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'AMERICA' AS A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Tocqueville described his visit to America in 1833 as a second discovery of that world.¹ He spent 286 days in the New World and then wrote the two volumes which form the greatest anthropological essay on a civilization that we possess. Yet before briefly outlining his findings and hypotheses, we need to be clear about two things. The first is that the two volumes of his **Democracy**, as many Tocqueville scholars have observed, are really very different works. He should really have called them something like 'America', and 'Democracy' to prevent confusion.² In the following account, for brevity and coherence, I will treat them together, though not only time but shifting intentions made them feel very different.

The major difference is alleged to be that the first book was really about America, and the second just used America as a way of talking about equality (democracy). Certainly there is a shift. But it is also important to grasp that even the first volume was really a way of experimenting with ideas that Tocqueville had partially worked out before his visit. The point is well made by Pierson. 'It will not escape the student that Tocqueville had just reversed the sequence of his perceptions. For literary purposes he implied that he had discovered his great natural law of modern societies in America. Actually, this idea had been the product of his youthful experiences at home.'³

In fact Tocqueville was fairly open about this. Near the start of the first volume he wrote 'I admit that I saw in America more than America; it was the shape of democracy itself which I sought, its inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions; I wanted to understand it so as at least to know what we have to fear or hope therefrom.'⁴ In 1834 between the visit and the publication, he wrote to a friend. 'Some will find that at bottom I do not like democracy and that I am severe toward it; others will think that I favour its development imprudently ... but this is my response: nearly ten years ago I was already thinking about part of the things I have just now set forth. I was in America only to become clear on this point. The penitentiary system was a pretext: I took it as a passport that would let me enter thoroughly

¹Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 183

² Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 215

³Pierson, **Tocqueville in America**, 747

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 17

into the United States.⁵ Or as he put it succinctly commenting on the first volume, in a letter to J.S. Mill, 'America was only my framework; democracy was my subject.'⁶

His reasons for choosing America seem to have been three-fold. Firstly, America presented a simple, clear, field for the investigation of the questions that interested him. 'The special reason that has put the Americans in a state to be understood, is that they have been able to build their social edifice from a clean start.'⁷ Secondly, with his fear of the emptiness of the abstract, he felt that his message would have more power if written as a kind of narrative. He himself recognized the rhetorical need to make the abstract concrete, as had Montesquieu and Smith, and he wondered explicitly at one point 'Here I want to illustrate how the government can do things which no power before it had done. But perhaps this idea might be introduced in narrative form...'⁸ In many ways all of his work is a semi-narrative, a journey or exploration, the outward form is America, England or France, the inner thought is mankind and the riddle of modern civilization.

The third aim was to use America as a guide. 'So I did not study America just to satisfy curiosity, however legitimate; I sought there lessons from which we might profit.'⁹ America should not, of course, be directly imitated. 'The new society in which we are does not at all resemble our European societies. It has no prototype anywhere. It has also some primary conditions of existence that no other possesses, which makes it dangerous for any other society to imitate it...'¹⁰ Yet one could learn from it, and particularly from its mistakes. To make a 'mistake' in an old civilization like Europe was usually disastrous. But the energy, youth and flexibility of America meant that 'the great privilege of the Americans is to be able to make retrievable mistakes.'¹¹ Thus America was a thought experiment in more than one sense. It was a place for Tocqueville to test ideas he had been developing since he was nineteen, but it was also, in itself, a civilization which was making mistakes and retrieving itself - trying out new things and hence showing old Europe what it should and should not do.

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⁵Tocqueville, **Letters**, 95 (1834); Tocqueville and Beaumont were officially employed on a survey of the American prison (penitentiary) system.

⁶Quoted in Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, liii

⁷Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 177

⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 1025

⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 17

¹⁰Pierson, **Tocqueville in America**, 70

¹¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 287

Tocqueville partly chose America because it appeared to be young, sparsely populated, relatively 'simple'. He came to think of it as laid out on a kind of grid. If one could understand the straight roads, then one could understand everything. Once he arrived there he found another advantage, which was its homogeneity. Leaving on one side French Canada, he found that there was a surprising similarity at a deep level over the whole continent - despite dramatic geographical differences. This contrasted enormously with his experience of Europe. 'I doubt whether there is any nation in Europe, however small, whose different parts are not less homogeneous than those of the United States with an area half the size of Europe.'¹² More specifically, and recalling his own experience of the north-west tip of France, he wrote 'From the state of Maine to that of Georgia is a distance of some thousand miles, but the difference in civilisation between Maine and Georgia is less than that between Normandy and Brittany.'¹³

The combination of newness and homogeneity made it possible to comprehend and even to give it a name, 'America'. Yet it was no easy task to understand this new civilization. There were at first arrival a welter of impressions, often confusing, which had to be sorted out. 'You understand that I cannot yet have a fully developed opinion of this people. At first sight, it presents, like all others, a mixture of vices and virtues that is rather difficult to classify and that does not form a single picture.'¹⁴ He sensed that there was a surface and a deeper structure to be understood. As he later put it, 'The vices and weaknesses of democratic government are easy to see; they can be proved by obvious facts, whereas its salutary influence is exercised in an imperceptible and almost secret way.'¹⁵ Yet the difficulty was not merely one at the level of confusion, or of surface and base. The real difficulty, as Tocqueville realized, was that America was built on contradictions. It was the outcome of logically incompatible elements. Its fascination came from the fact that it was a **new** mix of forces, forming a restless, seething set of combinations.

Tocqueville uses an image of a pool in a rushing stream where contrary flows meet and swirl when he is trying to capture one of the major contradictions. 'When one examines what is happening in the United States closely, one soon discovers two contrary tendencies; they are like two currents flowing in the same bed in opposite directions.'¹⁶ At other times he described more than two contrary flows. For instance he talked of '...the great American fight between the provinces and the central power, between the spirit of independence and democracy, and the spirit of hierarchy and subordination.'¹⁷ He noted the agitation. 'This constant strife between the desires inspired by equality

¹²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 206-7

¹³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 207

¹⁴Tocqueville, **Letters**, 44 (1831)

¹⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 285-6

¹⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 477

¹⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 483

and the means it supplies to satisfy them harasses and wearies the mind.¹⁸ But paradoxically it also led to order. 'One may say that it is the very vehemence of their desires that makes the Americans so methodical. It agitates their minds but disciplines their lives.'¹⁹ If there was a central feature to the New World that was to be seen in America it was its turbulence and restlessness, its absence of tranquillity.

