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WHY TOCQUEVILLE ON CHINA?



AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

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What in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville could conceivably be thought to offer any guidance for the study of contemporary China? Tocqueville was born early in the nineteenth century (1805) at a time when China lay in near total isolation from Europe. Matters changed during Tocqueville's lifetime with the so-called Opium War (1839–41), in which China suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Great Britain. This reversal helped set in motion a series of events that led to the destabilization of the Manchu (or Qing) dynasty, which eventually fell in 1911. Tocqueville commented in his personal notes on a few of the early occurrences in this sequence, but he never undertook an extensive analysis of developments in the Far East. His focus in his published works was on the West, or what he often called "the Christian world."

Tocqueville's occasional references to China—there are four in *Democracy in America* and one in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*—are nevertheless highly revealing of his political thought, although more for what they were intended to say about the West than about China itself. China, for Tocqueville, was the "symbol" (*emblème*) of the fully centralized administrative state, having long ago perfected what some of the centralizing European states were only then beginning to achieve.¹ The Chinese dynasties over the ages had succeeded in building a bureaucratic system able to govern a huge territory from the center and to regulate a broad array of activity and behavior in a uniform manner.² Tocqueville invoked this example to respond to a group of French intellectuals of the eighteenth century, known as the "economists" or "physiocrats," who had touted the Chinese administrative system as the model of perfect government. "There is not one of them," he wrote, "who does not in some part of his writings give an emphatic eulogy of China."³ Administrative centralization for the physiocrats was the great instrument of rational social control that would promote their preferred regime in France, proudly labeled a "legal despotism."⁴

Tocqueville deplored this fascination with centralized administration. It was a mechanism, he thought,

that sapped a society of its movement, creativity, and energy—to a point, as he once half joked, of dampening the erotic spirit. He mentions a "hero" in a Chinese novel who manages to touch the heart of his mistress by a strong performance on a civil service exam!⁵ Tocqueville never doubted that many individual decisions of an enlightened administration might be wise, but he believed the net effect of the system over time was to deprive people of the opportunity to make choices on their own and thereby render them passive and inert. It produced subjects rather than citizens. The consequences extended far beyond the political realm, creating a society characterized by "tranquility without happiness, industry without progress, stability without force, and material order without public morality."⁶

Tocqueville's direct references to China open a fascinating window into an important and neglected aspect of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European political theory. But they in no sense supply the basis for launching a research project for the study of contemporary China. The justification for AEI's intellectual experiment to draw on Tocqueville's thought lies elsewhere, in what his general political science can offer for suggesting new lines of inquiry for current scholarship.

In this sense, making an initial connection between Tocqueville and China may not be as difficult as one might think. Tocqueville was one of the first thinkers to treat two of the great themes that have preoccupied modern scholars of China: modernization and transition. His writings on these themes were the forerunners of such classic works as James Bryce's *Modern Democracy* (1921) and Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), and they thus indirectly help inform the wave of scholarship in comparative politics on "democratic transitions" that appeared after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Tocqueville had already identified something analogous to "transition" as the central practical issue of his time: "The organization and establishment of [liberal] democracy among Christians is the great political problem of our time."⁷ Much the same concern pre-occupies China scholars today, a fact well illustrated

by the title of Minxin Pei's celebrated book, *China's Trapped Transition* (2006).⁸ But it would be little more than a polite exercise to invoke Tocqueville merely because he was the first to study these issues. The real reason must be that he treats the themes now central to comparative politics with a freshness that has been lost in the layering of subsequent scholarship, in which certain premises have come to be accepted without reflection.

Tocqueville's political science is pertinent to the study of the modern world and to China's place within it for a different reason. Tocqueville is well known not only for his treatment of the *kinds* of political regimes that exist in the modern world, but also for his reflections on the *types* of political units he thought would hold the future destiny of the world in their hands. Already in his day, he identified that the commanding units in the not-too-distant future would no longer come from among the circle of the traditional European nation-states, which "had reached the limit that nature has drawn and appear to have nothing more to do than preserve themselves."⁹ The mantel of the great powers would instead pass to much larger entities—"superstates" as we sometimes refer to them today—that would be of a dimension that filled much of a continent and possessed populations of a different scale.

