir,” p.9). But the entrepreneur, of course, chooses his risks, and he aims to distinguish himself through the wealth his risks might bring. The industrial worker must take his chances in the service of the enrichment of others, and he hardly finds them choiceworthy.

#### NATURAL GOODNESS VERSUS SOCIALIST GREATNESS

Tocqueville also suggests, however, that there is greatness in the worker’s misery because it is distinctively human. It has made his mind extremely restless, opening it to socialist arousal. It has caused him to perceive, with growing clarity, the unadorned truth about the arbitrary or accidental existence of the brute with the angel in him. His circumstances have caused him to feel his contingency or isolated dependence on nothing but chance. His earthly misery, as well as his earthly hopes, increase as he ceases to view the world as governed by God’s providence, or by the providence of aristocrats (S, pp.63, 75).

The popular view of socialist revolution, Tocqueville says in the *Souvenirs*, is as a “lottery” (S, p.136). The people, in their restlessness, see no reason why their condition might be radically altered, and, who knows, maybe radically improved. They seem to believe the socialist indictment of the injustice or arbitrariness of the present more than the socialist promise to control the future on their behalf. They want, above all, to be liberated from their restless misery, from their radical perception of their individuality. They embrace the radical social transformation promised by revolution not because, as Marx contends, they have been reduced to a subhuman condition, but because they are so human—or such a great distance from nature—that they experience almost nothing good about their existence. They affirm the socialist lottery in the hope that their lives will be something other than that which is determined by the outcome of lotteries. Socialist revolution is “a powerful effort of the workers to escape from the necessities of their condition” (S, p.137).

Tocqueville shows the unnatural or extremely human or late-historical character of the mental restlessness that produces socialist arousal by comparing his drunken porter, a particularly repulsive socialist braggart who threatened his life, with his exemplary servant Eugene, “assuredly no socialist either by theory or temperament.” Eugene seems at first, the finer human being by far. But his goodness, it becomes clear, comes from the fact that he is barely human at all. It is, in Rousseau’s sense, natural goodness (S, p.157).

The blindly greedy and otherwise mentally disordered porter is full of the passion inflamed by mental restlessness. His discontent causes him, but not

Eugene, to imagine replacing Tocqueville as master. If he is the worse being, it is because his mind and his desires are more human.

Eugene, Tocqueville says, is distinguished from other human beings of his class in his revolutionary time by his contentment. He is satisfied as a servant. He “generally desired nothing beyond his reach,” and he “was always pleased with himself.” He was free from anxiety about his future. His desires are simple because they are unmixed with much self-consciousness. His freedom, Tocqueville says, is “from that most usual sickness of our time, the restless mind.” This freedom, “a peaceful repose,” Tocqueville goes on, Eugene “enjoyed as a gift of nature.”

Eugene’s freedom from discontentment is what people enjoyed in feudal times. History, or the progress of humanity and the restless mind, had passed him by. Eugene was, in many senses, remarkably unaffected by time. Even in a much earlier time, Tocqueville remarks, his lack of restlessness would have been considered extreme (S, p.157).

Tocqueville reports that he felt “a sense of repose” when he saw Eugene’s face. But it was a momentary experience, one which did not transform his being. It did not cure his mental restlessness, and he did not spend much time with Eugene. He did not find Eugene, as he found socialist arousal, interesting and worthy of serious study. What Tocqueville recognizes is human liberty, or manifestations of the restless mind (S, pp.157, 76, 82).

Tocqueville’s description of Eugene’s natural gift is part of an uncommonly theoretical statement about human condition. He says that Eugene “unconsciously followed the precepts inculcated by philosophers, but seldom observed by them, and enjoyed as a gift of nature the happy balance between powers and wants that alone brings the happiness promised by the philosophers” (S, p.157). The philosophers say that human beings should consciously cultivate moderation. That moderation, the life according to nature, brings human happiness. It is the human antidote to the feverish misery of the restless mind.

But it seems to Tocqueville that the philosophers themselves do not enjoy the happiness they promise. They are rarely moderate, because they do not experience their powers and wants in “happy balance.” Philosophy or philosophic inculcations are not effective antidotes to the restless mind, and they do not lead to human happiness. What the philosophers hold can be achieved through conscious cultivation can only be achieved unconsciously, through natural gift.