Tocqueville described this turbulence caused by the conflicts of desire and reason, centre and periphery, equality and individualism, in a number of brilliant passages. 'No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult; a confused clamour rises on every side, and a thousand voices are heard at once, each expressing some social requirements. All around you everything is on the move.'²⁰ The contrast was re-emphasized when he returned to France. 'When one passes from a free country into another which is not so, the contrast is very striking: there, all is activity and bustle; here all seems calm and immobile. In the former, betterment and progress are the questions of the day; in the latter, one might suppose that society, having acquired every blessing, longs for nothing but repose in which to enjoy them.'²¹

The restless, swiftly changing cascade is what struck him forcefully. 'Restlessness of character seems to me to be one of the distinctive traits of this people. The American is devoured by the longing to make his fortune; it is the unique passion of his life; he has no memory that attaches him to one place more than another, no inveterate habits, no spirit of routine; he is the daily witness of the swiftest changes of fortune.'²² Again he invoked the metaphor of a rushing stream with its cross-cutting currents and turbulent cataracts. 'Often born under another sky, placed in the middle of an ever moving picture, driven himself by the irresistible torrent that carries all around him along, the American has no time to attach himself to anything, he is only accustomed to change and ends by looking on it as the natural state of man.'²³ The result was a paradox which is one of the central features of modern capitalism, that desire always outstrips achievement. 'At first sight there is something astonishing in this spectacle of so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance.'²⁴

¹⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 694

¹⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 796; see also Lerner's summary of these contradictions in *ibid.*, I, c

²⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 299

²¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 298-9

²²Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 182; cf. Tocqueville, **Letters**, 44 (1831)

²³Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 183

²⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 693

Tocqueville was aware that in **ancien regime** societies, mercantile wealth tended to be looked down on. 'In aristocracies the rich are also the ruling class. Constant attention to great affairs of state diverts them from the petty cares of trade and industry. Should one of them nonetheless feel a natural inclination toward business, corporate public opinion at once bars his path.'²⁵ Likewise, manufacturing was vulgar and 'low caste'. Beaumont, Tocqueville's travelling companion described a manufacturer thus: 'No elegance; good nature; polite; sometimes indiscreet; embarrassingly obliging; it's **absolutely America**.'²⁶ In other words, being 'in trade', whether as a merchant or manufacture was vulgar, vaguely dishonourable, somehow dirty and demeaning. But not in America.

The central American passion was the pursuit of profit, both as a means and as an end. Tocqueville comments on this with amazement. 'So one usually finds that love of money is either the chief or a secondary motive at the bottom of everything the Americans do.'²⁷ He noticed that 'A breathless cupidity perpetually distracts the mind of man from the pleasures of the imagination and the labours of the intellect and urges it on to nothing but the pursuit of wealth.'²⁸ He realized that this was partly to do with the 'open frontier' of America. 'To clear, cultivate and transform the huge uninhabited continent which is their domain, the Americans need the everyday support of an energetic passion; that passion can only be the love of wealth.'²⁹ But later, when he visited the French Canadians, he found that they lacked this mentality and realized that it was mainly cultural and historical, rather than caused by the vast 'emptiness' or the practicalities of battling with nature.

It continued to fascinate and surprise him. 'It is odd to watch with what feverish ardour the Americans pursue prosperity and how they are ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it.'³⁰ The desire for the shortest route was one of the reasons, he thought, for the huge inventiveness and conspicuously growing wealth of America. 'They think about nothing but ways of changing their lot and bettering it. For people in this frame of mind every new way of getting wealth more quickly, every machine which lessens work, every means of diminishing the costs of production, every invention which makes pleasures easier or greater, seems the most magnificent accomplishment of the human mind.'³¹ This tendency was made all the stronger by the huge size,

²⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 714; for Tocqueville's distaste for bourgeois society and particularly its obsession with wealth, see Boesche, **Tocqueville**, 85ff.

²⁶Quoted in Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 63-4

²⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 796

²⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 583

²⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 805

³⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 692

³¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 593

diversity yet homogeneity, of America. 'In a large state thought on all subjects is stimulated and accelerated; ideas circulate more freely; the capitals are vast intellectual centres concentrating all the rays of thought in one bright glow; that is why great nations contribute more and faster to the increase of knowledge and the general progress of civilisation than small ones.'³²

This mention of inventions and labour-saving devices is one of the few places where Tocqueville explicitly talks about the early stages of the technological and industrial revolution that had transformed England and were starting to do the same in America. As Schleifer points out, Tocqueville did, abstractly, recognize that the industrial revolution, along with the tendency to equality (democracy) was one of the great forces of his time.³³ He also showed some sporadic interest in specific technologies and industrialization.³⁴ But in the case of America, in one of his very few failures to see into the future, he predicted a great commercial, but not industrial, future for the country.³⁵

The likelihood of continuing wealth accumulation was also heightened by what, to an aristocrat like Tocqueville, was a very strange attitude to work. He explained to his French contemporaries how it was in America. 'Among democratic peoples where there is no hereditary wealth, every man works for his living, or has worked, or comes from parents who have worked. Everything therefore prompts the assumption that to work is the necessary, natural, and honest condition of all men.'³⁶ Thus, 'Not only is no dishonour associated with work, but among such peoples it is regarded as positively honourable; the prejudice is for, not against, it.'³⁷ Honour, which lies in idleness in most societies, has been overturned. 'In a democratic society such as that of the United States, where fortunes are small and insecure, everybody works, and work opens all doors. That circumstance had made the point of honour do an about turn and set it facing against idleness.'³⁸ Thus all occupations, as long as they make money, are honourable and the American is very versatile and flexible in his or her attitude. 'In the United States professions are more or less unpleasant, more or less lucrative, but they are never high or low. Every honest profession is honourable.'³⁹ People will often do several types of job, successively or

³²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 197

³³Schleifer, **America**, 168

³⁴Schleifer, **America**, 283

³⁵Schleifer, **America**, 83

³⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 711

³⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 711

³⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 806

³⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 712

simultaneously. In America it sometimes happens that one and the same man will till his fields, build his house, make his tools, cobble his shoes, and with his own hands weave the coarse cloth that covers him. This is bad for improving craftsmanship but greatly serves to develop the worker's intelligence.⁴⁰

Tocqueville at times implied that perhaps necessity was the mother of work, as it was of invention, that people worked so hard because of their small fortunes. Yet he realized that it was deeper than this. Even as they became wealthier, they were driven on. For them desire for well-being has become a restless, burning passion which increases with satisfaction.⁴¹ They exhibited a restrained, puritan passion for wealth.

