7
What is a Good Theory?

CRITERIA FOR A GOOD THEORY

Tocqueville shows throughout his analyses and critical remarks on his contemporary historians and philosophers of history that he had pondered on the question of what is a good scientific theory and that he had some clear ideas on the subject. His conceptions of this problematic prefigure those of the leading methodologists in the social sciences, such as Karl Popper or Friedrich von Hayek. It is important to look at this aspect of his work because of the fact that due to processes that I can only refer to briefly, the teachings of Tocqueville are today, like those of Popper and Hayek, largely unknown.

The dimension of *critique* (in the Kantian sense of the term) that is the source of all the fruitfulness of Tocqueville's work has largely disappeared from contemporary social science, along with the idea that the social sciences have seriously scientific aims. Such a development would not have surprised Tocqueville, because equality tends to engender relativism on the subjects that it opens up.

To go straight to a simple definition; for Tocqueville a good theory is one that explains a social phenomenon by making it the consequence of understandable behaviour on the part of the individuals concerned. This can be seen by looking closely at all of his analyses. Thus for Tocqueville as for Weber, Popper or Hayek, a good theory is a theory that involves "methodological individualism". It remains to be determined whether and under what conditions the observer has

properly "understood" the reasons and motivations of the individuals observed, whether he has been able to reconstruct them faithfully, and whether as a result his analysis can claim objective validity. On this other point, Tocqueville prefigures Max Weber.

ORDINARY PSYCHOLOGY OR DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY?

A basic point for this conception of a "good theory" is to show in a reliable manner the psychological motives of social actors. The next question will thus be to determine the type of psychology that is appropriate. Ordinary psychology or depth psychology?

Here again the analysis of Tocqueville's work brings a clear response; all that is needed is ordinary psychology, the same that we use in everyday life. It is the only one that can legitimately deliver both conviction and consensus.

In the broad definition of this concept that I have deliberately adopted here, what is known as depth psychology sees human behaviour as driven by non-observable *forces*. They are many and various, such as the forces that are thought to emanate from the Freudian unconscious, from Marxist "false consciousness", from the conjectural mental montages produced by socialisation, or by biological evolution, or even from the reduction of human psychology to similarly conjectural instincts such as the "mimetic desire" that has revisited Gabriel Tarde's instinct of imitation in recent years. In Tocqueville's time, depth psychology was limited to crude forms. Nonetheless, explanations of behaviour by hidden *forces* were widespread. When Guizot describes the differences between the French and the English "genius" he is using a type of explanation that will be systematically used by "racial psychology" and subsequently by culturalists of all forms.

This type of psychology offers the advantage, certainly, of easing the task of the human sciences because it has the power to legitimate *ad libitum* nearly every interpretation of behaviour. But what the human sciences gain in facility, they lose in credibility as Weber so clearly showed in the critical remarks on psychoanalysis that are contained in an anthology edited by his nephew (Baumgarten, 1964).

Ordinary psychology, that which we use everyday and which Aristotle and the seventeenth-century moralist philosophers had perfected, that which is used by judges and policemen, draws its power and its identity from the fact that it alone can generate refutable propositions. We can test the theories that the woodcutter cuts wood

to warm himself or that he cuts wood to make a wooden object against reality and determine without ambiguity which is correct, or whether it is necessary to find a third theory. The theory that Hitler allowed the war to continue (despite the fact that it was clearly lost) can be tested against factual data. He believed that its outcome was still uncertain, and thus hung on to the frail signs of hope that came to him from informants who embellished the truth because they feared his reactions if they depicted the situation as too bleak. By contrast, the theory that Hitler wished "in his heart of hearts" the annihilation of a Germany he believed to have betrayed him and let victory escape postulates a psychological mechanism that is wholly conjectural. The existence of this psychological "force" cannot be demonstrated. It can only be concluded that it does not sit well with the facts. In the case of the "genius" of nations that Guizot refers to, he evokes a cultural "force" that is empty of any explanatory value.