In human beings, to the extent they are distinctively human, nature, for some reason, fails to give her gift. The result is that wants exceed powers by a progressively greater amount, and restlessness, primarily mental restlessness, increases. To be human is to experience the discontent of this imbalance or disorder, and hence to be immoderate. Tocqueville knew from personal experience that it is the human condition to wish “for peace of mind and moderation of desires,” but not to have them. He saw a kinship between his own and

popular dissatisfaction in the bourgeois regime, and he saw them both as a more truthful reflection of the human condition than the doctrine of the philosophers.<sup>8</sup>

The more human or historical a human being becomes, the more the natural balance that produces the response of contentment is disturbed, and the less human beings enjoy. Revolution is caused by human beings who exist at too great a distance from Eugene's contentment. Their conclusion about their lives is the opposite of Eugene's about his. They hold that their present condition should be radically transformed.

The theoretical intention of socialism, as a product of and attractive to extremely restless minds, is to return humanity to Eugene's barely human condition, to create through history or revolution what he enjoys by nature. The purpose of the historical act of socialist revolution, in other words, is to bring history or humanity to an end, to return human beings to the natural goodness described by Rousseau. One reason Eugene is no socialist is that he already possesses what socialism promises.

#### THE ATTACK ON PROPERTY

Tocqueville defines socialism by its radical opposition to the right or privilege of property which has heretofore seemed to have been the foundation of social order. It is an attack by the restless mind on the one inegalitarian distinction that has, so far, been exempted from characteristically modern or late-historical acts of leveling, the restless destruction of order. Merely political leveling—the egalitarian perfection of the form of government—had, in fact, made the people more miserable and restless (S, pp.13–15, 75). Their desires had expanded more rapidly than their conditions had improved. Their existence, as Marx also explains in "On the Jewish Question," seemed more whimsical and atomistic and miserably isolated than ever before. The coming of what Marx calls political "heaven"—the egalitarian or universal and homogeneous state—had made social existence more individualistic or hellish.<sup>9</sup> Human misery had become more intense or distinctively human.

Such extreme experiences of one's unsupported individuality come because the revolution is incomplete. The social foundation of this miserable and arbitrary experience of individual distinctiveness must be eradicated. Socialism aims to make the revolution not merely political or limited but social or comprehensively human (S, p.75).

Socialism is based on the awareness that political change cannot produce the radical liberation to which the people's expanding desires point. Liberation from this discontent requires, it seems, the transformation of what Tocqueville calls "the unalterable laws that constitute society itself." It requires, Tocqueville often says, what is obviously impossible. But at one point he muses

that his view that these laws are unalterable is merely a prejudice in favor of existing order, one that cannot sustain itself against popular restlessness. His imagination is constrained by the fact that his mind is not simply restless (S, pp.66, 75–76, 98, 136–37).

Tocqueville's prejudice against socialism, he acknowledges, is aristocratic. He defends the right of property, not for bourgeois reasons, but as "ancient law" or "sacred right," which, along with the family, is indispensable for the flourishing of civilization or human greatness or excellence. Property, for him, is an aristocratic remnant to be perpetuated to keep open aristocratic possibilities. But it is inevitable, he says, that the people would come to ask whether they do not have "the power and the right" to abolish property in the interest of their own "enjoyment." The people, in a bourgeois regime, have been given no reason, no argument or incentive, for preserving anything aristocratic (S, pp.75, 105).

Socialist arousal occurs not only because the people feel their own existences to be accidental or arbitrary. The distinctions that constitute bourgeois society seem equally so. In the bourgeois regime, "the right to property is the last remnant of a destroyed aristocratic world." It appears as "an isolated privilege in a leveled society" (S, pp.12–13). The right or privilege makes no sense alone, but only as part of a world that had been destroyed or leveled.

The right to property was easy to defend "[w]hen it was merely the basis of many other rights" (S, p.12). These rights, Tocqueville says elsewhere, were those based on the aristocratic claim that a particular class needs freedom from material concerns in order to be cultivated to rule for the common good and preserve the liberty of all (CN, p.206). But this aristocratic claim, which Tocqueville believes to have much merit, seems to have been discredited by egalitarian revolution. The bourgeois rulers believe it no more than their socialist challengers. Both agree that bourgeois rule aims simply to be for the benefit of "Haves," or those with property.

