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**A reading of the French Revolution by Alexis de
Tocqueville:
continuity between the old and new regime**

**Professor Jean-Baptiste Noé. Doctor of History - Sorbonne.
Director of Orbis. School of Geopolitics.**

Dear Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The French Revolution is one of those events that cut world history in two: there is one before and one after. And since the end of the war, historians and politicians have been interpreting this event and trying to understand it, sometimes honestly, sometimes to link it to their own struggle. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) is a man apart in the analysis of the Revolution. Because of his family on the one hand. Among his ancestors were Chrétien-Guillaume de Malesherbes, protector of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose works he allowed to be published, Louis XVI's lawyer and guillotine in 1794 for defending the king. There is also François-René de Chateaubriand, one of the greatest writers of the 19th century, who opposed Napoleon I, Minister of Louis XVIII and Ambassador of France. Tocqueville comes from the French aristocracy, the one that both prepared for the Revolution and also suffered most from it. He is the author of a brilliant book, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), in which he was one of the first to understand the democratic system, its advantages and dangers. This earned him an election to the Académie française and intellectual recognition as a great man of letters. Alexis de Tocqueville is not only a historian, but also a political practitioner. A deputy, department president, Minister of Foreign Affairs, he has lived and practiced politics. When he talks about it, it is therefore both as a theorist and as a practitioner, which gives it a density and depth that other analysts do not have. With *L'Ancient Régime and the Revolution* (1856), Tocqueville was a major historian of this event. His book is original. It is brief. It does not seek to establish a chronology of facts, but to understand the event. It is more of an essay, an analytical book. From his time, there were many writings on the Revolution: Jules Michelet, François Guizot, Adolphe Thiers and of course Karl Marx, who lived in Paris at the same time as Tocqueville. But Tocqueville's approach is different from these authors. He enrolled in the French liberal school for which the Revolution was more a continuity than a rupture. Three historiographical schools are emerging. For two of them, the Revolution is a rupture. Revolutionaries consider the Revolution as the beginning of a new era;

France has moved from the shadows to the light. For them, France was born in 1789. The reactionaries consider the Revolution as a term. For them, France died in 1789. Unlike the two previous ones, the Liberals consider the Revolution as a moment. This is part of the history of France and is only a major event in a history that began before and continues after. This school tries to take the good in the Revolution and reject the bad. This is the intellectual current in which Alexis de Tocqueville is involved. In his studies, especially in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville developed a reflection essentially based on law. This serves to demonstrate the transition from the aristocratic to the democratic age. But his analysis seems to stop in 1789. He never evokes terror or revolutionary dynamics, as if this aspect of the Revolution did not interest him.

I/ A study of the Revolution through law and administrative functioning

Alexis de Tocqueville is an authentic historian who bases his work on the study of sources. He conducts his research in Paris and in the provinces, in Tours, to study the evolution of administrative law both in the capital and in the provinces. This allows him to understand the administrative transformations of France during the 18th century. It is these developments that, for Tocqueville, are at the origin of the Revolution. This is not a revolt of the people against their lords, as Marxist historiography believed, and still less an aspiration for freedom from an oppressive political system. The 1789 Revolution is more of an achievement than a beginning. Throughout the century, France experienced an administrative centralization that concentrated powers not in the hands of the king, but in the hands of the administration of Versailles (at the time the capital of France). This centralization therefore removed the nobles and lords from power. As a result, their privileges have become unjustified in the eyes of the public. Hence the revolt of 1787-1789, which led to a redefinition of France's political structure. There is therefore a continuity between the Old Regime and the Revolution. The new regime has recovered the centralization of power and administration that the old regime had begun. In a way, the Revolution completes the march of the Old Regime. Many reforms that were not achieved under Louis XVI were completed during the Revolution: the abolition of tax privileges, the standardization of weights and measures, territorial reorganization (end of provinces and creation of departments), the creation of the Louvre Museum. All the obstacles encountered by Louis XVI during the years 1770-1780 were overcome at once, allowing the revolutionaries, who were in fact the high nobility, to enforce them. Paradoxically, those who had opposed the reforms of Turgot and Louis XVI then had them adopted in the summer of 1789. Tocqueville's analysis is innovative. It shows that the Revolution was almost complete even before the Revolution. Therefore, the revolutionary rupture is an ideological distortion. The revolution is more a discourse on itself in which it presents itself as innovative, as a truly transformative event. His analysis of the Revolution is therefore essentially legal. Hence the reproaches that can be made of it, particularly in its reduction of violence and revolutionary dynamics. We will discuss this in the third part.

