

//Enfoques//

Tocqueville's Origins of the French Revolution

**Por Emmanuel Guerisoli.*

Alexis de Tocqueville was the first author to correctly underline some of the main factors that stimulated, or better yet triggered, a series of events that led to the social and politically structure based radical changes implemented by the French Revolution. Tocqueville properly highlighted which social and political aspects of the Old Regime not only survived, but were strengthened and vigorously adopted by the Revolution and its begotten system. In this sense, he was able to demystify the French Revolution from its characteristically *tabula rasa*, or national foundational-stone, kind of event given by later post-revolution French governments. The French Revolution transformed many things from its roots, but so many remained unchanged or were even reinforced. Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* masterfully embodies Lampedusa's famous dixit in *Il Gattopardo*: "The more things change the more they remain the same".

On the other hand, Tocqueville's work suffers from a few shortcomings. First, he tries so emphatically to demonstrate the continuances between the Ancient Regime and the post-revolution system that he almost completely undermines the social and political changes brought up by the Revolution. Secondly, he does not pay any kind of attention to exogenous or international system factors. Tocqueville, actually, disregards them as having any role in the revolution's origins. This paper will briefly comment on Tocqueville's factors that triggered the French Revolution and briefly comment on the variables that he did not consider.

It is rather interesting to see that Tocqueville defines the French Revolution as a religious revolution but with no anti-religious goals. He defines the revolution in such terms in order to emphasize its universal aspiration. The French Revolution originated in France but dealt with issues that were common to all humanity. The revolution tried, not only, to free the Frenchmen but all men. Tocqueville refers to the Revolution's philosophical foundations: the Enlightenment. During the second half of the 18th century, France was its cradle. The Enlightenment's ideas achieved for universal freedom from despotic rule. They were notorious among the kings' court, the nobility and the rapidly growing upper bourgeoisie and, finally, were the intellectual product of aristocratic individuals. In this way, Tocqueville points out how the French nobility was going to be one of the main factors of the French Revolution in two distinct ways. First, the Enlightenment's political and social ideas, which were the core of the political ideology that would embody the Revolution and inspire the policies enacted after July 1789, were a conception of aristocratic minds. The nobility, in a way, conceived the ideas that would later on politically, socially and morally justify and legitimize their downfall. Secondly, according to Tocqueville it was the French aristocracy

who first rebelled against the absolutist monarchical power. The nobles did not only conceive the ideas that would destroy them, they also actually started a series of events that would culminate in a Revolution that they did not envisage and that would ultimately decimate them.

Tocqueville accurately recognizes that it was the French aristocracy that petitioned the calling of the General Estates in 1787 because they were trying to impede the Monarchy's last possible financial resort at its hand: the taxation of the nobility. Tocqueville actually downgrades the fiscal constraints to which the French State was subject at the end of the 18th century. He argues that the State's bankruptcy was not an issue because it was not the first time that a similar situation happened to the French Crown and because between 1780 and 1789 France was a more economically prosperous country than during the Seven Years War and the American Independence War. The issue was not that the Crown did not have any money; it was that the State decided to end with the centuries' long aristocracy's exception of taxation; which resulted in nobility's rebellion. Tocqueville describes how the French nobility had lost its feudal role and, instead, it primarily dedicated to civil management, most importantly court and fiscal administration; to rent their lands to small peasants; and, to partake in the King's court. All of them were exempted from taxation just because they owned a noble title. Tocqueville underlines the pivotal role that the nobility played in being civic servants. Even if many members of Absolutist regime's bureaucracy were bourgeois, the courts, fiscal agencies and other institutions, like the provincial parliaments and the municipal councils, were almost exclusively integrated by noblemen. The central power of the State and its immense bureaucracy is one of the continuities that Tocqueville sees between the old and the new regime; particularly, the idea of a bureaucratic machine managed by elites. As Tocqueville, and much later Perry Anderson, notice, the French aristocracy had an enormous control over the Absolutist system; the Monarchy could only enact its desired policies when they did not harm the nobility's interests(1). If any decision taken by the Crown was detrimental to their interests then they would have obstructed its implementation in an institutional way: the aristocratic packed courts and provincial parliaments would have delayed or refused to execute any unfavorable provision (2).

The French aristocracy, then, obstructed the French Monarchy's taxation plan and pressured the King to call the General Estates in 1787. The upper bourgeoisie, on the other hand, favored the Crown's taxation plan but wanted to take advantage of the General Estates calling in order to gain more leverage in the tax reform's decision process (3). Either way, it was the French nobility's rebellious attitude against the King that would prompt the next series of events. Much has been said about this aristocratic political defiance; Tocqueville does not regard nobility's actions as a way to transform Absolutist France into a British kind of constitutional monarchy where the aristocracy would obtain political dominance, with regards to the Crown and the upper bourgeoisie, through an income-based or landownership-based representative parliament (4). He just perceives these actions as the last available

desperate option to a soon to be old socio-economic system's class. French aristocracy had become a burden to France. If they did not turn themselves into a productive force, like the growing bourgeoisie, they would remain a useless, parasitic and institutionally over-represented class in the eyes of France's main economic sector: the peasants.