Some admirers of Tocqueville during the cold war sought to impress Tocqueville's prophetic powers upon others by citing the dramatic passage in which he named the two dominant powers of the future: the United States and Russia. Each of these countries, he wrote, "seems called by a secret design of providence to hold the destinies of half the world in its hands one day."¹⁰ His prophecy may appear less impressive today, which is just as well because, for the most part, Tocqueville scorned the practice of making specific historical predictions. His real point in this passage was that, where physical facts permitted, the modern world allowed states to be put together on a much vaster scale because of the weakening of secondary powers and the simplification of the principle of legitimacy. Only two basic political options remained in the modern world, both of which would be justi-

fied in the name of equality: "Men have two ways to be equal. They can all have the same rights or all be equally deprived of rights."¹¹

Without attempting to peer into the future, it is evident that the distribution of power today has begun to approximate the picture Tocqueville sketched. The major players are the handful of "superstates," with the United States and China being the two most important states. Each represents one of the two basic modes of rule possible for modernity: liberal democracy and authoritarianism. While all states have a set of fundamental interests that are influenced by their geographic position and history, many of their most important objectives are shaped by their form of government. The prospects for cooperation in the world, therefore, hinge in large part on the character of the political regimes of the major states. Tocqueville's conception of the "great problem" of his day—the establishment of liberal democracy—best describes our own as well.

The Basic Factors of Political Analysis

Tocqueville's approach to formal political analysis begins with a consideration of two fundamental factors or causes: the social state and the political regime. The social state corresponds roughly to what many call the "stage of development" of a society; when Tocqueville uses this concept to describe the *group* of the most advanced nations of the time (the West or the "Christian world" of his day), it therefore designates the general stage of development of the age. Tocqueville introduces *Democracy in America* with just this theme: "A great democratic revolution is taking place among us."¹² The revolution refers to the death of aristocracy, the previous age in Europe based on hierarchical classes and the birth of "the equality of conditions." Tocqueville came to America to observe the contour of this new age firsthand. As he told John Stuart Mill, "America was only the frame. My picture was Democracy."¹³

The "social state" for Tocqueville is a broad concept that gains in its sweep what it loses in precision.

The social state is caused by—and comprised of—a number of elements, of which the economic component is only one. To be sure, the modern democratic social state owed much to the creation of new kinds of wealth in commerce and industry, which broke the grip of property in land and opened up society to a greater fluidity of movement up and down the economic ladder. But the democratic social state was also the product of the “idea of equality,” the notion that there are not qualitative differences among human beings related to the situation of their birth inside of a conventional social hierarchy. The emergence of this idea in society was the death knell of the aristocratic order. The idea constitutes the most important characteristic of the democratic age. All societies must now recognize the underlying legitimacy of popular sovereignty, in the sense that political power can only be justified if it is of and for, though not necessarily by, the people. Finally, in coupling the concept of the democratic social state with the conditions of *our* age, Tocqueville regularly includes the major structural elements of modernity that have been associated with and that have helped to drive the process of democratization, such as commerce, technology, and political units of a certain size.

The social state is a socioeconomic nexus of forces to which Tocqueville ascribed great explanatory power. It generates tendencies that influence the character of political life, intellectual thought, religious beliefs, tastes, and sentiments. Among the features of the democratic social state Tocqueville noted were (by way of comparison with aristocracy) fewer social and political points of opposition to central governmental authority, greater pressure toward uniformity, a diminished sense among individuals of their strength and influence, a growing sense of their isolation, and an augmented preoccupation with the material or bodily aspects of existence.

