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Alexis de Tocqueville. *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, ed. Jon Elster, tr. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xxxii + 280 pp. \$75.00 U. S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-88980-3; \$19.99 U. S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-521-71891-2.

Review by Paul A. Rahe, Hillsdale College

There is not much to be said for political failure, but it does have one compensation. With some frequency, it provides not only occasion for reflection but the requisite time. Had he succeeded as a general, Thucydides would never have managed to compose his history of the Peloponnesian War. Had the Medici retained Niccolò Machiavelli in his post as secretary of the Second Chancery in Florence, he would never have written *The Prince* and his *Discourses on Livy*. Had civil war not broken out in England, Thomas Hobbes would not have produced his *Leviathan*. And had Alexis de Tocqueville's attempt to frame a practicable constitution for the Second Republic in France proven effectual and had its second President not mounted a coup against the regime Tocqueville served as Foreign Secretary, the latter would not have resigned his post, abandoned the political arena, and penned his *Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. In truth, had none of these disasters taken place, we, the intellectual heirs of these philosophical historians and political theorists, would have been much the poorer.

With the exception of Hobbes, all of these men demonstrated a keen aptitude for politics. But they were far more acute as observers than effectual as practitioners. All four were driven into one species of exile or another, and this afforded them not only leisure, but a measure of critical distance from which to reflect on what was out of joint with the chaotic times in which they lived.

Tocqueville's situation was in one sense peculiar. He grew up in the shadow of a catastrophe that he had not himself witnessed, and he spent his entire life thinking about a world he had never known. From the outset, he recognized that he could make sense of the world in which he lived only if he somehow managed to comprehend in full the nature and consequences of the rupture that had taken place in his native France in the period stretching from 1789 to 1815.

In 1835, the year in which the volumes of *Democracy in America* that constitute what scholars call "the first *Democracy*" appeared, John Stuart Mill asked the author of these volumes to write an article for *The London and Westminster Review* on "questions of high politics" in France. Tocqueville demurred. "I am afraid," he responded, "that, in spite of all my efforts, the present circumstances of my country could not be adequately comprehended in England if I did not first make known what the circumstances were right before the French Revolution, and if I were to paint that picture, whose colors are bound to be a little dulled. I am afraid I would not interest the reader sufficiently."^[1] The article that Tocqueville actually submitted the following year Mill translated and published under the title "On the Social and Political Condition of France."^[2] It is, however, telling that Tocqueville himself entitled the piece "L'État social et politique de la France avant et depuis 1789" and that, in it, he managed to say next to nothing at all about post-revolutionary France.^[3]

The prodigy who would grow up to author *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* was born into a prominent aristocratic family that had welcomed the French Revolution and had suffered

grievously during the Terror. When the National Convention put Louis XVI on trial for treason, Tocqueville's great-grandfather Malesherbes, the friend and patron of the *philosophes* and the author of the *Grandes Remonstrances*, emerged from retirement to help with his royal master's defense. For this heroic act, he and most of the members of his family paid with their lives. Tocqueville's parents, who were newlyweds at the time, were spared the guillotine only by Robespierre's fall. Had the Jacobin regime lasted half a week longer, they would have been among its victims, and their son Alexis would never have been born.

In the aftermath of the Terror, Tocqueville's father, Hervé, became an ultra-royalist, a staunch supporter of the legitimate Bourbon line, and an unabashed admirer of Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*.^[4] It was with an eye to the account given of monarchy in that seminal work that he penned the two narrative histories he entitled *Philosophical History of the Reign of Louis XV* (1847) and *Survey of the Reign of Louis XVI* (1850).^[5] The youngest of Hervé's three sons was no less impressed by Montesquieu's masterpiece. In early November 1836, when he was in the midst of wrestling with the so-called "second *Democracy*"—the volumes of *Democracy in America* that appeared in 1840—Alexis de Tocqueville wrote to his childhood friend Louis de Kergolay that when he grew frustrated with his inability to make progress, he sought consolation in the companionship of "three men with whom I live a little bit each day—Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau."^[6]