Hence theories that involve psychological propositions that relate to the range of ordinary psychology involve psychological mechanisms whose existence is established by observations and experiments that anyone can do. In the case where the observer is uncertain, whether a behaviour can be imputed to this or that mechanism, he can attempt to decide on the basis of the facts available and will often find an effective solution. It follows from this that ordinary psychology is entirely suitable for use in an analysis that aims at scientific ends.

Following the work of the American sociologist Robert Nisbet (1966), this approach has sometimes been described as "rational" psychology. But it is preferable to speak of "ordinary" psychology, since the causes of behaviour reside not only in reasons but also in motivations. As Durkheim showed, suicide rates decline in periods of crisis because the depressive individual is diverted from his personal worries by the external situation, a psychological mechanism whose existence everyone would readily accept.

Depth psychology has the drawback, on the other hand, of making the theories it inspires irrefutable because it claims the right to refer to psychological mechanisms that are wholly conjectural. It follows from this that such theories can claim to offer *interpretations* that are more or less interesting, but not *explanations* that are easily subjected to the verdict of reality.

I will take up for a moment the example of judges and police officers. It is not by chance that they are generally very happy to use ordinary psychology in their decisions, since it is the only one they find reliable

and that can offer theories of behaviour that refer to recognised psychological mechanisms and that can be tested against reality.

A more precise statement of a "good theory" as it emerges from Tocqueville's analysis is that it makes a social phenomenon a product of attitudes, beliefs, and understandable human actions in the light of ordinary psychology, that can be successfully tested by observational data.

The inductive methodology of this definition of the concept of "good theory" would later allow the sociology of Durkheim and Weber amongst others or the anthropology of Evans-Pritchard, a means of making convincing explanations of many types of phenomena. It enabled Tocqueville to make a significant contribution to the explanation of many mysterious social phenomena.

THREE EXAMPLES OF GOOD THEORY

I will use three examples taken from the second *Démocratie* and *L'Ancien Régime* to show how Tocqueville employed the methodology that has just been defined to explain mysterious phenomena in an effective manner.

I propose choosing these three examples rather than others because they relate well to a sort of popular sociology that would see them as best explained by "cultural forces" that are more the province of depth psychology. They have the advantage then of showing how the substitution of ordinary psychology for depth psychology is the royal road that makes it possible to move from the level of subjective interpretation to that of scientific explanation.

These three examples are: American religiosity; the cult of reason in France at the end of the eighteenth century; and the causes of the particular frailty of the state in France and the reasons why it appears less capable of modernising than others. For the first two, I will be summarising an argument that I have put forward elsewhere (cf. Boudon, 2003).

In all three cases, a popular sociology would tend to concoct hidden causes that recall the "principles" or "genius" of peoples that are referred to by Guizot and also be inclined to consider that such differential phenomena are explained by the fact that the French, English and Americans are "culturally" different to each other.

Culturalism is the favourite theory of popular sociology. Nowadays in France its proponents harp on about the notion that liberal-

ism is part of the "Anglo-Saxon culture" and that it is incompatible with "French culture".

We should note in passing that these claims have the advantage of suggesting that questions of method, that are readily taken as being abstract or speculative, have very real political consequences in certain cases. These are of course "great commonplace truths" to use Tocqueville's words again, of a sort that claim the existence of an unassailable incompatibility between "French culture" and liberalism, and on which certain political decisions of the French government have been based.

The first of the three phenomena that are considered here, that of the American religious exception, is enigmatic because American society is "democratic", or in contemporary parlance, "modern". Now according to Tocqueville the egalitarianism that is typical of democratic societies encourages incredulity. At the same time, materialistic values are in the ascendancy within them. Moreover, American society has not experienced the aristocratic past history of the old European societies that were marked by the powerful influence of religion. So why is "disenchantment" less evident in America than it is in France or Britain?

One thing is certain. We cannot be content with the pseudo-explanation that claims that "American culture" (as we say nowadays) or the "American genius" (as was said in the time of Guizot and Tocqueville) makes the Americans more religious than other nations. However, this popular sociological form of explanation should not be attributed to the "man in the street" alone, or as the media vocabulary would have it, "*anonymes*" ["anonymous people"—*trs.*]. Many well-known commentators use this explanation regularly, for they prefer this "culturalist" explanation to the infinitely more subtle theories of Adam Smith, Tocqueville and Max Weber who provided the essential contributions to the question. For, in the same way as they like "books which can be read quickly", they like explanations that are rapidly understood. Now "culturalist" explanations and more generally those of a "holistic" nature (in the methodological sense) are far less demanding than explanations of an "individualistic" nature (in the methodological sense).