Yet, important as the social state was for Tocqueville, he named a second general cause of equal if not greater consequence: the character of the political order. The democratic social state, as noted, simplifies the political options to two basic alternatives,

but the difference between them could not be more important: “one has freedom for its principal means of action; the other servitude.”¹⁴ Tocqueville studied the particular causes that inclined a society to adopt one or the other of these political forms, but he always insisted that, in contradistinction to the social state—which is a given—either regime form was a possibility. The social state is a providential fact; the regime form is potentially within human control. It is in this sense, as he often put it, “chosen”; as he concludes in *Democracy in America*, “it depends on them [the nations of our day] whether equality leads to servitude or liberty, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery.”¹⁵

The significance of the regime form for Tocqueville derives from the overriding importance of liberty as both a political and a moral good. With a biting sarcasm directed at many of his fellow thinkers, Tocqueville openly confessed to his love of liberty in his preface to *The Old Regime and the Revolution*: “Some may accuse me of displaying too strong a taste for freedom, which, I am assured, is hardly of concern to anyone in France today.”¹⁶ Free societies are preferable to authoritarian ones not only for their political benefits but also for the benefits they offer civilization. The regime form conditions much about the quality of life, refracting without ever wholly canceling out some of the general effects of the social state: “whatever the tendencies of the social state, men can always modify them and ward off the bad tendencies while appropriating the good.”¹⁷

Tocqueville came from a distinguished aristocratic family, and he well understood—it seemed almost to be in his bones—the aristocratic point of view. He admitted at times to feeling the powerful pull of aristocratic sentiments even in opposition to his rational judgment. The passages in which he engages in what amount almost to dialogues with his aristocratic readers are especially revealing of his thought, even if today they have grown more difficult for us, who have been so thoroughly shaped by democracy, to appreciate. Many aristocrats viewed the revolution that brought the democratic social state as the decisive, indeed practically the only,

change worth considering; having formed their opinion of democracy's overall character, they dismissed as trivial any differences or variations in the political forms that might exist within it. The democratic age as a whole was a catastrophe. Tocqueville refused to go along with this judgment. While acknowledging that aristocrats could never expect to recover the same kind of greatness and refinement they once enjoyed or to partake of the same sort of elevated liberty, he nevertheless insisted that the stakes involved in the choice of political alternatives were more than sufficient to warrant the engagement of the truly noble soul. Tocqueville pleaded with his fellow aristocrats to abandon the futile hope of "living like our fathers" and to strive instead "to attain the kind of greatness and happiness that is proper to us."¹⁸ And a certain kind of greatness he believed there was: free democratic societies offered the possibility of achieving a greater degree of justice than the world had ever known before.

Tocqueville also pointed to the depth of the downside of the democratic age. Aristocratic times, of course, had known their regimes of servitude, as under Henry IV or Louis XIV, but this sort of absolutism paled in comparison to what Tocqueville feared could emerge in democratic times. Under modern conditions, "each citizen, being equally powerless, equally poor, equally isolated, can only oppose his individual weakness to the organized force of the government."¹⁹ Democratic despotism could be more thorough, more dehumanizing, and more enduring than anything the aristocrats had seen or could grasp. Aristocrats owed it to the human race to do what they could to prevent it.

Tocqueville was never so detached in his analysis as to depreciate the understanding of the political world as it was known to statesmen and political actors. Even though he provided in his sketch of "soft despotism" the first, and arguably still the most haunting, portrait of the diminished quality of life potential to the new democratic age, the choice of political forms remained for him the paramount question. This perspective differentiates his thought not only from that of many of his fellow aristocrats,

but also, and more importantly, from the famous theoretical commentaries on the "democratic revolution" of Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. For all of these thinkers, the political factor is insignificant; the only cause worth considering is the historical or sociological one. Tocqueville summoned every ounce of his magnanimity to insist otherwise.