Such passionate materialism started with the commercial middle classes, and spread out as that bourgeois group took over the heart of America and set its standards. The passion for physical comfort is essentially a middle-class affair; it grows and spreads with that class and becomes preponderant with it.⁴² It also spread out from the sphere of the economy into all of life. The passions that stir the Americans most deeply are commercial and not political ones, or rather they carry a trader's habits over into the business of politics.⁴³ As Smith had earlier observed of England, it was a country 'ruled by shopkeepers'.

Those who have commented on Tocqueville have noted that he saw that **America** had somehow solved Adam Smith's contradiction between private desire and public benefit by harmonizing self-interest with public interest, creating a kind of calculative virtue.⁴⁴ As Lerner puts it, 'Time after time he confronts the paradox of a society which is fragmented by self-interest and self-seeking but which seems nevertheless to have found a principle of inner order.'⁴⁵ Sometimes Tocqueville just recognizes that somehow this has been achieved. 'What a happy land the New World is, where man's vices are almost as useful to society as his virtues!'⁴⁶ At other times he points to the way astute politicians and lawyers frame their activities to bring public and private good together. Thus 'American legislation appeals mainly to private interest; that is the great principle which one finds again and again when one studies the laws of the United States.'⁴⁷ He noted furthermore that 'American legislators show little

⁴⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 501

⁴¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 350

⁴²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 685

⁴³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 352

⁴⁴ For example, Schleifer, **America**, 235-243

⁴⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, ciii

⁴⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 351

confidence in human honesty, but they always assume that men are intelligent. So they generally rely on personal interest to see to the execution of the laws.⁴⁸

In one of the few places where, in his travel journals, he tried to tackle the problem he wrote that 'The two great social principles which seem to me to rule American society and to which one must always return to find the reason for all the laws and habits which govern it, are as follows: 1st. The majority may be mistaken on some points, but finally it is always right and there is no moral power above it. 2nd. Every individual, private person, society, community or nation, is the only lawful judge of its own interest, and provided it does not harm the interests of others, nobody has the right to interfere. I think that one must never lose sight of this point.'⁴⁹

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As for the consequences of the restless pursuit of profitable activity, Tocqueville notes several unexpected results. We have seen that it was combined with surprising restraint, not just as a result of the Puritan heritage. Paraphrasing certain themes in Montesquieu and Smith on the pacifying effects of the pursuit of wealth, he noted that 'Trade is the natural enemy of all violent passions. Trade loves moderation, delights in compromise, and is most careful to avoid anger.'⁵⁰ With an obvious message for his own revolution-prone country, and making a helpful distinction between permanent surface change, and the absence of fundamental revolutions, he wrote that 'Daily they change, alter and renew things of secondary importance, but they are very careful not to touch fundamentals. They love change, but they are afraid of revolutions.'⁵¹

The constant immersion in the pursuit of material goals also altered the whole attitude to time and the momentum of history. Time past was irrelevant. 'Aristocracy naturally leads the mind back to the past and fixes it in the contemplation thereof. But democracy engenders a sort of instinctive distaste for what is old.'⁵² Tocqueville saw that political, social and physical time are interrelated, a sort of Einsteinian view of the relativity of concepts of time and social relations. 'Among democratic peoples new families continually rise from nothing while others fall, and nobody's position is quite stable. The woof of time is ever being broken and the track of past generations lost. Those who have gone before are easily forgotten, and no one gives a thought to those who will follow. All a man's interests are limited

⁴⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 96

⁴⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 96

⁴⁹Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 149

⁵⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 826

⁵¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 828

⁵²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 621

to those near himself.⁵³ He noted the optimism and future-orientation of the Americans. 'Howsoever powerful and impetuous the course of history is here, imagination always goes in advance of it, and the picture is never large enough. There is not a country in the world where man more confidently takes charge of the future, or where he feels with more pride that he can fashion the universe to please himself.'⁵⁴

These shocks and surprises at the turbulence and commercial spirit of America led Tocqueville to ponder on how the system could work like this. This presented him with further puzzles. He could see that the ever-striving, hard-working and calculating spirit was somehow linked to the political system. He made a strong connection between political freedom and the generation of 'wealth' or well-being. He first noticed that this was a characteristic of 'democratic' countries. 'There is therefore at the bottom of democratic institutions some hidden tendency which often makes men promote the general prosperity, in spite of their vices and their mistakes, whereas in aristocratic institutions there is sometimes a secret bias which, in spite of talents and virtues, leads men to contribute to the afflictions of their fellows.'⁵⁵ On the basis of his later experience in England he widened this into a universal proposition. 'I doubt if one can cite a single example of any people engaged in both manufacture and trade, from the men of Tyre to the Florentines and the English, who were not a free people. There must therefore be a close link and necessary relationship between these two things, that is, freedom and industry.'⁵⁶ But the actual causal links were very difficult to discern.

At times he seemed to suggest that the bourgeois mentality was the most important, affecting political institutions and thence wealth. 'Everyone living in democratic times contracts, more or less, the mental habits of the industrial and trading classes; their thoughts take a serious turn, calculating and realistic; they gladly turn away from the ideal to pursue some visible and approachable aim which seems the natural and necessary object of their desires.'⁵⁷ At other times he emphasized freedom and education and almost exactly paraphrased Adam Smith's 'peace, easy taxes and a due administration of justice'. 'If you give democratic peoples education and freedom and leave them alone, they will easily extract from this world all the good things it has to offer. They will improve all useful techniques and make life daily more comfortable, smooth, and bland. Since their social condition by its nature urges them this way, there is no need to fear that they will stop.'⁵⁸

Another link was between the degree of political absolutism and centralization on the one hand and

⁵³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 653

⁵⁴Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 183

⁵⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 289-90

⁵⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 696

⁵⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 773-4

⁵⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 701

wealth creation on the other. He believed that 'It is certain that despotism brings men to ruin more by preventing them from producing than by taking away the fruits of their labours; it dries up the fount of wealth while often respecting acquired riches. But liberty engenders a thousandfold more goods than it destroys, and in nations where it is understood, the people's resources always increase faster than the taxes.'⁵⁹ One way in which this insidiously happened was through the draining of the more innovative from the countryside as centralization proceeded. 'Is it a centralized country? The rural districts are emptied of rich and enlightened inhabitants. I could go further - a centralized country is a country of imperfect and unprogressive cultivation; and I could comment on the profound saying of Montesquieu by explaining his meaning - "lands produce less by reason of their fertility than by reason of the liberty of their inhabitants."⁶⁰

Perhaps the nearest he came to resolving the difficulty of reciprocal causation was when he wrote 'I have no doubt that democratic institutions, combined with the physical nature of the land, are the indirect reason, and not, as is often claimed, the direct one, for the prodigious industrial expansion seen in the United States. It is not the laws' creation, but the people have learned to achieve it by making the laws.'⁶¹ Here he recognized that there was something behind the laws - returning again to the primacy of culture.