Fourteen years later, when, in self-imposed internal exile, he contemplated writing another work and considered what "idea" could be the "mother of a book" that he could compose, Tocqueville ruefully confessed to the same correspondent that he was "worth more in thought than in deeds [*l'action*]," and he added, "I can contemplate only a contemporary subject. Basically, it is only the things of our own time that interest the public and interest me myself." He went on to pose a question to himself and to his correspondent. "Given that what best suits my nature and the habits of my mind would be a collection of reflections and perceptions on the present time, a free judgment regarding our modern societies and a prediction of their probable future," he asked what vehicle would best suffice? Tocqueville suspected that it was "only in writing history" that he could find for his ideas "a basis solid and consistent with the facts." In his judgment, the "long drama of the French Revolution" was the appropriate subject since it would allow him to discuss the past in such a way as to throw light on the present. The challenge for him was to learn how to mix "history, properly speaking, with philosophical history," and his conclusion was that "the model, beyond imitation, of this genre is the book of Montesquieu on the grandeur and the decline of the Romans."^[7]

Initially, with Louis Napoleon in mind, Tocqueville thought that he would focus his attention primarily on Napoleon Bonaparte. The propensity of democracy to result in a despotism of one sort or another had been the principal theme of *Democracy in America*,^[8] and, in the 1850s, after Louis Napoleon's coup d'état, he was even more deeply concerned with this problem than he had been in the 1830s. As he struggled with the question and sketched a series of chapters on the Thermidorian Convention, the Directorate, the Consulate, and the Empire, however, he found that he had been right in his response to Mill's invitation fifteen years before. He concluded that he could not, in a philosophical history, properly make sense of the fact that the Revolution eventuated in the rise of Bonaparte if he did not commence with the *ancien régime*, explore the role played by what Montesquieu had called "general causes" in bringing about its demise, and then write about the Revolution as it had unfolded.

Here, too, Tocqueville's inspiration was Montesquieu, who had asserted, in a fashion that came to haunt the friends of liberty in the first two generations following the French Revolution, that, if you "abolish in a monarchy the prerogatives of the lords, the clergy, the nobility, and the towns, you will soon have a state popular or, indeed, a state despotic," and who had then added a memorable warning: If you eliminate "all of the intermediary powers" forming a monarchy, he had observed, you should take the greatest possible care to preserve your liberty, for, if you "lose it," you will become "one of the most fully enslaved peoples on the earth."^[9] The second of the three books making up Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime and the*

Revolution constitutes a defense, in the form of an analysis of the trajectory followed by the monarchical regime in France from the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century, of the cogency of Montesquieu's *cri de coeur*.

Tocqueville's project was majestic. *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* was intended as the first of three volumes. The other two were to deal with the Revolution itself and with Napoleon. That he did not live to write them is a matter for great regret. The slender volume that he did produce nevertheless has exercised a hegemonic influence on the field. One can criticize Tocqueville's use of the *cahiers de doléances*, and scholars have done so. One can express regrets that he did not examine more closely the world of the *sans culottes*. One may even wonder whether his account of the social isolation of the various classes within the *ancien régime* is not exaggerated. But one cannot gainsay the fact that his brief volume has set the agenda for the study of pre-revolutionary France.

In editing this book and in recruiting Arthur Goldhammer to translate it, Jon Elster has done a real public service. Goldhammer is the most accomplished translator currently in the business of rendering into English books composed in French. His is by no means the first translation of *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. Henry Reeve, who had already produced a translation of *Democracy in America*, and John Bonner published rival renderings the year the book first appeared in French. [10] Stuart Gilbert produced a third translation a century later; [11] Alan S. Kahan followed suit just over a decade ago; [12] and Gerald Bevan added yet another rendering in 2008. [13] The Bonner, Gilbert, and Bevan translations are all available in paperback. Yet, although they are considerably cheaper than the Goldhammer version, the difference is worth the price.

Goldhammer's rendering of the French is at once graceful and literal. He does not turn *philosophes* into "thinkers" or mere "intellectuals," as Bonner and Kahan did. He calls them "philosophers" or transliterates the French (pp. 129, 140, 180). In the same spirit, he translates *la tutelle administrative* as "administrative tutelage" (p. 47) rather than as "paternal government," "guardianship of the state," "government paternalism," or "administrative control" in the manner of Gilbert, Bonner, Kahan, and Bevan. One could take issue with him for translating *fonctionnaires* sometimes as "officials" or even "public officials" and at other times as "functionaries" (pp. 52, 55, 58, 64, 87-88, 127, 150, 177) and for rendering *inquiet* variously as "anxious" or "restless" (pp. 156, 173), but this would be to pick nits. [14] The truth is that he brings English readers bereft of French very close to the original text, and he does so without producing any awkwardness in English.