As stated before, Tocqueville does not give too much of a relevant role to the bourgeoisie in the origins of the French Revolution. Both the upper and lower middle class would have a greater role after the 14th of July 1789. Instead, he sees the roots of the Revolution in the French aristocracy, as indicated above, and in the French peasantry. Tocqueville is able to empirically prove that the feudal agrarian system was almost dead in 18th century France. Seigniorial-peasantry relationships just amounted to land-renting, hunting and pasture privileges and harvest's percentage rendering (5). However, peasants were drowning in taxes. More than 75% of their returns were destined to the French central State, to the regional or provincial departments and to the municipalities (6).

The last two were mainly aristocratic conformed institutions.

Additionally, peasants were forced to give in to the central State's or departmental authorities a substantial percentage of their harvest for the urban populations. Furthermore, if it is considered that during the 1780s a series of famines and bad harvests produced a serious of food shortages, where commodity's high prices could not compensate the limited quantity of offered goods, worsening the peasantry conditions. Then, it is no surprise that there was a growing discontent among the peasants against the Crown failed foreign policies endeavors, that they were supporting with their work and their children, and against the aristocracy's unproductive and untaxed life style that they had to provide for (7). Here, Tocqueville discerns continuity between the old and the new regime: France after the revolution will still be mostly peasant and they will still be severely burdened with taxes and wars but a new kind of political system will replace Monarchy and a new class will replace the aristocracy. All those circumstances were the catalyst for a sequence of peasant's rebellions, starting in 1788, that overwhelmed the Monarchy's police authority (8). Ironically, the Crown was unable to contain the rising revolts because its repressive power depended on army garrisons that were headed by the aristocracy, whom, at first, refrained from suppressing in order to pressure the King with no taxation. The fateful combination of the rebellion of the dominant classes against the regime's authority plus the total breaking of the State's repressive power permitted an all-out uprising of the lower classes. Peasants and middle classmen were able to take the reins of the revolution and change the French socio-political system according to their interests.

Regardless of Tocqueville's successful achievement in identifying the origins of the French Revolution, (the aristocracy refusal to be taxed and the peasantry's discontent on the nobility's untaxed privileges) it has to be said that no exogenous factors are taken into consideration. Tocqueville did not agree with the idea that the American Independence War depletion of France's reserves had provoked the civil unrest that later triggered the revolution. Even if the causal correlation between the

American Revolution and the French one is indirect, international systemic variables did matter in the revolution's inception. Without strong international competition from a rising industrialist country like Great Britain and a series of military defeats, the French Monarchy would have not had to resort to tax the aristocracy and the regime's repressive mechanisms would have worked and effectively stopped the peasant's uprisings (9). Finally, Tocqueville sees the bourgeoisie a class that masterfully took advantage of a revolution that they did not originated. Even if the role of the bourgeoisie may have been greatly exaggerated in the French Revolution's narrations, it still had a pivotal role in confronting the aristocratic courts and parliaments; in replacing the nobility as civic servants; and, in obstructing the aristocracy's crave for an exclusive political role in State's decisions. Without the upper and lower middle class, nobility may have gained total control of the Absolutist system (10).

Lastly, it has to be said that there are moments where Tocqueville affirms that political and social freedom were greater during the Ancient Regime than afterwards. These statements have to take into account Tocqueville's own historical context and personal life at that moment. He had self-exiled from politics after Louis Bonaparte coup d'état in December 1852 and was completely aware that Napoleon's III regime was a new kind of authoritarian system with more repressive and despotic rule than the pre-revolutionary Absolutist regimes. Nevertheless, Tocqueville's work stands out among the best and most descriptive analysis of the French Revolution's origins. His emphasis on underlining the continuances between the old regime and the new one and the almost complete lack of attention paid to the important and radical social and political changes brought by the Revolution have to attributed to the fact that *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* was the first part of his uncompleted work on the revolution; which had it been continued and concluded would have certainly highlighted the system-changing ideas enacted after July 1789.

1) See Anderson, Perry, *Linages of the Absolutist Sate*, New Left Books, London, 1974. It is rather interesting to compare Tocqueville take on the French State compared with his views on the United States. He argues that one of the main differences between of how the Frenchmen and the American perceived the State was that the first ones saw it as place to look for working positions an mode of living, while the latter had a completely opposite idea.

(2) See Skocpol, Theda, *States and Social Revolutions. A comparative Analysis of France, Russia & China*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979, pp. 56-60.

(3) See Furet, Francois and Richet, Denis, *The French Revolution*, Macmillan, New York, 1970.

(4) See Cobban, Alfred, *Old Regime and Revolution, 1715-1799*, Penguin, Baltimore, 1957, pp.155.

- (5) See Moore Barrington, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, pp. 40-108.
- (6) See Skocpol, Theda, *States and Social Revolutions. A comparative Analysis of France, Russia & China*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979, pp. 119.
- (7) See Moore Barrington, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, pp. 40-108.
- (8) See Skocpol, Theda, *States and Social Revolutions. A comparative Analysis of France, Russia & China*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979, pp. 121.
- (9) See Skocpol, Theda, *States and Social Revolutions. A comparative Analysis of France, Russia & China*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979, pp. 60-65.
- (10) See Moore Barrington, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, pp. 40-108. Moore's famous theory: weak landlords but strong bourgeoisie give rise to democratic system like the French one.

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