Even if he had been content to explain the situation fully in terms of the legal and political 'freedom' he would have faced a serious problem. This was because, from a French standpoint 'America' seemed to run itself without any obvious political system at all. Again it seemed to have achieved the impossible, to be very well organized and orderly, with few signs of government.

When Tocqueville first arrived he expressed his astonishment at the bizarre situation. 'What is most striking to everyone who travels in this country, whether or not one bothers to reflect, is the spectacle of a society marching along all alone, without guide or support, by the sole fact of the cooperation of individual wills. In spite of anxiously searching for the government, one can find it nowhere, and the truth is that it does not, so to speak, exist at all.'⁶² How then was it held together?

One part of the solution lay in de-centralized power, which, like Montesquieu, he admired. Yet he was fully aware that too much decentralization could be disastrous. Thus, looking back at the early mediaeval period in Europe he described it thus: '...the cause of all the miseries of feudal society was that power, not just of administration, but of government, was divided among a thousand people and broken up in a thousand ways; the absence of all governmental centralisation then prevented the nations of Europe from advancing energetically toward any goal.

Tocqueville explained that the Americans had created an 'imagined community' to hold together, through ideology, an equal peoples who thus needed few police, no central bureaucracy, no standing

⁵⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 257

⁶⁰ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 130-1

⁶¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 301

⁶²Tocqueville, **Letters**, 59 (1831)

army. He noted that in contrast to France, '...one is bound to notice that all classes show great confidence in their country's legislation, feeling a sort of paternal love for it.'⁶³ Using 'ideal' in the sense of imagined, he wrote that 'The government of the Union rests almost entirely on legal fictions. The Union is an ideal nation which exists, so to say, only in men's minds and whose extent and limits can only be discerned by the understanding.'⁶⁴ This ideal community was highly artificial, manufactured, yet it felt 'natural'. He believed that it was only possible because it was founded on that most powerful set of American institutions, the self-governing commune, and a plethora of different institutions. 'Everything in such a government depends on artificially contrived conventions, and it is only suited to a people long accustomed to manage its affairs, and one in which even the lowest ranks of society have an appreciation of political science.'⁶⁵ The vitality was at the local level, and fed upwards. Centralized aristocracies like France were top-down, and the nation was only held together by physical force. 'So, whereas with us the central government lends its agents to the commune, in America the township lends its agents to the government. That fact alone shows how far the two societies differ.'⁶⁶

The whole system depended on the dynamic creation and maintenance of 'artificial communities' at the lower levels. Tocqueville had earlier noted that 'The American people taken in mass is not only the most enlightened in the world, but - what I put much higher than that advantage - is the one whose practical political education is the most advanced.'⁶⁷ This practical education was absolutely essential for democracy to work and hence for wealth to increase, especially as a counterbalance to the dangers of narrow individualism generated by growing equality. 'If men are to remain civilised or to become civilised, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as equality of conditions spreads.'⁶⁸ And this is exactly what he found in America. 'Better use has been made of association and this powerful instrument of action has been applied to more varied aims in America than anywhere else in the world.'⁶⁹ He found that 'Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are for ever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types - religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons,

⁶³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 297; Anderson, **Imagined Communities**

⁶⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I. 202-3

⁶⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 203

⁶⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 81

⁶⁷Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 179

⁶⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 666

⁶⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 232

and schools take shape in that way.⁷⁰

He had heard that the English were famous for their associations, or as Montesquieu would have described them perhaps, 'intermediary institutions'. Yet while 'A single Englishman will often carry through some great undertaking' he found that 'Americans form associations for no matter how small a matter. Clearly the former regard association as a powerful means of action, but the latter seem to think of it as the only one.'⁷¹ This was one explanation for their dynamism for it made them self-confident, experienced in practical politics, unafraid of the State.⁷² Indeed Tocqueville placed great emphasis on individual self-responsibility in government and other spheres and this was one of the facts which attracted him to the American legal system as a central feature in his explanation of democracy. Firstly, whereas in France the political institutions dominated the legal ones, in America it was the other way round. 'In a sense the legislature penetrates to the very heart of the administration.'⁷³ Secondly, the legislation itself was made for the people and not for the State and hence had a distinct flavour. 'Nothing is more peculiar or more instructive than the legislation of this time; there, if anywhere, is the key to the social enigma presented to the world by the United States now.'⁷⁴ Thirdly, the dominance of law was combined with delegation downwards. 'In no country in the world are the pronouncements of the law more categorical than in America, and in no other country is the right to enforce it divided among so many hands.'⁷⁵

Among these 'hands' two particularly struck him. One was the office of justice of the peace. As he realized, this was a system that had been introduced from England. 'The Americans have borrowed from their English forefathers the conception of an institution which has no analogy with anything we know on the Continent, that of justices of the peace.'⁷⁶ The other major delegation of power had also been borrowed from England, namely the jury system. In a number of places Tocqueville explained how

⁷⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 662

⁷¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 663

⁷² Weatherford, **Native Roots**, 183-4 and Mander, **Absence of the Sacred**, ch.13, argue that the American settlers may have learnt some of the democratic and associational skills from the native Americans, for instance the famous Iroquois Confederacy, and that Tocqueville may have been half aware of this. I am grateful to Charles Ehrhart for these references.

⁷³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 89

⁷⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 46-7

⁷⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 87

⁷⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 90

juries not only protected the individual citizen against the power of the State, but, perhaps even more importantly, involved them in responsibility for their own governance. It was the most important 'political' education they had and trained them to participate properly in a democracy.

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There was one further area where Tocqueville believed he had found a key to American civilization. That was religion, in particular the **relations** of religion to the political system.⁷⁷ Tocqueville's account captures yet again the deep contradictions in the system. On the one hand, it was clear to him that religion was enormously important as a social glue and as a source of consolation. Faith and hope he thought were two of "the most permanent and invincible instincts of human nature" because "each has a need to nourish some illusion."⁷⁸ Without religious belief, man was easily seduced into terrible excesses. Thus in relation to the French revolution, he wrote that the 'universal discredit into which all religious beliefs fell at the end of the eighteenth century exercised without doubt the greatest influence on the whole course of our Revolution; it distinguished its character.'⁷⁹ Thus he was relieved to find that in many ways America was far more full of genuine religious activity than the Europe he had left. He believed that 'It is evident that there still remains here a larger foundation for Christian religion than in any other country in the world, to my knowledge...'⁸⁰ Although he modified this a little in the published book, he still argued that 'In America religion is perhaps less powerful than it has been at certain times and among certain peoples, but its influence is more lasting. It restricts itself to its own resources, of which no one can deprive it.'⁸¹ Yet he also recognized that it was a peculiar and different 'religion' to the Catholicism which he had rejected in France.