The second phenomenon under discussion is the French cult of reason of the end of the eighteenth century. This is an enigma because a similar thing did not happen in England during the same period. However, the two countries were very similar on many counts and French intellectuals translated, met and popularised the work of

many British intellectuals. Voltaire introduced Locke to the French, Rousseau paid a visit to Hume. Anglomania ruled in French philosophical circles. Without too much conviction popular sociology would have it that the reason why France at the end of the eighteenth century was so devoted to the cult of reason was that the French were more "Cartesian" (another commonplace truth) than the British.

The third phenomenon is puzzling because power seems to be more concentrated in France than in Britain, particularly if it is accepted, following Tocqueville, that the French Revolution had reinforced the tendencies of the Ancien Régime from this point of view and especially if we think of the repeated episodes of Jacobinism and Bonapartism that have shaken France and spared Britain. Despite all of this, the modernisation of the French state appears to lag chronically behind when compared to that of the British (Root, 1994). Why is there such a weakness? Popular sociology has an explanation ready and waiting. French "culture" ensures that the French are all without fail "individualists".

THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXCEPTION

Tocqueville explains the American religious exception in the second *Démocratie* and comes back to it in *L'Ancien Régime*, when he asks why the progress of the Enlightenment did not generate a wave of secularism in the United States (AR, 182).

This phenomenon is explained to begin with through the fact that religion is at the origin of the United States. But Tocqueville appreciates that this explanation is inadequate. "In America, religion has drawn up, one might say, its own boundaries. The religious order has remained entirely distinct from the political order, to such an extent that it was possible and easy to change ancient laws without changing ancient beliefs." (DAII, 431).

This passage is quite dense but it refers to the separation of Church and State adopted from the very beginning of the new republic. When he inquired into the strong religiosity of Americans during his first visit to the United States, Tocqueville found that his informants all gave him the same reason: "everybody attributed the peaceful authority that religion exercised over their country to the complete separation of Church and State" (DAI, 280).

But the "limits" that constrain American religion are more complex. More precisely, the text referred to poses a double question; that

of the nature of these limits and that of their source. In addition, it is essential for an understanding of the American religious exception to take note that "in the United States the Christian sects vary enormously and are continually changing" (DAII, 431). Tocqueville is elliptical on the two questions I have just referred to as well as on the mechanisms that are responsible for the causal relation that links the fragmentation of American religion with its healthy vitality. But we can without too much difficulty guess what he had in mind here.

The causal relation in question is the result above all of the fact that the American Protestant sects differ among themselves primarily over their specific interpretations of doctrinal issues. As Protestantism claimed freedom of interpretation of doctrine, this did not lead to any attitudes of rejection between the sects. Whatever sect to which he belonged, the American Protestant was seen by the members of other sects as belonging to the same religion. That is why "in the United States the Christian sects vary enormously and are continually changing, but Christianity itself is such an established and compelling fact that there is no point in either attacking or defending it" (DAII, 431).

In addition, because of the differences in doctrinal interpretation that typifies the conglomeration of American Christian sects, the beliefs that are common to all are of a particularly moral character. Indeed they are much more of a moral than they are of a doctrinal character. As religious beliefs tend, furthermore, to transform themselves into opinions in democratic societies, as Tocqueville shows, the doctrinal aspects of religion are also minimised for this other reason.

Finally, Protestantism is perceived by the believer as especially useful for the proper conduct of daily life. This tendency towards the immanentisation of daily life that is a result of equality and more particularly of the scepticism and individualism it engenders, also contributes to the emphasis on moral rather than doctrinal aspects of religion in the United States.

By "drawing up its own boundaries", and by favouring the moral dimension over the doctrinal one, religion in the Unites States has avoided the conflicts with science that were typical of other contexts, especially that of France. For in the competition between science and religion that runs through the nineteenth century, it was in relation to its doctrinal aspects rather than the moral ones that religion was seen to be vulnerable.