The right to property, appearing in the bourgeois world unveiled as the only foundation of social order, is unprecedentedly indefensible as a right. The distinction between the Haves and the Have-nots, appearing as merely economic or quantitative, never seemed more arbitrary or unjust. This historical revelation of its arbitrariness, Tocqueville partly agrees with Marx, is partly in the service of the truth. Aristocrats have always, with some self-consciousness, veiled their selfishness with arguments and illusions.<sup>10</sup> Tocqueville himself sees some truth in the arguments and some human benefit to the illusions. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that they are now largely ineffective. Revolution, or the progress of the restless mind, has made them no longer generally persuasive or credible.

Tocqueville quotes himself saying in the assembly on the eve of revolution "that the real cause, the effective one, that makes men lose power is that they become unworthy to exercise it" (S, p.14). He, the aristocratic partisan of the integrity of political life, agrees with the people, and even socialist theorists,

that the bourgeois rulers are unworthy to rule. He says that they ought to have cared for the common good, and moderated their own and popular greed through devotion to religion and country. He is particularly candid about the fact any ruling class must cultivate mores and opinions to perpetuate its power by curbing popular restlessness. The bourgeois rulers, he notes, not only could not see the beauty of virtue. They were also blind to its utility (S, p.6).

But the effectiveness of virtue requires that it not even be viewed by rulers as merely useful. Tocqueville affirms the central aristocratic opinion that one must really see virtue's beauty, and hence really be devoted to political liberty and the common good, to rule most effectively. The open moral and political skepticism of bourgeois rule, despite the resulting reliance on ingenious institutional or mechanical solutions, makes it inherently unstable. It makes the socialist challenge inevitable and at least somewhat legitimate (S, pp.7, 14, 41).

Tocqueville adds, however, that bourgeois skepticism is the result of democratic revolution, of the restless mind's reduction of order to illusion or arbitrary oppression. The bourgeois rulers' candid selfishness is a product of their enlightenment, of their intellectual liberation from illusion. Incoherently or restlessly, they regarded their reduction of human to mechanical motivation as a point of pride (S, pp.11, 62). It would seem that their postrevolutionary historical situation made their self-defense impossible.

Tocqueville's own candid conclusion in his *Souvenirs* was that, despite the partnership that was the foundation of his whole life's project, he could not foresee political life returning in his time, except momentarily. One of his memories was yet another failed attempt to institutionalize or constitutionalize it. The mind had simply become too restless to sustain ordered or political liberty. The history of his time, he acknowledged, is the history of revolution.

## THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIALIST THEORY

The socialist challenge is inevitable and radical. It means to be the culmination of the revolution, the reversal of the growth of human misery. It means to show what has not yet been shown, that history's movement away from nature and toward democratic equality is genuinely good for human beings. Its opposition to property is partly practical and partly theoretical. It aims to cure "that disease called work which has afflicted man since the beginning of existence." It also seeks to eradicate mental restlessness by replacing political life, religion, and theoretical speculation with a simply true "social science" (S, pp.71, 74). The acknowledgement of that science's truth would bring the mind to rest.

Socialism connects the disorder of mental restlessness with that which produces work. It holds that they have the same material and hence historically transformable cause. The eradication of property would mean the end of work. This cure would extend, somehow, to mental restlessness. Socialist theorists

may, characteristically, be unclear on whether work causes mental restlessness or mental restlessness causes work. But their interdependence in history Tocqueville himself, following Rousseau, sees.

History is opposed to nature, that which is governed to impersonal necessity. History is the work of human beings to overcome the contingency of their existence, which they, inexplicably, come to experience through their self-consciousness. By working, they increase their distance from nature and hence their dependence on chance. They become, and experience themselves as, progressively more contingent or accidental or disordered. The resulting restlessness causes them to work all the harder. They do so to meet the needs they have created through the mixture of brutish desire with anxious self-consciousness, but they end up also producing new needs, harder to satisfy. Human beings, the historical paradox goes, make themselves more miserably restless in response to their restless misery.