China Today

It is possible now to situate contemporary China according to Tocqueville's categories of social state and political regime. By coincidence, the current Chinese constitution, adopted in 1982, begins precisely with these two questions.²⁰ It opens with a historical sketch noting how China abolished the "feudal monarchy" in the revolution of 1911. Yet this transformation to modernity remained incomplete, as "the Chinese people had yet to fulfill their historic task of overthrowing imperialism and feudalism." Further steps were required, with a decisive event being the "new-democratic revolution" led by the Communist Party and Chairman Mao Zedong in 1949, which "overthrew the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism." In line with the Marxist-Leninist understanding of stages of development, the constitution treats capitalism (and imperialism) as a successor social stage to feudalism, preparatory to a future stage of socialism. (In Tocqueville's analysis, capitalism and socialism are both arrangements falling within the democratic social state of equality of conditions.)

The constitution acknowledges that the changes up to that point (1982) had only begun to transform conditions for much of the population. The socialist society has been in the process of being built "step by step" since 1949, and a major part of the work remained to be accomplished. As the constitution notes, "The basic task of the nation in the years to come is to concentrate its effort on socialist modernization." Left unstated, but almost acknowledged, is the fact that China was still woefully underdeveloped, with a paltry middle class comprised largely of party members and with millions living in a backward peasant economy.

All know today what has happened since. In one of the most remarkable economic transformations in world history, driven in large part by the introduction of market elements in the economy, China has, in the span of a single generation, made great strides in overcoming its poverty and backwardness. To be sure, in a state that is so vast in size and population, large portions of the country still remain, by any standards, highly undeveloped. But China's direction is unmistakable: one only need cast a brief look at photos of the Shanghai skyline to see how far China has come on the scale of development. The display the Chinese government put on for the world during the 2008 summer Olympics was intended to showcase China's transformation into a modern and developed society.²¹

Turning next to the political form, the constitution provides a clear statement of the regime type: "The People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants."²² The political form is thus admitted to be an authoritarian government of some kind. It is legitimized, as Tocqueville foresaw would be the case, by fidelity to the idea of equality. It is "socialist democracy" or popular in its aim or end: "All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people."²³

The characterization of the regime as a people's democratic dictatorship describes what is (or was) a common feature of all Marxist-Leninist states. Left unexplored in the constitution—as one would expect—is the status of the Chinese regime within this broader universe. Scholars have suggested rough classification schemas of these regimes by reference to the aims they have pursued and the means they have employed to put them into effect. The most ambitious form, what one might call reshaping totalitarian orders, has had the goal of creating "socialist man" by the full application of state power. Such was the goal of the early Soviet Union, of China during Mao's reign (especially during the Cultural Revolution), and of Cuba (for a period of time) and Cambodia. The precursor of this extraordinary

kind of regime in modern times was the French Revolution, famously described by Tocqueville as "striving for the regeneration of the human race . . . it took on the appearance of a religious revolution which so astonished its contemporaries."²⁴

Another form of Marxist-Leninist dictatorship has paid only lip service to the higher aim of remaking human nature. It has sought above all instead to keep the public utterly quiescent and fearful of making any challenge to the party or dictator in power. When pursued with thoroughness and tenacity, as under the East German regime and the Soviet regime under Stalin's rule in the later years, it is a totalitarianism of negative objectives attempting to isolate individuals from one another in order to prevent collective action (other than occasional displays of support for the regime). Looking ahead, Tocqueville foresaw the development of this kind of despotism, which twisted ordinary language in order to designate as "good citizens" those "who confine themselves to themselves"; it would aim to make "a sort of public virtue of indifference."²⁵

As for China, its political regime has evolved since the 1982 constitution. Written in the early years of Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the constitution was one instrument of his plan to move China away from Maoism. Subsequent events have filled in some of the spaces and helped to fix the character of the dictatorship. Whatever may linger of the old project of creating the socialist man, the dictatorship now widely accepts, indeed relies heavily on, the capitalist motive of self-interest. In pursuing the project of economic modernization, it has abandoned full collectivization and tolerates a significant free-market sector that generates much of China's new wealth and supplies a good deal of the revenue for maintaining the still-vast state-run sectors. The dictatorship has also relaxed its grip on large parts of society, permitting a wider range of expression in cultural and social affairs. Yet it has staked out boundaries, not always perfectly clear, beyond which forms of free expression and activity may not go. The state patrols these boundaries and can deal effectively and harshly with those who transgress them. The

authoritarianism is certainly milder and more restrained than in the past, but it is palpable. And it has the benefit of being able to rely on some of the modern techniques of social control.