In addition, the multitudinous nature of the American Protestant sects did not merely lead to the separation between Church and State. It also ensured that they would not confront the State.

A contrario, in England, the "advance of irreligiousness" is due in particular to the fact that the Anglican Church "became a political party" (VA, 446) , whereas the fragmented Protestant sects of the United States could not hope to achieve such an outcome. However, the "advance of irreligiousness" was less significant in England than in France, declares Tocqueville, because of the fact that alongside the Anglican Church there are many sects in England that have the ability to attract the believer who has fallen out with the official Church and which will profit from its decline.

French Catholicism is much more centralised than American Protestantism. Its doctrinal dimension is also more pronounced. And as Durkheim would also show, the freedom of doctrinal interpretation allowed to the believer is much narrower in Catholicism. This is the reason for the twin conflicts of French Catholicism, with political authority and with the rise of the sciences. It could be added, if we follow the line of analysis suggested by Tocqueville, that the conflict with politics has led, moreover, to the churches losing their traditional functions. Because they "drew up their own boundaries" American religious institutions were able to retain their important role within the framework of "health–education–welfare". But in France by comparison they have been largely stripped of the functions they traditionally exercised in these domains by the state.

Tocqueville's theory complements that of Adam Smith. Smith had earlier noted that England was experiencing a growing irreligiousness, but that the same phenomenon was not apparent in the United States. He was not content with assuming that this difference was due to the religiosity that the Pilgrim Fathers had managed to transmit from one generation to the next. As Tocqueville would later note, Smith points to the multiplicity of American sects and puts forward the idea that the American competitive system allowed the believer more easily to find the church that suited him than the quasi-monopolistic English system that was dominated by the state church, the Anglican Church. In the second case the believer who is in disagreement with the Church or with a particular doctrinal point would be tempted to withdraw from the community of believers, explains Smith. In the first case he would rather resolve this "cognitive dissonance" by changing church.

This model probably explains a good part of the fact that we see from sociological surveys that the Scandinavian countries hold the record nowadays for atheism—14% of Swedes and 19% of Danes declare that "life has a meaning only if God exists" against 29% of the French, 30% of the Germans, 36% of the British and 61% of Americans (Inglehart *et al.*, 1998). The Lutheran Church was in effect, until very recently, the state church in all of the Scandinavian countries and, moreover, had very few competitors (Ianaccone, 1991). Until quite recently 95% of Swedish citizens were classified as Lutherans.

Max Weber (1999 [1920–1921]) brings a final element to the explanation of the American religious exception. This is, that because of the correlation between the historical waves of immigration and the social status of the corresponding ethnic groups in American society, there are differences in the prestige attached to the various religious sects. The Lutherans had been part of American society for a long time and had thus attained on average a respectable social standing by the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time when Weber made his trip to the United States in 1901, they were able to fix church taxes at a high level, as he explains. So high in fact that if the same rates had applied in Germany, it would be difficult to find any Lutherans at all, as he notes with irony. In consequence, to be able to present oneself as a Lutheran and *a fortiori*, for example, as a Methodist, was to display a respectable social status. Religious sects thus function as distributors of the symbols of social status in the United States, Weber explains. This function, established as a result of anonymous mechanisms, has contributed in its own way and for evident reasons to the vitality of religious sects in the United States.

It was also important for Tocqueville to explain why American religiosity is not incompatible with the materialism that is typical of American society.

To deal with this point he puts forward an outline analysis which shows that the "enlightened [self-]interest" that lies at the heart of utilitarian doctrines as they had been developed through the work of Jeremy Bentham, is not incompatible with religion because "[self-] interest is the principal means religions themselves make use of to lead men". Moreover, utilitarianism is a doctrine of whose intrinsic truth it is important to be aware: "enlightened [self-]interest is not a lofty doctrine, but one that is clear and reliable […] it contains a large number of truths that are so evident that all it takes is to enlighten men as to their existence for them to see them". And Tocqueville adds

that "it seems to me that of all philosophical theories, [it is] the most appropriate for men of our times" (DAII, 513, 515).