He noted the absence of a dominant religious authority and hence the freedom to follow reason and individual conscience. In parallel to the de-centralization in politics, this led to de-centralized religion where the 'sects' became the equivalents to companies (economics) or communes (politics). He described the situation and his bafflement early on in his stay. 'Thus you see: Protestantism, a mixture of authority and reason, is battered at the same time by the two absolute principles of **reason** and **authority**. Anyone who wants to look for it can see this spectacle to some extent everywhere; but here it is quite striking.'⁸² There are obvious echoes of his own earlier battle between reason and authority. And this perhaps led to an early somewhat cynical observation which he later dropped - for although it

⁷⁷ For an excellent fuller account of this topic, see Goldstein, **Trial of Faith**.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Boesche, **Tocqueville**, 110

⁷⁹ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 165

⁸⁰ Tocqueville, **Letters**, 52 (1831)

⁸¹ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 369

⁸² Tocqueville, **Letters**, 52 (1831)

captured the optional nature of particular faith it did not capture the sincerity. 'People follow a religion the way our fathers took a medicine in the month of May - if it does not do any good, people seem to say, at least it cannot do any harm, and, besides, it is proper to conform to the general rule.'⁸³

Part of the mystery was resolved by seeing that religion had been separated from politics. 'European Christianity has allowed itself to be intimately united with the powers of this world.'⁸⁴ This had not happened in America. State and Church were separate. This was recognized as a cause of the mutual harmony of each. Thus in America '...all thought that the main reason for the quiet sway of religion over their country was the complete separation of church and state.'⁸⁵ It meant that while political and economic life could be turbulent, religion could be calm and certain. 'Thus, in the moral world everything is classified, co-ordinated, foreseen, and decided in advance. In the world of politics everything is in turmoil, contested and uncertain.'⁸⁶ It was extraordinary, but it worked. By separating the two worlds of politics and religion, they came to support each other better than by forcing them into the kind of concordats he was familiar with in Europe. 'Far from harming each other, these two apparently opposed tendencies work in harmony and seem to lend mutual support.'⁸⁷ Not that this flowed from any intrinsic lack of zeal, or even lack of ambition on the part of the sects. It was more, as Adam Smith and others had argued, the result of stalemate. America showed this wonderfully 'because the religious and irreligious instincts which can exist in man develop here in perfect liberty.'⁸⁸

Particularly interesting was the position of the Catholic clergy. 'Protestants of all persuasions - Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists, Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Quakers, and a hundred other Christian sects - this is the core of the population. This church-going and indifferent population, which lives day to day, becomes used to a **milieu** which is hardly satisfying, but which is tranquil, and in which the **proprieties** are satisfied. They live and die in compromises, without ever concerning themselves with reaching the depths of things; they no longer recruit anyone. Above them is to be found a fistful of Catholics, who are making use of the tolerance of their ancient adversaries, but who are staying basically as intolerant as they have always been, as intolerant in a word as people who **believe**.'⁸⁹

He tried to capture the same point with a metaphor of a set of concentric circles, with the

⁸³Tocqueville, **Letters**, 49 (1831)

⁸⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 372

⁸⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 365

⁸⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 55

⁸⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 55

⁸⁸Tocqueville, **Letters**, 50 (1831)

⁸⁹Tocqueville, **Letters**, 50 (1831)

Catholics in the middle. 'It is an incredible thing to see the infinite subdivisions into which the sects have been divided in America. One might say they are circles successively drawn around the same point; each new one is a little more distant than the last. The Catholic faith is the immobile point from which each new sect distances itself a little more, while drawing nearer to pure deism.⁹⁰ In such a situation the extreme dogmatists, the Catholics, not only had to abandon any idea of an alliance with the State, but they were pushed back into a purely private role. Because of the multiplicity of sects and of different priests, each religious group became relegated to the level of the private life of the citizen. They had no choice but to accept that religion and their particular morality stopped at the front door of their sect follower; it could not be imposed on others. 'American Catholic priests have divided the world of the mind into two parts; in one are revealed dogmas to which they submit without discussion; political truth finds its place in the other half, which they think God has left to man's free investigation.⁹¹

Thus religion was inwardly strong and outwardly weak. 'Religion in America is a world apart in which the clergyman is supreme, but one which he is careful never to leave; within its limits he guides men's minds, while outside them he leaves men to themselves, to the freedom and instability natural to themselves and the times they live in. I have seen no country in which Christianity is less clothed in forms, symbols, and observances than it is in the United States, or where the mind is fed with clearer, simpler, or more comprehensive conceptions.⁹² It was not a 'civil religion', but a privatized, individualized, yet heavily ethical world continuing the traditions of its Pilgrim fathers.

Like Montesquieu before him, Tocqueville seems to have realized that there was something about this religious structure which was particularly propitious for the development of what we would now call capitalism. It was not so much the actual dogma, but the structural position of religion and the spur it gave. Part of this is caught by Lerner when he writes 'He even saw what Max Weber and R.H. Tawney were to see later: that there was an inner relation between the religious spirit and the strength of the capitalist impulse in America, and that the single-minded pursuit of wealth and personal property was linked with the single-minded quest of God.⁹³ Or as Tocqueville himself put it, in a paradox of the same kind as Weber's 'That is why religious nations have often accomplished such lasting achievements. For in thinking of the other world, they had found out the great success in this.⁹⁴

* * *

Tocqueville synthesized all these ideas into one major theory, that the development of the spirit of equality was the key to American civilization. In America he found a land which had explicitly enthroned the premise of equality, rather than of inequality. It made it a central tenet that man was born free and

⁹⁰Tocqueville, **Letters**, 49 (1831)

⁹¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 357

⁹²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 574

⁹³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, cii

⁹⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 707

equal. This was still a peculiar way to look at things and Tocqueville consequently noted that 'No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions.'⁹⁵ Equality, or democracy as he often called it, became the key to understanding America. 'So the more I studied American society, the more clearly I saw equality of conditions as the creative element from which each particular fact derived, and all my observations constantly returned to this nodal point.'⁹⁶ There had been some early attempts to take inequality over from the Old World, but they had failed. 'Laws were made there to establish the hierarchy of ranks, but it was soon seen that the soil of America absolutely rejected a territorial aristocracy.'⁹⁷