Whether the dictatorship supports the current arrangement by necessity or by conviction is unclear. It may not even be that important. Whatever the wishes of those in the higher echelons of the government, their visions for the future now count for less than the imperatives stemming from the structural realities now in place. The current authoritarian system is one in which parts of society fear the dictatorship and in which the dictatorship is wary of certain parts of society.²⁶ Those in society worry, obviously, about the power of the state, which can reward and especially punish, while some in the state worry about the possibility of losing public support. Maintaining a degree of popular backing, or at least acquiescence, appears to be essential to the regime's well-being, if not its survival. A crackdown along the lines of the regime's response to the Tiananmen Square revolt of 1989 might undermine its credibility in the world at large. Both society and the dictatorship thus tread with caution, each concerned with identifying the red lines beyond which it dares not tread.

China's Future: The Stable-State Scenario

Using Tocqueville's two categories, China is best described today as a nation that has entered into the democratic social state and that is governed by an authoritarian government. The main question scholars are asking now is whether the current government is secure, that is, whether China is in a "stable state" politically or in a process of transition to a different type of regime.

These terms of analysis are admittedly imperfect. Under the stable-state category, there is room for change beneath the surface, which, given China's rapid pace of economic modernization, is likely to be substantial. The possibility that evolutionary developments could lead at some point to a transformation of

the regime without an open break cannot be excluded either. That said, the stable-state scenario refers to a situation in which the current form of government remains in place for the foreseeable future. The transition scenario holds that there are too many strains or contradictions for the current regime to be able to survive; an attempt will be made in the short to medium run to overturn it and replace it with a form of liberal democracy.

What can be said on behalf of each position? There are more observers arguing the stable-state scenario today than there were fifteen or so years ago. This shift reflects in part an ebbing of some of the exuberance for the prospects of liberal democracy that followed the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Liberal democracy at that point enjoyed a moment of enormous moral prestige, with a near consensus that it represented the wave of the future. Recalcitrant leaders, like those in Belarus, might reject liberalism in order to cling to power, but they would consign their countries to backwardness, internal illegitimacy, and international scorn. Attitudes began to shift when Russia was widely thought to have tried the full liberal experiment, both economic and political, in the 1990s, but fared disastrously in the economic realm.²⁷ Might it not be the case, some asked, that nations would do better to undertake a phased process of economic liberalization first, followed by political liberalization later?

At the same time, the triumph of liberal democracy was conflated in the minds of many throughout the world with the ascendancy of American power. This fact was warmly greeted in some places, but in others it provided fertile grounds for reactions not only against U.S. dominance, but also against the U.S. system of liberal democracy. Even in the liberal democratic West, many who resented American power were willing to settle scores at the expense of questioning the good of liberal democracy.

In this climate, the leadership of more countries found it easier to question and oppose liberal democracy. Semiliberal democracies and proud authoritarians formed odd alliances. Many of these governments looked more favorably to China as a

“model.” Never mind that China had engaged in a great deal of economic liberalization, while some of these regimes were shunning markets; to them, the more important point was that China had an authoritarian system and had grown powerful, wealthy, and respected. The earlier idea that political liberalization would follow economic liberalization began to give way to the new idea that authoritarian government was just as natural and desirable an end.