Thus, not only is utilitarian philosophy important and well-founded, despite its modesty, but it is also entirely compatible with religious feelings in Tocqueville's view. Because religion—especially religion as seen by the Americans—is not only about promising believers happiness up above. It is also (and perhaps above all) about ensuring their happiness down here. "It is often difficult to know when listening to [American preachers] if the principal aim of religion is to procure eternal bliss in the other world or happiness in this" (DAII, 515). Religion in its American Protestant form is not incompatible with utilitarian values. But as will be remembered, this tendency towards the immanentisation of religion is not, for Tocqueville, confined to America. It is simply more visible in the United States which furnishes once more a magnifying glass that helps Tocqueville to focus more closely on a general development.

These themes in the work of Tocqueville reappear in that of Max Weber. They include the idea that Puritanism is not incompatible with capitalism and that it creates, by contrast, a context that is favourable to its development; and Weber's suggestion that happiness in the beyond is a theme that only appears very late in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In Weber's view, religion's function was at the very beginning more concerned with ensuring that the believer had "a long and happy life on earth", as *Deuteronomy* would indicate.

The immanentisation of American religion that so impressed Tocqueville still intrigues the visitor today. He will note that it is not at all rare in Baptist churches to hear prayers about the most ordinary aspects of life, such as "Jesus, make me lose 8 pounds!" (Sorman, 2004).

A society where, as in America, businessmen and traders play a dominant role is one where confidence must be assumed to be a value that is solidly established. Utilitarianism coincides here with morality. Put crudely, morality is respected because it pays.

Tocqueville also tries to explain why Americans sometimes practice their religion "with exaltation", another observation of his that has contemporary relevance once one thinks of the success of the "televangelists" and the behaviour of their congregations during the services they lead. The marriage between utilitarianism and religion, the fact that "dogmatic beliefs" are so much a part of public opinion, the immanent nature of the objectives pursued by the believer through his religious practices, the limited exploitation of the range of aesthetic

values by religious institutions—all of these create for some people, as Tocqueville explains, the need to find a more intense religious experience. The fervent spiritualism that characterises some believers is a counterpart to the prevailing materialism and utilitarianism (DAII, 519).

THE CULT OF REASON

Tocqueville always considers the collective beliefs that he sets out to explain as aggregation effects of individual beliefs, or in more precise terms as beliefs that the analyst can legitimately attribute to ideal-typical individuals. Then he postulates that reconstructing the meaning of these beliefs amounts to a reconstruction of the reasons they have for believing them.

In *L'Ancien Régime*, he wonders why French intellectuals of the end of the eighteenth century were so obsessed with reason, by Reason with a capital R, and why their vocabulary of ideas was so readily disseminated. The question is puzzling, because the same phenomenon appears hardly anywhere else during the same period. It did not happen in England or the United States, the favourite comparison points of Tocqueville. Nor was it seen in Germany. Tocqueville could not, therefore, conclude that it was an expression of general tendencies in all modern societies.

In fact, Tocqueville explains, intellectuals of the last part of the eighteenth century—the "*philosophes*" as they were then known—had good reasons for believing in Reason. The France of this time was in such a state that Tradition seemed to many to be the source of the current ills. The aristocracy and the senior clergy were discredited. They squandered their authority at Versailles. They did not take part in local political affairs or in economic life. The minor nobles who stayed on their land hung on obstinately to their feudal privileges, and especially so if they were penniless. The lower clergy was seen as hand in glove with the privileged few. As a result of all these conditions, there was a general feeling that the institutions, and more especially the distinctions between the "Estates", had lost all meaning and that they owed their survival only to the fact that they enjoyed the authority of Tradition. In the end only one conclusion could be drawn from this system of arguments, and it led to the conviction that a new society should be created and that it should be founded not on Tradition but on its opposite—Reason. Such a society would be able to benefit from

all of the consequences of the principle of the equality of all, a "natural" principle, and would abolish the system of "Estates".

> *The spectacle of so many excessive or absurd feudal privileges, whose burden was more and more resented and whose causes were less and less understood pushed, or rather simultaneously propelled, the minds of each of them towards the idea of equality* (AR, 171).