He became convinced after his visit that this growing equality was the future. 'It seems to me beyond doubt that sooner or later we, like the Americans, will attain almost complete equality of conditions.'⁹⁸ He believed that 'the gradual process of equality is somehow fated.'⁹⁹ Governments could channel its course, but not stop it. 'In a word, from now on democracy seems to me a fact that a government can have the pretension of **regulating**, but of stopping, no.'¹⁰⁰ This was all the more so because there was a positive feed-back. The more equality there was, the more impatient people became at the remaining inequalities. 'When inequality is the general rule in society, the greatest inequalities attract no attention. When everything is more or less level, the slightest variation is noticed. Hence the more equal men are, the more insatiable will be their longing for equality.'¹⁰¹

His certainty did not only arise from his American experience. His increasing research into the history of Europe appeared to show the same tendency. When people suggested that a new aristocracy created by industrial or commercial wealth might re-instate hierarchy, Tocqueville was prepared to concede temporary, small-scale, reversals. 'Hence, just while the mass of the nation is turning toward democracy, that particular class which is engaged in industry becomes more aristocratic.'¹⁰² Yet this was only marginal. 'Does anyone imagine that democracy, which has destroyed the feudal system and

⁹⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 5

⁹⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 5

⁹⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 37

⁹⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 17

⁹⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 8

¹⁰⁰Tocqueville, **Letters**, 56

¹⁰¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 695

¹⁰²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 720

vanquished kings, will fall back before the middle classes and the rich?¹⁰³ Thus his work on **Democracy in America** was impelled by a need to understand and direct this tendency. 'This whole book has been written under the impulse of a kind of religious dread inspired by contemplation of this irresistible revolution advancing century by century over every obstacle and even now going forward amid the ruins it had itself created.'¹⁰⁴

Tocqueville's greatness lies in the fact that as a member of a noble family, he nevertheless partially rejected the premise of natural inequality which had been the foundation of his ancestral power. He realized that 'rational equality is the only state natural to man.'¹⁰⁵ This was proved not only by the fact that 'nations get there from such various starting points and following such different roads'¹⁰⁶ but also by the evidence that 'Running through the pages of our history, there is hardly an important event in the last seven hundred years which has not turned out to be advantageous for equality.'¹⁰⁷ His central dynamic, therefore, was the tendency towards equality, and the movement away from birth to achievement as the basis for social position. This was the unstoppable force, the tide of history. Thus he wrote that, 'the great human revolution which we set in motion more than sixty-five years ago, advances towards liberty only occasionally, but towards equality with an irresistible and uninterrupted progress.'¹⁰⁸

His anxiety was that such a tendency could lead either to the elevation or subjugation of men. 'To me the Christian nations of our day present an alarming spectacle; the movement which carries them along is already too strong to be halted, but it is not yet so swift that we must despair of directing it; our fate is in our hands, but soon it may pass beyond control.'¹⁰⁹ His central conclusion in the first volume of **Democracy** was summarized thus by J.S. Mill. 'They may be stated as follows:- That Democracy, in the modern world is inevitable; and that it is, on the whole, desirable; but desirable only under certain conditions, and those conditions capable, by human care and foresight, of being realized, but capable also of being missed. The progress and ultimate ascendancy of the democratic principle has, in his eyes, the character of a law of nature.'¹¹⁰

¹⁰³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 8

¹⁰⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 9

¹⁰⁵Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 9

¹⁰⁶Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 9

¹⁰⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 7

¹⁰⁸Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II, 282

¹⁰⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 9

¹¹⁰Mill, **Essays**, 217

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Tocqueville was particularly interested in the effects of the advancing tide of equality on inter-personal relations. He noted the effects on parent-child relations. He wrote that 'Everyone has noticed that in our time a new relationship has evolved between the different members of a family, that the distance formerly separating father and son has diminished, and that paternal authority, if not abolished, has at least changed form.'¹¹¹ Thus, in America, 'the family, if one takes the word in its Roman and aristocratic sense, no longer exists.'¹¹² The phenomenon could be seen as a child grew up in America, for 'as soon as the young American begins to approach man's estate, the reins of filial obedience are daily slackened. Master of his thoughts, he soon becomes responsible for his own behaviour. In America there is in truth no adolescence. At the close of boyhood he is a man and begins to trace out his own path.'¹¹³

The independence of children and their separation from their parents could be seen when he compared his own aristocratic childhood with what he saw in America. In the former, patriarchal power was still present. He believed that 'When men are more concerned with memories of what has been than with what is, and when they are much more anxious to know what their ancestors thought than to think for themselves, the father is the natural and necessary link between the past and the present, the link where these two chains meet and join.'¹¹⁴ On the other hand, in America 'When the state of society turns to democracy and men adopt the general principle that it is good and right to judge everything for oneself, taking former beliefs as providing information but not rules, paternal opinions come to have less power over the sons, just as his legal power is less too.'¹¹⁵ Here, as elsewhere, hierarchy and holism were linked on one side, with equality and individualism as a matched pair on the other.

The change from patriarchal to egalitarian family structures was obviously connected to the change from a situation where the state used the father, to one which separated politics and the family. 'As in aristocratic society, so in the aristocratic family, all positions are defined. Not only the father holds a rank apart and enjoys immense privileges; the children too are by no means equal among one another.'¹¹⁶ Thus 'In aristocracies society is, in truth, only concerned with the father. It only controls the sons through the father; it rules him, and he rules them. Hence the father has not only his natural right. He is given a political right to command. He is the author and support of the family; he is also its

¹¹¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 756

¹¹²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 756

¹¹³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 756

¹¹⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 758

¹¹⁵ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, ii, 759

¹¹⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 760

magistrate.¹¹⁷ But this was not the case in democracies, where each member of the family was a free citizen, responsible for himself. The alteration in power was perceptible in the tone of the relationship of fathers and sons in America. For 'among democratic nations every word a son addresses to his father has a tang of freedom, familiarity, and tenderness all at once, which gives an immediate impression of the new relationship prevailing in the family.'¹¹⁸ Thus the premise of equality changed all the relations between the generations, and even between older and younger brothers.