Socialism aims to eliminate the incoherence or disorder which produces this paradox. It works to bring both restlessness and work to an end. The mind uses imagination to discover socialism's possibility—against all human experience—in response to the perception that that experience has been no good. Socialism aims to replace anxiousness and misery with truth and contentment. Because everything human is to some extent disordered, its "social science" can only become wholly true if human distinctiveness or liberty disappears. The individual must lose his or her self-consciousness in the social whole. Tocqueville always identified socialism with extreme centralization, because it opposes, most radically, the "decentralizing" passion or willfulness that causes the individual to separate himself from the social whole.<sup>11</sup>

Science or comprehensive knowledge is only possible in a world without the brute with the angel in him. But that seemingly logical conclusion is really a particularly incoherent or restless or human one. Brutes, of course, cannot possess such knowledge. God, Tocqueville says, sees human beings in their particularity. He, in his wisdom, can comprehend each brute with the angel in him. Tocqueville, in affirming the superiority of and in pursuing divine wisdom, shows the inadequacy and hence the disordered pretentiousness of merely human or systematic rationalism.<sup>12</sup>

## SYSTEMATIC THEORY

Tocqueville understands socialism as a systematic theory, as an attempt to give a comprehensive, deterministic account of human and social change. It is, in that respect, not radically different from but merely a radicalization of bourgeois theory, which also attempts to understand human existence systematically or mechanically. Both theories share a moral and political skepticism, a denial of the possibility or goodness of human liberty, which made them both hateful

to Tocqueville (cf. S, pp.6–7, 62, with DA, 542–43). He said, in fact, that they were more certainly “pernicious” than untrue.<sup>13</sup>

Systematic theories give coherent or consistent accounts of existence, ones that achieve “mathematical exactness,” by “banish[ing] men” or the incoherence of mental restlessness (S, p.62). Such theorists vainly claim, in effect, to divinize themselves by brutalizing others (DA, p.543). They deny or attempt to destroy the existence of the brute with the angel in him. They claim to eradicate the uncertainty and incoherence that characterizes merely human existence, including human thought, through thought.

By banishing men, systematic theorists, in truth, banish themselves. They do so because they find their extreme mental restlessness, their intense awareness of the contingency of the human condition, hateful. They experience nothing good in being human. Systematic theory is, at bottom, willful self-denial or misanthropy, a product of human misery rather than devotion either to wisdom or human liberty. It is hateful from the perspective of Tocqueville’s partisanship, which opposed systematic consistency on behalf of human liberty.

#### SOCIALIST THEORISTS: INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

The misery of extreme mental restlessness, of a similar although distinct historical origin, motivates socialist theorists as much as the people who are aroused by their theory. These intellectuals ally with the people against the aristocrats and bourgeois or middle class, who come together in response to the socialist challenge in their attachment to existing order. The theorists use the doctrine of socialism, a product of their minds and imaginations, to appeal to the people’s material desires and hopes. They use it, in fact, to expand their desires and hence their restlessness further by radicalizing and focusing their hopes. They hope that the people, so aroused, will be the “brute force” to make systematic theory true (S, p.137).

Tocqueville connects the extreme restlessness of theorists with the origination of systematic theory most clearly in his uncompleted second volume on the revolution. There, he notes that the literary-political theorists of the eighteenth century had an “unnatural contempt for the time in which they lived and the society to which they belonged.” They were strangely deficient “in instinctual love, or almost involuntary respect usually felt by men in all countries for their own institutions, their traditional customs, or the wisdom and virtues of their fathers.” Because they were so uprooted from the natural and particular attachments ordinarily established by instinct and passion, they asserted that “reason” should “take the place of authority in all things.” Their detachment is evidence that they existed far from nature, that they were extremely human or late-historical beings (CN, pp.153, 157).

These partisans of reason were extremely aware that their present existence was not reasonable, but arbitrary and contingent. They hated the incoherence

that characterizes the mixture of brute and angel which is human life. They, in their restless misery, imagined radical change" (CN, p.153–54).

Reason, they held, should rule without restraint or exception. In their pride, they did not see clearly that the simple rule of reason would be the end of humanity. But, with Rousseau, they could not but ask "whether the simplicity of savages was not worth more than all our riches and arts, whether their instincts are better than our virtues . . ." (CN, p.156). They could not help doubting even the goodness of their pride in their intellectual liberty, which freed them from the blindness of instinct. Their misery, mixed with their desire for consistency, made them doubt the goodness or reality of everything distinctively human.

Tocqueville accounts for the restless misery of the eighteenth-century French theorists more particularly in *The Old Regime*, as the product of their detachment from the pleasures and responsibility of political life. In that century, he observes, French men of letters were not in political life, as they were in England. Nor did they "turn their backs on politics" and enter a "separate world" of "pure philosophy," as they did in Germany. The French writers were not in politics, but they were interested in political reform (OR, p.158).