This view is obviously the one the Chinese dictatorship advances on its own behalf.²⁸ The dictatorship claims credit for the economic achievements of the past thirty years—after all, it has been in power—and it in no way considers itself in transition to anything else. The regime has many supporters. In Russia, for example, leaders of the dominant party, United Russia, held meetings in 2009 with senior communist Chinese officials for the purpose, according to a report in the *New York Times*, “to hear firsthand how they wield power . . . [and see how] to use a one-party system to keep tight control over the country while still driving significant economic growth.”²⁹ For the Russians, and many others, the fact that China remains nominally communist is less important than the fact that it is authoritarian.³⁰

Admiration for the current regime in China is now also expressed more frequently in the West. In the view of Harvard professor Ezra Vogel, “In the 30 years since Deng started his revolution . . . China has become the workshop of the world, urban slums have been replaced by forests of modern high rise buildings, superhighways have succeeded dirt roads and cars have displaced donkey carts.”³¹ One of the most prominent political commentators in America, *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman, echoed the sentiments of the eighteenth-century physiocrats: “One-party autocracy certainly has its drawbacks. But when it is led by a reasonably enlightened group of people, as China is today, it can also have great advantages. That one party can just impose the politically difficult but critically important policies needed to move a society forward in the 21st century.”³²

Another argument for the stable state scenario rests on the current regime’s durability.³³ The longer it remains in power without turmoil or serious challenge, the more difficult it becomes for anyone to imagine a fundamental change. The dictatorship becomes part of how things are. Its status has been reinforced by the increasing respectability it has achieved in the eyes of liberal democratic nations. Part of this response, of course, is a matter of realpolitik: China’s economic power and its military prowess command attention, and the United States, for one, relies heavily on Chinese capital to fund its ever-growing debt. The celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of China’s Communist Revolution in 2009 was a sign of the times. In the United States, New York City’s Empire State Building turned the lights on its upper floors to red and yellow to commemorate the event.

If durability helps supply the dictatorship with a measure of stability, what are its other props? Some say the continuance of the regime depends on its record of generating continuing economic growth, without which it will come under intense pressure. But performance is a weak reed of legitimacy, since an economic downturn at some point is likely. In Tocqueville’s analysis, any system, even one in which the society is held in check by force, will need at some point a “positive” basis of support in the form of a generally accepted belief or idea: “Despotism all alone by itself can maintain nothing lasting. . . . One will never encounter, whatever one does, genuine power among men except in the free concurrence of wills.”³⁴ The Chinese dictatorship may well be aware that official communist ideology (Marxism-Leninism and Maoism) no longer exercises a positive hold on the minds and hearts of the public, and perhaps not on that many in the party either. Elements of the regime have been open to exploring alternative foundations of support, including a revival of a modified Confucianism, as a way both to counter unbridled consumerism and to shore up a “traditional” appeal to order. The idea here has been to experiment with appropriating a version of authoritarian Confucianism along the lines articulated by the former prime

minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew.³⁵ How far this or other efforts will succeed in securing a renewed ideological foundation of the regime remains unclear at this point.

The State-of-Transition Scenario

The alternative scenario depicts China as being in a state of transition in which forces are somehow moving toward the establishment of a liberal democracy.³⁶ This position, which has the support of many observers, rests on two main arguments. The first, just alluded to, is that the current regime has no solid foundation that justifies its rule. In the words of Gordon D. Chang, author of *The Coming Collapse of China*, “The Communist Party is becoming increasingly divorced from its subjects.” The public submits to the party dictatorship, but it does not believe in it and has already moved well past it. Belief in communism is a dead letter, and no viable authoritarian substitute has come to its rescue. The current regime is physically entrenched, but it is becoming increasingly isolated from civil society, especially from its most advanced sectors. Its weaknesses are apparent: “The Communist Party has not sensed or responded to people’s widespread desire to have more say in their government . . . it cannot keep up with the Chinese people, who are, in a very real sense, the ones on the march.”³⁷ The march is toward democracy.