Just as the relations between the generations was deeply affected, so was the relation between the genders. Tocqueville believed this to be a very important topic. 'Therefore everything which has a bearing on the status of women, their habits, and their thoughts is, in my view, of great political importance.'¹¹⁹ He wondered whether 'democracy' was likely to destroy or modify 'the great inequality between man and woman which has up till now seemed based on the eternal foundations of nature?'¹²⁰ Personally he felt sure that it would 'raise the status of women, and should make them more and more nearly equal to men.'¹²¹ He then outlines the high status of American women. For instance 'In Europe one has often noted that a certain contempt lurks in the flattery men lavish on women; although a European may often make himself woman's slave, one feels that he never sincerely thinks her his equal. In the United States, men seldom compliment women, but they daily show how much they esteem them.'¹²² The Americans carried to an extreme a tendency which Tocqueville had noticed seemed somehow to be linked to Protestantism and liberty, and hence was also found in England. 'In almost all Protestant nations girls are much more in control of their own behaviour than among Catholic ones. This independence is even greater in those Protestant countries, such as England, which have kept or gained the right of self-government. In such cases both political habits and religious beliefs infuse a spirit of liberty into the family.'¹²³ The fact that Tocqueville was married to a middle class English woman, Mary Mottley, gave him an especial insight into these cultural differences.

Tocqueville noted that the freedom of American women started when they were young. 'Long before the young American woman has reached marriageable age, the process of freeing her from her mother's care has started stage by stage. Before she has completely left childhood behind she already

¹¹⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 758

¹¹⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 760

¹¹⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 763

¹²⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 777

¹²¹ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 777

¹²²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 779

¹²³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 763

thinks for herself, speaks freely, and acts on her own.¹²⁴ This was reinforced by the relatively late age at marriage. 'Precocious weddings hardly occur. So American women only marry when their minds are experienced and mature, whereas elsewhere women usually only begin to mature when they are married.'¹²⁵ It was then maintained by a division of labour between the sexes. Men and women were given different spheres, in recognition of their different abilities, but each was valued highly. The Americans 'consider that progress consists not in making dissimilar creatures do roughly the same things but in giving both a chance to do their job as well as possible. The Americans have applied to the sexes the great principle of political economy which now dominates industry. They have carefully separated the functions of man and of woman so that the great work of society may be better performed.'¹²⁶ To sum up, the Americans do not think that man and woman have the duty or the right to do the same things, but they show an equal regard for the part played by both and think of them as beings of equal worth, though their fates are different.¹²⁷

Thus again there was a paradox. In many respects American women were quite confined in their role. Yet they had the highest 'station' or status in the world. 'For my part, I have no hesitation in saying that although the American woman never leaves her domestic sphere and is in some respects very dependent within it, nowhere does she enjoy a higher station.'¹²⁸ It was another instance of a blend of religion, economy and society. 'The Americans are both a Puritan and a trading nation. Therefore both their religious beliefs and their industrial habits lead them to demand much abnegation on the woman's part and a continual sacrifice of pleasure for the sake of business, which is seldom expected in Europe.'¹²⁹ And it was upon the superior ability and status and intelligence of American women that the greatness of America was based. 'If anyone asks me what I think the chief cause of the extraordinary prosperity and growing power of this nation, I should answer that it is due to the superiority of their women.'¹³⁰

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Tocqueville was well aware of the implicit dangers of the New World which he was analyzing. In general he was very fair and balanced in his appraisal. He saw much to admire and to praise as we

¹²⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 763

¹²⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 767

¹²⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 777-8

¹²⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 780

¹²⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 780-1

¹²⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 766

¹³⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 781

have seen, and may also note his admiration for the high educational standards and the independence of mind. It was a mighty, largely tolerant, and ambitious nation. Yet, alongside the achievements he noted not only the possibility of despotism and loneliness, but other presently existing evils. One, which he castigated with bitterness, was slavery which appalled him on his southern travels.¹³¹ Another was the destruction of the American Indians. A book could be written just about his poignant account of the tragic destruction then in its last phases.¹³² Here we can only cite three examples from his extensive journals and writings. As he watched the last huddled bands of Indians he felt an inexpressible sadness. 'There was, in the whole of this spectacle, an air of ruin and destruction, something that savoured of a farewell that was final and with no return; no one could witness this without being sick at heart; the Indians were calm, but sombre and taciturn.'¹³³ He summarized the European impact thus. 'The Europeans, having scattered the Indian tribes far into the wilderness, condemned them to a wandering vagabond life full of inexpressible afflictions.'¹³⁴ As he saw only too clearly, they were faced with an impossible choice. 'From whatever angle one regards the destinies of the North American natives, one sees nothing but irremediable ills: if they remain savages, they are driven along before the march of progress; if they try to become civilised, contact with more civilised people delivers them over to oppression and misery.'¹³⁵ Already he could see an end to their way of life and even, the prophet that he was, an end to the wilderness.

His vision of the ecological destruction that took place over the following century is shown in a moving passage written during his 'fortnight in the wilderness'. 'In a few years these impenetrable forests will have fallen; the sons of civilization and industry will break the silence of the Saginaw; its echoes will cease; the banks will be imprisoned by quays; its current, which now flows on unnoticed and tranquil through a nameless waste, will be stemmed by the prows of vessels.' It was the imminent loss which added to the beauty. 'It is this idea of destruction, with the accompanying thought of near and inevitable change, that gives to the solitudes of America their peculiar character, and their touching loveliness.'¹³⁶

Yet, at a deeper level, he thought that even the white settlers were themselves being destroyed, but by a more insidious disease. There is sadness in this observation too. He thought that '...the people

¹³¹ There are numerous references to his views on slavery in the index to Tocqueville, **Democracy**.

¹³² For a good background account of the tragic impact of epidemics, trade goods, alcohol, firearms, mission schools and so on on Indian culture, see Axtell, **European and Indian**, ch.9

¹³³ Tocqueville, **Letters**, 73 (1831)

¹³⁴ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 393

¹³⁵ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 420

¹³⁶ Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 202.

is becoming enlightened, attainments spread, and a middling ability becomes common. The striking talents, the great characters, are rare. Society is less brilliant and more prosperous. These various effects of the progress of civilization and enlightenment, which are only hinted at in Europe, appear in the clear light of day in America. From what first cause do they derive? I do not yet see clearly.¹³⁷ Later, though puzzled, he saw the malaise more clearly. 'Why, as civilisation spreads, do understanding men become fewer? Why, when attainments are the lot of all, do great intellectual talents become rarer? Why, when there are no longer lower classes, are there no more upper classes? Why, when knowledge of how to rule reaches the masses, is there a lack of great abilities in the direction of society? America clearly poses these questions. But who can answer them?'¹³⁸