Jon Elster's introduction (pp. xiii-xxviii) is less satisfactory. In it, he treats Tocqueville as a social scientist rather than as a philosophical historian or political philosopher, and he sounds some of the themes elaborated in his important recent book. [15] Scholars may find this stimulating, as I did, and they will be pleased, as I was, that, in the bibliographical note (pp. xxix-xxx), Elster draws attention to the biographies of Tocqueville published by André Jardin and Hugh Brogan, [16] to Robert T. Gannett's path-breaking study of the sources he used in preparing to write the book, [17] to Françoise Mélonio's study of the work's reception in France, [18] to R. R. Palmer's book juxtaposing Tocqueville and his father as historians, [19] to François Furet's well-known essay situating Tocqueville vis-à-vis the historiography of the Revolution, [20] and to the volumes John Markoff and Gilbert Shapiro have devoted to assessing the specific historical claims that Tocqueville makes. [21] But those most apt to pick up this volume—undergraduates and graduate students intent on learning about the French Revolution or about Tocqueville and his analysis of the virtues, defects, and prospects of liberal democracy—will find little in the introduction itself that is of use to them. The introduction that Hugh Brogan wrote for the Bevan translation and those that François Furet and Françoise Mélonio composed for the Kahan translation are better suited to the needs of that audience.

There is one other respect in which the new Cambridge edition of Tocqueville's book falls short. It does not include the notes Tocqueville made and the chapters that he had begun drafting for the projected

sequels to his *Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. To find these in English, one must resort to the second volume of Kahan's two-volume translation. For the time being, at least, that valuable volume remains in print.

NOTES

[1] Letter from John Stuart Mill to Alexis de Tocqueville on 11 June 1835 and Letter from Alexis de Tocqueville to John Stuart Mill on 12 September 1835, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres, papiers et correspondances*, ed. J.-P. Mayer et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1951-), VI:1, p. 296, hereinafter cited as *ATG*.

[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, "On the Social and Political Condition of France," tr. John Stuart Mill, *London and Westminster Review* 25 (April 1836):137-69.

[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, "L'État social et politique de la France avant et depuis 1789," in *ATG*, II:1, pp. 31-68 and in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres*, ed. André Jardin et al. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1991-2004), III, pp. 1-40.

[4] In his devotion to Montesquieu, Hervé de Tocqueville typified his generation and class. See Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[5] See Hervé de Tocqueville, *Histoire philosophique du règne de Louis XV* (Paris: Amyot, 1847), and *Coup d'oeil sur le règne de Louis XVI depuis son avènement à la couronne jusqu'à la séance royale du 23 juin 1789, pour faire suite à l'Histoire philosophique du règne de Louis XV* (Paris: Amyot, 1850).

[6] Letter to Louis de Kergolay on 10 November 1836, in *ATG*, XIII:1, pp. 415-19 (at 418).

[7] Letter to Louis de Kergolay on 15 December 1850, in *ATG*, XIII:1, pp. 230-31 and in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies, Souvenirs, 1814-1859*, ed. Françoise Mélonio and Laurence Guellac (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), pp. 700-705.

[8] See Paul A. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

[9] Charles de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois* 1.2.4, in Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949-51), II, pp. 247-49.

[10] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The State of Society in France before the Revolution of 1789 and the Causes which Led to That Event*, tr. Henry Reeve (London: John Murray, 1856), and Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, tr. John Bonner (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1856).

[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Régime and the French Revolution*, tr. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1955).

[12] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, tr. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago, Ill. and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998-2001).

[13] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, tr. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Classics, 2008).

[14] As I have attempted to show elsewhere in detail, *inquiétude* as used in Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville as well as Locke, is a term of great analytical importance freighted with Augustinian and Jansenist overtones: see Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift*, pp. 40-42, 46-49, 80, 107-8, 139, 170-71, 175, 179-81, 194, 213, 217, 267, 272-73.

[15] Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[16] André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, tr. Lydia Davis and Robert Hemenway (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988), and Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

[17] Robert T. Gannett, *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for the Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago, Ill. and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[18] See Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

[19] See Robert R. Palmer, ed., *The Two Tocquevilles, Father and Son: Hervé and Alexis de Tocqueville and the Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[20] See François Furet, "De Tocqueville and the Problem of the French Revolution," in Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 132-63.

[21] See John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), and Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, eds., *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

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