The English writers, like Tocqueville, found satisfaction or pleasure in political responsibility. They were still, decisively, aristocrats. They wrote like "statesmen" on behalf of human liberty. If anything, their political involvement made them too unappreciative of the partial truth of general or systematic theory, as Tocqueville believed Burke was (OR, pp.2, 153).<sup>14</sup> Their minds were, from a theoretical perspective, not detached or restless enough to perceive the truth. The German writers, in effect, attempted to divert themselves from their knowledge of the limitations of the political world by trying to live somewhere else. The French writers neither affirmed through involvement nor were able to divert themselves from the political world. They wrote to criticize and perfect it imaginatively.

These proponents of an "abstract, literary politics" thought they had the time and distance from practical affairs to reflect radically about the nature, or, better, the unnaturalness of political life. From their cosmopolitan or universal perspective, they criticized all patriotism and particularism (CN, p.165). But their criticism, in truth, was a reflection of the unnaturalness of their detachment. For Tocqueville, any view from a distance is bound to be a distortion.

These writers, and the aristocratic audience they formed according to their tastes and opinions, had privileges but not political power. They had all that was required to exercise intellectual liberty, but not political liberty. Their detachment made them miserably anxious, bored, and restless. They experienced what Tocqueville did as an uprooted aristocrat in the political bourgeois regime which denied him a weighty role. Their theorizing, which produced an indiscriminate passion for rationalistic or systematic innovation, was, whether they understood it or not, a reflection of their restless misery.

They concluded that political or human life, because it is somewhat incoher-

ent, is absurd. Tocqueville concludes that their situation, as disempowered but still privileged aristocrats, was absurd. Privilege without responsibility is indefensible, which is why Tocqueville holds that human liberty depends on political liberty.<sup>15</sup> The eighteenth-century theorists, with their aristocratic taste for immaterial principle and their contempt for merely material advantages, were less blind than were the bourgeois rulers of 1848 about the indefensibility of their privileges. But both they and the bourgeois rulers agreed that there was no moral or political justification for their situation.

From Tocqueville's perspective, the theorists' misery was caused by their exclusion from political life. Reflection on its basis should not produce the conclusion that, because political life is somewhat restless or disordered, it ought to be abolished. Political involvement, although itself a product of human restlessness, moderates or makes endurable that restlessness. It caused Tocqueville, despite his propensity for theoretical detachment and doubtful anxiety, to avoid misanthropy.

But the theorists' rationalistic imagination always pointed to the abolition of political life. Tocqueville says that the most practical of the eighteenth-century partisans of reason, the "Physiocrats" or "Economists," actually considered in some detail how the world was to be reformed. They anticipated many and perhaps eventually all the results of revolution, and they were the true originators of socialist theory. They hated, Tocqueville said, "any kind of diversity whatsoever." They carried their partisanship on behalf of consistency or uniformity to "fanatical lengths." They were extremely restless or disordered opponents of restlessness or disorder. They aimed at "absolute equality, State control of all activities of individuals, despotic legislation, and the total submerging of each citizen's individuality into the group mind" (OR, pp.158–59).

All human particularity or individuality is to be subjected to the rule of reason. All individual activity that would offend the mind is to be eliminated. The intellect is to conquer merely human reality, to eradicate everything it regards as unjust. It opposes, as Tocqueville says, the "human condition," the paradoxical mixture of brute and angel. Socialism is the "confiscation of human freedom" by "schoolmaster" or theoretical or social scientific leadership.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE SOCIALIST CHALLENGE

The effectiveness of socialism depends upon the convergence of the interests of the theorists and workers. Both intensely experience and want liberation from the restless mind, from the human condition experienced as radical contingency and nothing more. Theorists seek rational control. Workers want security and contentment. The convergence only comes if human beings are content and can live according to reason, or with the unconscious moderation of Eu-

gene. Contentment is natural and subhuman. Discontent is distinctively human or historical, and it grows over time.

Human beings, the theorists conclude, must overcome or surrender their humanity in the service of reason and contentment. Distinctively human existence is a miserable accident, and it produces absurd behavior. Socialism, rooted in this conclusion, means to bring the egalitarian revolution to its projected or rational conclusion. Tocqueville, understanding the theoretical force and misanthropy of this conclusion, became an opponent of reason and contentment, and a partisan of the willful affirmation of human liberty in spite of its misery, to the extent necessary to perpetuate human liberty.