The second argument in favor of transition has its roots in a social science paradigm of the 1960s and 1970s, which held that the process of modernization led to the establishment of liberal democracy. This position, which fell out of ideological favor by the end of the 1970s for being too pro-Western (and for allegedly being implicated in America’s intervention in Vietnam), reemerged somewhat following the collapse of the communist systems in Europe. The communist systems of dictatorship and command economies had failed politically and economically. Even many of those who were concerned first with economic development rather than political

freedom argued that no equilibrium can be found between authoritarian rule and a modern market economy. Economic development requires economic liberalism, and economic liberalism in the long run encourages political liberalism by opening up free choice and pluralism. The social-science evidence to support this position was reenforced by a global theory of a movement of history, first articulated by Francis Fukuyama. “History is directional, progressive,” he explained in one interview: “liberal democracy and market-oriented economic order are the only viable options for modern societies.”³⁸ In addition, there is an independent impulse toward political freedom. As expressed by Li Rui, once Mao’s personal secretary, “Modernization is possible only through democratization. This is the trend of the world in the twentieth century, especially since the Second World War. Those who follow this trend will thrive; those who fight against this trend will perish. This rule applies to every country—and every party.”³⁹

The Study of Transition

Tocqueville, as noted earlier, initiated the study of many of the central themes of modern political analysis, but he often approached these matters in ways that differ from the way scholars proceed today. His alternative perspective supplies the basis for the new themes of study undertaken in AEI’s Tocqueville on China project.

Is there anything in Tocqueville’s thought that speaks to the different scenarios for China? From his general political science, he spoke of the two chief regimes of modernity as liberal democracy and authoritarianism. Between these two, he saw no general force of history or natural process that operated decisively on behalf of either regime. While “democratic peoples have a natural taste for freedom,” they also have an even stronger attachment to equality, which can lead nations to embrace absolutism.⁴⁰ Tocqueville left the question of selection of regimes open. When it came to the possibility of

transition, he made clear that the mere taste or desire for a free regime was inadequate to sustain liberal democracy in the absence of a certain set of skills within the populace. Modern studies of transition that focus on predicting if and when there will be an attempt at change would thus seem incomplete without also considering the prospects of success. To apply Tocqueville's approach to the menu of options for a country like China, it would be necessary to speak (in addition to the scenario of the stable state of continued authoritarian rule) of two possible outcomes, not one, under the category of transition: a change that achieves a "soft landing" of a functioning liberal democracy and a change that ends in failure.

Tocqueville was interested not only in knowledge of what will happen ("historical causality"), but also in knowledge of what would be more likely to produce a certain result in any situation in which people act (what may be called "logical causality"). He devoted much of his attention to this last question, attempting to discover the general factors that help to produce success (sustainable free government) and failure. Analysis of this question is the main unifying thread running through his books *Democracy in America*, which examines a case (America) of a successful transition, and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, which examines a case (France) that "has rarely given us freedom, but always disorder."⁴¹ One should recall here that when Tocqueville died in 1859, seventy years after the French Revolution, France had still not established a durable free regime. The Revolution was a transition that failed.

To state the central practical theme of Tocqueville's scholarship in terms of the idea "America versus France" poses the obvious risk today, in the current climate of overheated sensitivity to claims of national power, that some will take the Tocqueville on China project to be a celebration of America. Nothing could be further from the truth. Tocqueville approached America in an unsentimental spirit, viewing it clinically as a case from which to draw certain general lessons: "The question I have raised interests not only the United States, but the entire

world; not one nation, but all men."⁴² It was only a coincidence that the successful example happened to be America, rather than Argentina. It is in the same spirit that the inquiry is conducted here.