Another insidious evil which he saw emerging, was an effect of that very principle of the division of labour which Smith had elaborated. Alluding explicitly to Smith, Tocqueville asked 'What is one to expect from a man who has spent twenty years of his life making heads for pins? And how can he employ that mighty human intelligence which has so often stirred the world, except in finding out the best way of making heads for pins?'¹³⁹ He expressed the thought thus. 'As the principle of the division of labour is ever more completely applied, the workman becomes weaker, more limited, and more dependent. The craft improves, the craftsman slips back.'¹⁴⁰ The brave new world of industrial civilization which he saw ahead was not one he unequivocally welcomed. The hugeness of America, with its physical size and in its growing population, presaged dangers. Those who had destroyed the wilderness and the Indians might be the heirs to a poisoned chalice. 'Great wealth and dire poverty, huge cities, depraved morals, individual egoism, and complication of interests are so many perils which almost always arise from the large size of the state.'¹⁴¹

* * *

Tocqueville had shown how the system seemed, amazingly, to work. But why was it like that? How had it come into being? Having diminished the importance of geography, and put 'laws' into perspective, he was not left with much else. For a while, he and Beaumont thought that the explanation for the large middle class and equality might lie in the inheritance system. But, as Pierson points out, this was a red herring and though it appeared in the **Democracy** could not get them very far.¹⁴² There was only one area left, 'culture', that is mores and customs. So Tocqueville turned to an explanation of these, reverting to his methodical device of the 'point of departure.'

¹³⁷Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 87

¹³⁸Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 160

¹³⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 718

¹⁴⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 719

¹⁴¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 196

¹⁴²Pierson, **Tocqueville in America**, 128

As Tocqueville thought more and travelled further he came to the conclusion that the secret of 'America' would not to be found in America, but in Europe, and particularly in England. He placed his final ideas on the subject in a footnote to his last work, the **Ancien Regime**. He put forward the general proposition that 'The physiognomy of governments can be best detected in their colonies, for there their features are magnified, and rendered more conspicuous. When I want to discover the spirit and vices of the government of Louis XIV, I must go to Canada. Its deformities are seen there as through a microscope.'¹⁴³ The same was true of the relationship of the United States and England. 'In the United States ... the English anti-centralisation system was carried to an extreme. Parishes became independent municipalities, almost democratic republics. The republican element, which forms, so to say, the foundation of the English constitution and English habits, shows itself and develops without hindrance.'¹⁴⁴ This also helped to explain the homogeneity of the United States - 'there was a strong family likeness between all the English colonies as they came to birth.'¹⁴⁵

He developed the idea of a germ, or seed, which shaped the colony but then took certain early tendencies further than in the homeland. 'I do not think the intervening ocean really separates America from Europe. The people of the United States are that portion of the English people whose fate it is to explore the forests of the New World...'¹⁴⁶ 'That portion' had taken the central feature, liberty, with them. 'At the time of the first immigrations, local government, that fertile germ of free institutions, had already taken deep root in English ways, and therewith the dogma of the sovereignty of the people had slipped into the very heart of the Tudor monarchy.'¹⁴⁷ They also took the separation of religion and politics. 'Most of English America was peopled by men who, having shaken off the pope's authority, acknowledged no other religious supremacy; they therefore brought to the New World a Christianity which I can only describe as democratic and republican; this fact singularly favoured the establishment of a temporal republic and democracy. From the start politics and religion agreed, and they have not since ceased to do so.'¹⁴⁸ These central features had been taken to their logical extreme. 'If it be true that each people has a special character independent of its political interest, just as each man has one independent of his social position, one might say that America gives the most perfect picture, for good and for ill, of the special character of the English race. The American is the Englishman left to himself.'¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³Tocqueville, 'Notes' , 270

¹⁴⁴Tocqueville, 'Notes', 271

¹⁴⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 37

¹⁴⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 584-5

¹⁴⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 36

¹⁴⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 355-6

¹⁴⁹Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 177

This was because of two significant facts. Firstly physical distance had created the practical necessity for self-governing local government institutions to take a greater burden than in the old country. From the very early days in the new colonies 'One continually finds them exercising rights of sovereignty; they appointed magistrates, made peace and war, promulgated police regulations, and enacted laws as if they were dependent on God alone.'¹⁵⁰ Secondly, the old hierarchical structure of England was not transferred. There was no extreme division of landed wealth, no aristocracy, no traditional gentry. In a sense America was an extension of that great middling part of English social structure, from the yeoman up to the successful manufacturer or merchant. The two extremes, the landless poor and the owners of huge estates, had vanished. As a result, 'All, from the beginning, seemed destined to let freedom grow, not the aristocratic freedom of their motherland but a middle-class and democratic freedom of which the world's history had not previously provided a complete example.'¹⁵¹ This was the fascination of studying America. Out of old English elements it had shaped something new and unprecedented. Because of its short history it was possible to observe exactly how it had started and how evolved and to see the combination of seed and maturation. 'America is the only country in which we can watch the natural quiet growth of society and where it is possible to be exact about the influence of the point of departure on the future of a state.'¹⁵²

At a specific level there were particular institutional transfers. 'Thus the flowering of local government in America flowed from the essential principle of the English polity. Transported at a single stroke far from the feudal remnants of Europe, "the rural parish of the Middle Ages became the New England township."¹⁵³ Yet this was just one element of the generalized system of freedom, carried from England. The English who emigrated three centuries ago to found a democratic society in the wilds of the New World were already accustomed in their motherland, to take part in public affairs; they knew trial by jury; they had liberty of speech and freedom of the press, personal freedom, and the conception of rights and the practice of asserting them. They carried these free institutions and virile mores with them to America, and these characteristics sustained them against the encroachments of the state.'¹⁵⁴ In turn, again linking freedom and wealth, he found that 'The English colonies - and that was one of the main reasons for their prosperity - have always enjoyed more internal freedom and political independence than those of other nations.'¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 46

¹⁵¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 37

¹⁵²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 35

¹⁵³Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 204; the quotation is from Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 53, and Tocqueville in fact is speaking of medieval Europe in general as the origin of the parish.

¹⁵⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 875-6

¹⁵⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 45

Tocqueville thus became increasingly aware, even during his stay in America, that in order to understand the origins and causes of that extraordinary land he would have to continue his travels. The answer to his riddle lay in the 'point of departure', and that point seemed to lie in England. Thus shortly after he returned from America he made a five week trip to England. Then in May to September 1835 he made a longer visit to study the country in depth. England, in fact, became his second home and not only because he had married an English wife. It was finally in England rather than America that he found the answer to some of his riddles. America was the future but in order to understand that future one must understand the past and present of a small island which had recently developed into the most powerful nation the world had ever known.