Tocqueville noted that during the 18th century, the laws enacted by Paris were not followed in the field, so that the edicts and laws had to be constantly taken up and reaffirmed: "A rigid rule, a soft practice; this is the character of the Ancien Régime". It is this weakness of

power that is at the root of the king's fall. What the Marxists had not understood. A power is not overthrown because it is strong, but because it is weak. If Louis XVI had had the crowd shot in 1790 or 1792, he would have kept his throne. Having refused to shed the blood of the people, he found himself at the mercy of the people who were able to overthrow him, judge him and execute him. The Revolution, for its part, has never hesitated in the use of force. From 1793 to 1794, she had thousands of people arrested and executed, with or without trial. In 1795, she had the monarchist deputies who had won the elections and who came to open the session of Parliament shot. In Paris, on the one hand, and in the provinces as well, there have been many repressions. The history of the 20th century has continued to demonstrate this fact: the powers that oppress the people are guaranteed to remain in place. If Gorbachev had repressed the Hungarian and Polish revolt in 1989, the Soviet regime would not have sunk. It was his refusal to shed blood that allowed the peaceful dissolution of the communist system. Tocqueville was one of the first to understand this. And he understood it because he has experienced it twice. In July 1830 and February 1848 the kings of France, Charles X on the one hand, and Louis-Philippe on the other, refused to use the army to repress the demonstrators. As a result, they were overthrown. On the other hand, in June 1848, the moderate republicans fired the gun at the extremist republicans. There are certainly hundreds of deaths, but this allows the republic to retain its power. Tocqueville thus demonstrated this apparent paradox: the revolution was caused by the weakness of the regime, not by its strength. The revolution could therefore fit into the legal mold of the old regime.

The revolution is also the consequence of the emergence of a new social class and a new aristocracy, that of civil servants:

Administrative officials, almost all of them bourgeois, already form a class that has its own particular spirit, traditions, virtues, honour and pride. It is the aristocracy of the new society, which is already formed and alive: it only waits until the Revolution has cleared the place. (Chap. V)

Public servants are the backbone of the new regimes. Leaders change, generals fall, leaders are exiled or guillotined, but public servants remain. They are the ones who capture and embody the true power. They are going through all regimes, all coups d'état, all constitutional changes. They too benefit from the weakness of regimes, because they can then flourish, expand their web and ensure their control. They thus have more power than ministers or heads of state. And in the face of an increasingly complex law, public servants have the advantage of knowing the legal rules when managers often have little knowledge of how the administration works. They are the part of the shadow that really runs the country, the so-called deep state. Tocqueville was one of the first to perceive this and to highlight their role and weight. Between 1789 and 1801, France experienced eight different political regimes. From this political instability comes the power of the shadowy men who are administrative officials. The danger well perceived by Tocqueville is that the civil service class will take complete control of the country, establishing an administrative despotism that in turn aggravates the consequences of government centralization. This sometimes endless power of the administration is the characteristic of

democratic societies, whose novelty and birth Tocqueville well perceived during the French Revolution.

II/ The transition from aristocracy to democracy

It was not the people who made the Revolution, it was the nobles. It was they who, in July 1789, requested and obtained the drafting of a constitution, putting an end to the absolute monarchy. It was the nobility that abolished privileges on the night of August 4, 1789. This abolition was carried out by three men: La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, Noailles and the Duke of Aiguillon, who belong to very old French families, who are large landowners and who are much richer than the king. Finally, it was the nobility that, on 26 August 1789, proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which is a synthesis of all 18th century political thought. At the end of the summer of 1789, the revolution was over. The reforms carried out by Louis XVI over the past ten years have been adopted, the nobles now pay taxes and the equality of all before the law is recognized. Louis XVI is proclaimed "The restorer of French freedom". As the English ambassador in Paris wrote to his king: "Never has a revolution been so peaceful. "If Louis XVI had shown more authority, everything would have remained there and he would be presented in school textbooks as the greatest king France has ever known. But then the story went wrong .

What Tocqueville understood is that the new regime is not political, but social. It is the transition from the aristocratic to the democratic age. Democracy is not a political form of government, it is a social state where there is the equalization of living conditions. Democracy is therefore first and foremost legal: it is the equality of all persons before the law; unlike the aristocracy, which is based on fundamental inequality before the law. It is therefore the conception of the law that is different. Tocqueville is trained as a lawyer and has worked as a judge in Versailles for many years. Hence his sharp eye on legal issues. This vision is in line with the three historiographical trends we mentioned at the beginning. Revolutionaries give primacy to politics and society, reactionaries to tradition, liberals to law. In his analysis of the French Revolution, Tocqueville is definitely in line with this last line of thought.

He had already studied this birth of democracy in his two books from his trip to America. However, the difference with France is significant. In America, it is a new people who have settled in a new land. The settlers founded a company *ex nihilo*. They were therefore able to choose their institutions more freely. The fact that the population comes from settlers uprooted from their countries also reinforces egalitarian sentiment, as they all come from a year zero from which they must build a country. The situation is radically different in France. There is a whole history and tradition here that means that democracy cannot be built from scratch, but that it is the result of a process. In America, there is the creation of a New World. In France, there is a transition from one world to another. It is this passage that Tocqueville seeks to understand and analyze. He himself is not a complete and joyful adherent of democracy. While he understands that this passage is inevitable, he does not necessarily approve all the terms and conditions. In *Democracy* he had understood the potential dangers of this new social system and his subsequent analyses confirmed his thinking. It is in this that he became the authentic

thinker of the revolution. In the United States, the company was a virgin one. So there was a birth. In France, there were the intertwined roots of past centuries, so there was change and evolution, what is called revolution. This revolution is the disappearance of the aristocracy, which was a way of living and seeing the world, a nobility. The French Revolution led to a change in human thinking that is evident in the changes in clothing. The revolutionaries abandoned wigs and powdered faces and swapped panties for pants. Clothing transformations illustrate social transformations.