Tocqueville acknowledges that he did not know whether socialism would triumph. That uncertainty gave nobility to his political writing and action. He did not consider himself a reactionary, defending a cause that history had definitely made futile or obsolete, although he was well aware that it might have done so.

His opposition to socialism also did not make him a Machiavellian, preferring what succeeds to imaginary utopias that certainly cannot.<sup>17</sup> He could see the strength of the socialist challenge. The bourgeois regime had aimed to eradicate restless misery, but, in fact, had intensified it. If history or the growth of the intensity and commonness of the experience of extreme mental restlessness has made political life impossible, then perhaps socialism will eventually succeed on the basis of indefensibility of merely bourgeois distinctions.

In the last several years, the socialist challenge has come to seem, perhaps for the first time since 1848, no longer credible. The demise of socialism, rather than its triumph, now seems to some to be the end of history.<sup>18</sup> But history, arguably, has not come to an end. The restless mind is still particularly restless, and religion, philosophic speculation, and even political life have not been completely replaced by a simply true social science. If history is to have an end, perhaps it still makes sense to say it would be socialism, or the return to existence without property or individuality, to something close to the natural goodness of the Rousseauian state of nature.<sup>19</sup> The socialist criticism of bourgeois life still has great weight, and perhaps socialism still has a future.

The disappearance of socialism Tocqueville would not regard as an unmixed blessing. He understood why so many, who have been and are particularly self-conscious and passionate in bourgeois regimes, have lost themselves in the socialist imagination. They believe, mistakenly, that devotion to the coming of socialism is the only credible or egalitarian passion left in the world, and hence the only way of escaping from the apolitical anxiety of bourgeois life. But Tocqueville held they were mistaken only because he remained devoted to the integrity of political life, which seems to return to the world in our time, as it did in his, only in extraordinary moments. Tocqueville's devotion remains as problematic to our restless minds as it did to his.<sup>20</sup>

Some contemporary socialists have turned to Tocqueville's antibourgeois

analysis for inspiration or at least vindication. William Sullivan, for one, sees Tocqueville's anti-individualism as informed by "Rousseau's pessimistic conclusion that modern civil society was incompatible with civic virtue." Tocqueville is best understood as giving "a new version of the republican argument for the intrinsic good of active citizenship." Only cultivation of such citizenship, or "positive freedom," can provide effective resistance to the "atomized despotism" that is the product of a "negative" or antipolitical understanding of liberty.<sup>21</sup>

But, despite his anti-individualism and his affirmation of "positive liberty" against bourgeois liberalism, Sullivan recognizes that Tocqueville was no socialist. Unlike Marx, "he did not seek, and does seem to have imagined under modern circumstances, a social organization of production based upon an ethic of participation and responsibility that would substantially replace the market" (Sullivan, p.7). He did not share the socialist vision of "citizenly fellowship" rooted in egalitarian "moral culture" (Sullivan, pp.220–25). Because his vision was limited by an antisocialist, liberal prejudice, Tocqueville did not see that socialism, properly understood, would be the perfection, not the eradication, of moral and political life.

Sullivan tends to see socialism as producing the comprehensive politicization of society. Tocqueville saw it as, necessarily, producing the end of political life, a world where human beings would be without political passion or passionate concern for their particular existences, where they would no longer desire to rule over themselves or others. It would be a world full of Eugenes, but without Eugene's dignity, because there would be no masters like Tocqueville.

Tocqueville's view of socialism seems to be closer to the spirit of Marx's than Sullivan's. Marx, in his description of communism or the end of history, says nothing about the fellowship of citizens. He writes of the spontaneous, passionless satisfaction of personal whims, a weightless, amoral existence.<sup>22</sup> The fulfillment of the dream of socialism is not the overcoming of selfishness by civic virtue, but a world in which virtue or self-restraint has become unnecessary or obsolete. It would be possible only with the disappearance of most distinctively human experience or liberty.

Tocqueville and Marx oppose Sullivan, finally, by viewing socialism not as the overcoming but the radicalization of bourgeois materialism. It completes the egalitarian revolution against human order, which is revealed as, most radically, disorder. Socialism restores society to order by purging the angel from the brute.