We note the "each of them". It shows that a collective belief can only be explained, for Tocqueville, by the fact that it makes sense to an ideal-typical individual, to some individual or another.

By basing their ideas on these reasons, the Enlightenment philosophers evolved, says Tocqueville, what we would term an "artificialist" vision of societies that set out to completely overturn the society of their time and replace it with a planned society conceived in the study of the "*philosophe*".

This argument is, of course, more or less lucid depending on the category of individuals concerned. It was more consciously expressed by the "writers" than the ordinary people. But if the jargon of the former was so quickly disseminated, if illiterate peasants throughout most of France began to invoke Reason in the *cahiers de doléance* [List of grievances written by each order (estate) in France as part of the electoral process called by Louis XVI in May 1789. *Cahiers* of the third estate—which included the peasantry—provide a valuable source about public opinion—*trs.*] it was because this jargon made sense to them. There are no hypotheses about contagion, imitation or inculcation involved here. The peasants were not subject to any irrational forces of a psychological or cultural nature, but had reasons to adopt the analyses and the words of the "*philosophes*". "Everyone felt that it was right to replace the traditional customs that ruled the society of their time with simple and elementary rules that were drawn from reason and natural law" (AR, 170).

The "contagion" hypothesis is explicitly refuted by Tocqueville in his analysis of the rise of irreligion in France at the end of the eighteenth century, by using a model that is fairly complex. It merits closer attention. "The agreement of several great writers who were inclined to deny the truth of Christian religion does not appear to be sufficient to account for such an extraordinary event, because why did all these writers, all of them, wear their minds on this side rather than another? [...]" (AR, 179). Hence, it was not because they were driven

by who knows what force to imitate each other that the "*philosophes*" developed identical subjects. It was rather a consequence of the general situation in France which meant that they all had the same reasons to "wear their minds on this side rather than another".

The anticlericalism of the era was due, explains Tocqueville, to the fact that the Church was seen as the defender of outmoded traditions. It supported a social hierarchy perceived to be illegitimate because it had no function. It supported the rights of Faith against those of Reason. It was closely linked with the political authority, which itself was seen as not promoting the interests of its citizens. In short, irreligion developed as the result of a confusingly formulated practical syllogism whose premises were considered by each person to be supported by the facts. It was because everybody had sound reasons to be irreligious that so many tended to take that view.

But Tocqueville's analysis also contains an essential additional component that makes it into a complex dynamic model of the diffusion of ideas. The development of anticlericalism may be explained by the fact that it makes sense for many people. But it was also embraced by others because it appeared to be strategically opportune to them to rally to the view that was dominating public opinion. The anticlerical ground swell took place because many people had intellectual reasons for rejecting tradition, and also because others, for strategic reasons, saw that they too had an interest in following the mass—"dreading isolation" they too joined in. The result of the abstention of those who "dread isolation" was that "those who deny Christianity" found themselves monopolising public opinion. In sum, anticlericalism seemed to everybody to be much more widespread than it was in reality (AR, 184).

The process uncovered by Tocqueville helps in understanding the sudden reappearance of Christianity after the revolutionary upheavals had subsided.

The same process also helps in understanding the sudden resurgence of Christianity in the countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism.

In a more general way, the mechanisms that are revealed by the analysis of the emergence of the cult of reason during the French Revolution proposed by Tocqueville appear to me to be capable of explaining a number of ideological phenomena. As I have had the opportunity to suggest above, it is the same type of mechanisms that explain the emergence and embedding of the diffuse secular religion

of relativism, in the same way as they explained the emergence and embedding of Marxism as a secular religion in an earlier period. In all these cases, the establishment of an ideology is explained by the realisation that these "great commonplace truths" spread through the twin effects of ignorance and the attractions of conformism. As a result of this involuntary mechanism of coordination, everybody "wears their mind on this side rather than the other".

STRONG STATE–WEAK STATE

My third example of a "good theory" concerns Tocqueville's explanation, developed in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* of why state reform in France has taken on the character of a mission impossible.

The administrative centralisation that is characteristic of France means that it employs a large number of *fonctionnaires* (state employees, civil servants), much greater in any event than in England, the constant comparison point of Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime*. "In the eighteenth century all parish affairs were conducted by functionaries [...] some were appointed by the *intendants* of the province, and others were elected by the peasants themselves" (AR, 75).