The vehicle for this transformation has been the role played by writers and philosophers. Tocqueville devotes a luminous chapter to the role of writers in the 18th century and how they helped shape the new world. He knows this all the more well because it was his uncle, Malesherbes, who was the protector and publisher of most philosophers of the Enlightenment. Since the nobility was deprived of political power because of the centralization of the administration, it took refuge in letters and cultural power. Writers have therefore had an essential role in society, taking centre stage. Since politics has no space for free discussion in a parliament or assembly, it was in books, newspapers and plays that it was able to express itself. The political role played by the nobles in other countries, notably England, was played in France by writers, gathered in what have been called salons. Literature has assumed a political function. But intellectuals are, by nature, people who are totally foreign to political experience and concrete reality. Their role is to invent and imagine, not to do. Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot thus had all the time they needed to imagine the best possible constitutions, the best societies, the best man. Cut off from reality, writers imagined a perfect world that some then tried to practice in reality. The Monarchy, by destroying the aristocracy, has constituted writers as imaginary substitutes for a ruling class. Politics no longer needed to be embodied in reality, all it needed to do was to anchor itself in the sky and promote the imagination. Therein lie the disasters of the Revolution and the great violence it generated, because nothing is worse than intellectuals who want to build a perfect man in a perfect society.

III/ Violence and revolutionary dynamics

One thing is missing in Tocqueville: the analysis of the revolutionary process. As we have said, it studies law, administrative and social structures, everything that forms the foundation of society, but it does not study human passions, violence and destruction. His revolution ended in 1789. And maybe he's the one who's right. After the summer of 1789, it was no longer the liberal revolution, the one that defended the rights and freedoms of individuals, but something else. His family was severely affected by the Revolution. His cousin Chateaubriand went into exile in 1792. His great-grandfather Malesherbes was guillotined in 1794 for having been Louis XVI's lawyer, although he was nevertheless the defender of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. His grandfather Louis de Rosambo was guillotined in 1794, as were several of his uncles and cousins. His father and mother should have been guillotined in July 1794, but they were freed thanks to the fall of Robespierre on July 27. His family told him about this violence, but he doesn't mention it in his books. For Alexis de Tocqueville, it seems inconceivable that this would be revolution. Thus, he did not mention the massacres of September 1792, when nearly 1,300 people were killed in Paris, the majority of them priests.

He does not speak of Terror, the guillotine, the wars of the Vendée, the shootings in Lyon, the assassination of the king, the hatred against Christianity and the destruction of churches. Why? Why? It is not out of ignorance of the facts, as we have seen. Nor is it for the love of violence. The massacres of June 1848 repelled him. He hates Emperor Napoleon III because he took power by making a coup d'état. He remains deeply royalist and committed to order, although he was a minister of the republic. He understands very well the link between 1787 and 1789, but less well the continuation of the revolution and in particular the violence omnipresent in it. He does not speak of revolutionary dynamics, internal transformations, violence and political upheavals. It does not mention Jacobin messianism, the ideological war that began in 1792, the revolutionary will to carry the revolution throughout Europe, including as far as Russia. Nor does it deal with the patriotism and nationalism that were born with the revolution or the transformations of war, which becomes a national and popular war and no longer a war of professional soldiers. Nor does he question the repetitions of the revolution. Why did the revolutionary will reappear in 1830 and 1848, and then in 1870 with the Commune? It's that for him it's not revolution, it's something else. The revolution, for Tocqueville, ended in 1789. The rest is only the consequence of the emergence of democracy, whose exacerbated form goes so far as to erase people. To understand what he thinks, we have to go back to *Democracy in America* and to the lesser-known documents, letters and reports he wrote as a member of Parliament on the conquest of Algeria that France was starting. This is where we can find Tocqueville's analyses of the violence not of the revolution, but of constructivist democracy. These analyses are all the more interesting because they go far beyond the revolutionary framework and can help us understand the functioning of the totalitarian systems of the 20th century.

Alexis de Tocqueville's approach is therefore very original. On the one hand, he reduced the French Revolution to the sequence 1787-1789, on the other hand, he extended revolutionary violence well beyond the period of terror that ran from 1792 to 1794 to demonstrate that it was the foundation of democracy itself. In doing so, it does not end the revolution in 1795 or even 1815, but it gives the possibility of linking it to all the totalitarian systems of the 20th century and beyond. Tocqueville is thus an authentic liberal thinker. On the one hand, he thinks of revolution as the recognition of law and the person, on the other hand he shows the dangers of egalitarianism in the erasure of the person and the non-respect of natural rights. This makes this author an essential thinker in understanding and thinking about our world.