Marx and Tocqueville share a hatred of the bourgeois world. Marx identified the bourgeois with human self-consciousness, which Tocqueville did not. Tocqueville held that its miserable anxiety can be genuinely moderated by the pleasures and responsibility of political life, of ruling oneself and others. Sullivan, in his "civic republicanism," seems to agree with Tocqueville about po-

litical life as an antidote to individualism, but he holds that Tocqueville's affirmation of it is inegalitarian and hence reactionary. Political movement can only be toward a more comprehensive egalitarianism. Sullivan's restless anxiety, from Tocqueville's perspective, produces a paradoxical devotion to political movements to bring political life to an end.

Tocqueville could not but recognize that this paradoxical devotion was evidence not only of the misanthropy but the greatness of socialism. It was the product of distinctively human passion, a human response to extremely restless anxiety. It was, he says, the foundation of a "great party" (S, p.12). Socialism, he agrees with Sullivan, is a political movement, even if it is one that aims to bring political life to an end. It was the cause of the return of political life, if only for a moment, in 1848. The challenge inspired the bourgeois regime, bringing aristocrats back to the political stage and even causing the bourgeois rulers to experience a nobler conception of liberty.

Socialism, more particularly, brought Tocqueville near the center of the political stage. It aroused his political passion, and hence suppressed his doubtful anxiety. It gave him a weighty political role. The resulting self-confidence—or consciousness of his greatness—gave him distinctly human pleasure and moderated his personal anxiety (S, pp.3–5, 231–32). The fact that the political life brought into existence by the revolution turned out to be an effective antidote to the apolitical anxiety of doubtful isolation is a crucial argument against socialism, against the intentions of revolutionaries who fight to make subsequent revolution and political life impossible. But, in this respect, bourgeois intentions are no different. When in power, bourgeois rulers also aim to create systematic or apolitical order. Their failure, as much as or more than the failure of socialism, made Tocqueville happy.

Tocqueville spent most of his political career in a futile and misery-producing attempt to elevate or politicize the bourgeois world. The *Souvenirs* makes clear that he would have been miserable in the America he described in *Democracy*, although it was, in many respects, an idealization or ennobling of democratic reality. It was not his own political efforts, but the challenge of socialism, that rescued him from his miserable condition (S, pp.84–85).

Tocqueville agrees with Nietzsche that the challenge of socialism, by politicizing bourgeois life against its inclinations, fends off the end of history, the coming of gentle, peaceful despotism.<sup>23</sup> The response to that challenge certainly is the noblest product of the West in recent decades. The "new world order" that may emerge in the absence of socialism—full of indistinguishable liberal or bourgeois democracies and based on the complete replacement of political with economic life—may be, Tocqueville would have feared, in the crucial or human respects almost indistinguishable from socialism.<sup>24</sup> But we can hope that the human mind will remain disordered enough to make world order impossible, that human beings will continue to live with their restless misery and resist nature's standards of reason and contentment.

## NOTES

1. The most comprehensive attempt to view Tocqueville in light of Rousseau is John Koritansky, *Alexis de Tocqueville and the New Science of Politics* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1987). Another very sweeping and instructive attempt is Wilhelm Hennis, "Tocqueville's Perspective," *Interpretation* 16 (1988): 61–86. Also see Allan Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 202–3, 231–32, 312–13. Roger Boesche makes some suggestive comments about the distinctively antibourgeois character of Tocqueville's liberalism in *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

2. Koritansky's analysis, which reduces Tocqueville's political and religious teaching to that of the *Social Contract*, does not even attempt to do justice to Tocqueville's analysis of religion as a support to individual greatness (*Democracy in America*, trans. G. Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer [New York: Doubleday, 1969], pp. 542–45).

Lamberti distinguishes well between Rousseau and Tocqueville: "Rousseau . . . sacrificed the individual to the citizen. Better than anyone else, Tocqueville posed the central problem of modern philosophy: how to respect the individual while preserving the citizen" (*Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, trans. A. Goldhammer [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989], p. 188).

3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. G. Lawrence (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987), p. 75. This source (Tocqueville's *Souvenirs*) is hereafter referred to as S. Tocqueville's other books are referred to as follows: *Democracy in America* is DA. *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. S. Gilbert (New York: Anchor Books, 1955) is OR. "Chapters and Notes for His Unfinished Book on the French Revolution," *The Two Tocquevilles*, ed. and trans. R.R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), is CN.