Thus, even during the Ancien Régime the number of functionaries was greater in France than in England or Germany. In these two latter countries the state had replaced local elites, i.e. the landowners, to a much smaller degree than in France. Locally and nationally the number of *fonctionnaires* grew following the extension of state powers. The financial needs of the state and the practice of the sale of public offices further reinforced this trend.

The result of the administrative centralisation that became ever more deeply embedded within France led to the creation of an all-powerful class that superimposed itself on the political institutions, Tocqueville argues. "The administrative *fonctionnaires*, nearly all of them bourgeois, already formed a class which had a particular outlook, with its own traditions, virtues, honour, and arrogance. It was the aristocracy of the new society [...]" (AR, 106).

Tocqueville is not casting any doubt on the usefulness, the sense of public service or the individual commitment of *fonctionnaires*, but is pointing out that their numerical importance and thus social and political significance profoundly affect French society and help to differentiate it in a major way from its neighbouring societies that were comparable in many other respects, such as English society.

From the standpoint of those administered, the progressive and more marked increase in the omnipotence of the French state meant that its citizens expected everything from it: "nobody could imagine how it would be possible to set up a major business without state involvement" (AR, 110). "As the government had taken the place of Providence it was natural that everybody looks to it for their particular needs" (AR, 111). "It [the government] is blamed for everything including bad weather" (AR, 112).

L'Ancien Régime is concerned here with the origins of some tendencies that were already noted in the second *Démocratie* and which seem to Tocqueville to have been aggravated rather than attenuated over time. The characteristics of the Ancien Régime could still be seen, reinforced, under the July Monarchy (1830–1848). "The citizens, despairing of being able to improve their lot, rushed tumultuously to the head of state and asked for his help. To be comfortably off at the cost of the state seemed to them to be [...] the easiest and most accessible way for all to escape a situation they could no longer afford, and the search for government jobs became the most active of all the industries" (DAII, 599).

By a remarkable process of unintended consequences the all-powerful nature of the administration helps encourage a demanding and confrontational attitude on the part of the *fonctionnaires* towards the political authorities. "In the end the government must necessarily face a permanent opposition because its role is to satisfy with limited means expectations [those of the *fonctionnaires*] that multiply without limit." (DAII, 599–600). This is why the *fonctionnaires* were able to obtain privileges that distinguished them from ordinary citizens and thus becoming "the aristocracy of the new society".

The exasperation that Tocqueville feels about the number and the political and social influence of the *fonctionnaires* in France is deep rooted and he has no hesitation in pushing his point to the verge of caricature. The administration's scorn for everything that is not its own affects all parts of society, including industrial and commercial businesses, he explains. One can ramble on about anything, but not cast doubt on the administration. "It [the administration] has absolutely no intention of allowing citizens to interfere in any way in the examination of their own work, for they prefer futility to competition". As far as the government is concerned, it knows that it must not displease the *fonctionnaires*: "The government will allow without demur almost any argument, even about God himself, as

long as even the most minor of its officials are not part of the discussion" (AR, 106).

One might note, incidentally, that the tendencies described by Tocqueville have only been reinforced since his time so that we arrive at a situation where France today is in a situation profoundly different to that of Holland, Great Britain, Sweden or Germany. In France, because the unionisation rate is very low in private companies, the unions find most of their members within the ranks of the *fonctionnaires*. At the same time members of parliament are proportionally most likely to come from the public services. This is because the *fonctionnaire* who loses in a political election will be given back his old job within the administration. This is not, however, the case in the United Kingdom. So the loss of his seat may be unpleasant but there is no great risk involved. Yet the businessman or lawyer who enters politics knows that he does so at his own risk.

If we put on one side the caustic tone of Tocqueville's prognosis that civil servants are doomed to become the "aristocracy of the new society", we should also recognise that this set of asymmetries between the public and the private has helped to reinforce the tendencies he describes, and has given the French civil service some real privileges particularly where retirement pensions are concerned (Brulé & Drancourt, 2004; Marseille, 2004). And in addition, these asymmetries have helped reinforce the state centralism that has typified France since the Ancien Régime.