4. See Hennis, p. 83: "Tocqueville is a political scientist in the tradition of Plato and Rousseau—a moral historian, or, if you will, an analyst of the order and disorder of the human soul in the age of democracy."

5. Rousseau's theoretical intentions are, of course, revealed in the quotation from Aristotle on his title page (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men, The First and Second Discourses*, ed. R. Masters, trans. R. and J. Masters [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964]), p. 77. The quotation, given in Latin, is translated by Masters as follows: "Not in corrupt things, but in those well ordered in accordance with nature, should one consider what is natural." For Rousseau, contrary to Aristotle, what is natural is what exists prior to history. Nature gives order; human beings make themselves human and hence disordered. From nature's perspective, to be human is to be disordered or diseased.

Tocqueville's debt to Rousseau is also to Pascal, because Rousseau's history depends on Pascal's psychology. For Tocqueville's debt to Pascal, see my *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetration of Human Liberty* (Lanhan, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993). This article contains much of chapter 1 of that book.

6. Alexis de Tocqueville, "Memoir on Pauperism," *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, ed. S. Drescher (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 6.

7. Alexis de Tocqueville, Letter to Louis de Kergorlay (21 September 1834), *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. R. Boesche, trans. J. Toupin and R. Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 93.

8. Tocqueville, Letter to Edouard de Tocqueville (2 November 1840), in *Selected Letters*, p. 143.

9. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 24–25.

10. Compare S, p. 75, with Tocqueville, DA, p. 525, on "the official doctrine of morality" at the time "[w]hen the world was under the control of a few rich and powerful men."

11. See Tocqueville, "Speech on the Right to Work," *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, pp. 199–200. See also Tocqueville, Letter to Nassau William Senior (10 April 1848), *Selected Letters*, p. 206.

12. On divine wisdom, see DA, p. 437, where it is described to show the merely human weakness of “general ideas” or systematic thinking.

13. See DA, p. 543, and letter to Arthur de Gobineau (20 December 1843) in John Lukacs, ed., *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1959), p. 227.

14. On Tocqueville’s criticism of Burke as part of the theoretical foundation of his political science, see James Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 153–54.

15. See Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s *Old Regime*: Political History,” *Review of Politics* 43 (1981): 88–111.

16. Tocqueville, “Speech on the Right to Work,” pp. 183, 199–200. For an analysis of Tocqueville’s defense of liberty that centers on this speech, see Daniel Mahoney, “Tocqueville and Socialism,” *Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty*.

17. For Tocqueville’s criticism of the superficiality and human unworthiness of Machiavellianism, see my “Tocqueville on Metaphysics and Human Liberty,” *Teaching Political Science* 14 (1987): 92.

18. Consider the controversy fueled by the instantly famous essay by Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18. Fukuyama says that bourgeois liberalism is the end of history. All preliberal alternatives—political and religious—have been discredited by history. Socialism, understood as a radicalization of liberalism, was tried and failed. That Fukuyama’s essay has a Nietzschean ending suggests that he is neither a Hegelian sage nor a brute. This essay, in any case, made him a great bourgeois success story. His book-length version, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), has already made him a millionaire.

19. That is what is really suggested by Fukuyama’s mentor, Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to Reading of Hegel*, trans. J. Nichols, ed. A. Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 159–62, “Note to the Second Edition.”

20. L. E. Shiner goes so far as to suggest that Tocqueville’s defense of the greatness of political life in the *Souvenirs* is a failure. Despite his intentions, he shows that it is nothing but inanity and insanity. His devotion to the truth overwhelms his devotion to human liberty or greatness (*The Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville’s “Recollections”* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988]).

21. William Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 203–6. Sullivan is one of the authors of Robert Bellah et al.’s best-selling *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). His book shows better than *Habits of the Heart* how Bellah’s project for reform is rooted in and is a criticism of Tocqueville.

22. See Marx, *The German Ideology* in *The Marx-Engels Reader* p. 124.

23. See Roger Boesche, “Hedonism and Nihilism: the Predictions of Tocqueville and Nietzsche.” *The Tocqueville Review* 8 (1986/7): 178. Boesche quotes *The Will to Power*: “Socialism will be able to be something useful and therapeutic: it delays ‘peace on earth’ and total mollification of the democratic herd animal; it forces the European to retain spirit” (p. 125).

24. Fukuyama claims to describe definitively the emergence of this order in his book.