It would be difficult to expect politicians, who were mainly recruited from the civil service and whose principal relationships are with the unions that defend the rights of *functionnaires*, to show a great deal of enthusiasm for reducing the powers and the expenses of the state. This is why so many French public services are in chronic deficit, for the solution of funding them by taxes does not face any serious opposition at any stage in the political decision-making process. Louis XIV balanced his budget by taxes, but also by selling off public offices. Today, only the first solution is available. This has led to a particularly high level of taxation in France which hobbles its dynamism.

The growth in the number and power of *fonctionnaires* is a result, since Tocqueville's epoch, of the fact that for a long time the state has tended to take on new functions: "the sovereign's power has broadened [...] to cover the entire sphere of the old powers, but this is no longer enough to contain it and it spills over everywhere to spread into the domain that hitherto was the preserve of individual independence" (DAII,

639). Thus it was that the state, far from confining itself to the royal functions that were properly its domain, became not merely a benefactor and educator, but also an entrepreneur: "it became the biggest industrialist" (DAII, 643). The inevitable outcome of this extension of the state's domain was that "as the central power's remit increased, the number of *fonctionnaires* who represented it also grew" (DAII, 639, note).

Finally, all French governments are subservient to this new class of *fonctionnaires* in Tocqueville's view.

As we can see, the obesity of the French state is not something that dates from the spread of the welfare state. The welfare state has simply increased its girth. The arrival of the Communists as a party of government in the years following the Second World War did not help matters from this point of view, because of their devotion to the cult of state intervention. It is only in recent years as a result of the crisis of the welfare state and the progressive losses of sovereignty consequent upon the birth and development of the European Union, together with the gradual penetration of liberal ideas as reality began to impinge, that a modest ebb has begun.

Theoretically, a government that is supported by an oversized state should be strong. But in practice it is weak. It is strong because of the extension of its prerogatives. It is weak because it is incapable of passing any measure that would affect its *fonctionnaires*. Thus "two revolutions seem to be in process during our time, working in opposite directions. The first continually weakens power and the other continually reinforces it, and in no other period of our history has it appeared to be so weak or so strong" (DAII, 645).

The contemporary reader has the impression that what was true of the France of the July Monarchy remains so in large measure in the France of today. The governments of the Fifth Republic have always found it difficult to ensure that the general interest prevails over the corporatist interests of its agents—teachers, workers in the electricity and gas industries, or railway workers.

Tocqueville would not have been at all surprised at this. "It is a surprising spectacle [...] to see how this government which is so demanding [...] and remains so firmly opposed to any opposition [...] and yet it stops, it hesitates, it negotiates, it takes note of dispositions, and remains well within the natural limits of its power" (AR, 145). It is a little as if Tocqueville had, many years in advance, written the scenario for the most recent French reforms of the *"service minimum"*, the reform of pensions, of social security or of education.

He would probably have been amused by how often the government has recourse to the practice of "expert commissions" and noted that in France it allows the authorities to "take note of dispositions", to gain time and to be content with minimal reforms which are unlikely to displease the "social power" but have little chance of being effective. A commission on the reform of the education system issued a report in October 2004 to the French government. I knew there was little risk in announcing in advance of its publication that it would be a perfect illustration of la Fontaine's fable about the mountain that gave birth to a mouse. The report had discovered that it was useful to be able to read and write, that it was important to restore authority and to stop violence in schools and to reduce inequality of opportunity, but without saying how this should be done (Boudon, 2004a). It does not matter that the need to "take note of dispositions" means bequeathing to future generations a poisoned chalice in the form of unpaid bills and an educational system which is breaking down, and which can only lead to a progressive downgrading of France by comparison with the other states of Europe.

Tocqueville also identified another characteristic of the French. As a result of administrative centralisation, the French dream of becoming *fonctionnaires*. As he writes in his *Souvenirs*, "the taste for official posts and the desire to live off taxes are not an illness due to any party in particular, but the great and permanent infirmity of the nation itself" (AR, 72).

The surveys conducted on this issue confirm that this remark still applies to the France of today.