Tocqueville's effort to discover a general lesson about transition from these two cases might be deemed implausible on the grounds, widely accepted when Tocqueville wrote, that France and the United States were countries in different social states. There is a surface plausibility to this objection. After all, had not the French in the course of their Revolution deposed (and beheaded) their king and expelled (and plundered) a large part of their aristocracy? Was not the Revolution all about a sudden change of social state from the old order of hierarchical classes (aristocracy) to the new order of democracy (equality of conditions)? While Tocqueville never denied the momentousness of the French Revolution, he challenged the idea of a total change of the social state in France in 1789. A key to understanding his book *The Old Regime and the Revolution* is to realize—what most American readers have missed—that he does not take the term "old regime" to be synonymous with the France of the old aristocratic social state. The "old regime" is divided into an earlier and a later period, the earlier being the time of the feudal constitution when the aristocracy played a central role in governing the nation, and the later period being the time of monarchic absolutism. The old or feudal constitution was not really overthrown in 1789 for the simple reason that it had already largely been overthrown long before. The monarchy in place since at least Louis XIV had been transforming France, working to "elevate the people to the level of the nobles . . . [and] equalize everything beneath the throne."⁴³ True, the mass of the people, still in the condition of peasantry, had not attained an equality of condition. But the power of the aristocracy had been eliminated, with authority centralized in a monarchy operating with the aid of a large bureaucracy. What remained of the old or feudal constitution in 1789 was more a corpse than a living body. All that was needed was to knock off the head, so to speak, and the French system of

1787 was in perfect shape for the modern democratic absolutist government of the 1790s and the imperial order of Napoleon.

America and France at the time of their transitions were, accordingly, not as far apart in their social states as most believed. Tocqueville could, therefore, pursue his search for a helpful explanation for success and failure in the two cases. Many factors were, of course, at work in the transitions in both countries, some of which were tied unalterably to one place or a particular circumstance—for example, the abundance of free and open land and the absence of powerful neighbors (factors that contributed to a successful initial transition in America), and the reverse in France (which proved to be impediments to a successful transition). But by sifting through, as best he could, the variety of causes that operate on society, Tocqueville in the end was satisfied that he had identified a set of causes that was both general, that is, not attached to a particular place, and decisive: “the Americans have shown that one must not despair of regulating democracy with the aid of laws and mores.”⁴⁴ The import of this conclusion was that America, even with all the other advantages it enjoyed, could not have succeeded in establishing a working liberal democracy without having a certain set of laws and mores, and that (perhaps) France, even with all the disadvantages it faced, might well have succeeded if it had had a certain set of laws and mores. And of these last two—laws and mores—mores for Tocqueville were more fundamental.⁴⁵ Laws, although directly contributory on their own, are often most significant for how they influence mores.

Tocqueville elaborated on this theme in his account of the historical development of each society. America in its modernizing and democratizing process in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a strengthening of the mores supporting free government, a result achieved by encouraging local institutions, promoting educational and religious institutions, and avoiding administrative centralization. In its modernizing process, France managed to do largely the opposite. The monarchy proceeded by dismantling the institutions of the old constitution

that had provided for local participation and free government (albeit not democratic), replacing them with a system of governance by a centralized bureaucracy. Students of French history have asked whether these local institutions, some of which had strong ties to the privileges of the aristocracy, could ever have been modernized or needed instead to be destroyed altogether before any process of democratization could proceed. John Stuart Mill took the second position, while the weight of Tocqueville’s argument was that wise policies could have preserved the older institutions while allowing them to adapt to more democratic conditions. The tragedy of French history, in his view, was that France had lost the best parts of its political patrimony.

What were the mores that helped to sustain freedom? Tocqueville defined the term so broadly that many have been left to wonder how helpful it is. Beyond its strict meaning of moral dispositions, he used it to refer to the “different notions that men possess, to the various opinions that are current in their midst, and to the sum of ideas of which the habits of the mind are formed.”⁴⁶ Dwelling on this definition is obviously no substitute for following Tocqueville in his detailed treatment of the constitutive elements that shape mores and the ways in which these elements might be inflected to help foster free human beings. The factors that shape mores range from basic metaphysical presuppositions (freedom requires first propositions that hold that human beings can in some measure shape their destiny) to the epistemological method of intellectuals and citizens (freedom is favored by reasoning from particulars to general conclusions rather than by abstract and deductive speculation) to the capacity of individuals for autoregulation (freedom, because it expands the legal limits of the permissible, requires individuals who are capable of self-control) to skills at interacting with others (free citizens must know how to form associations with each other and take pride in making certain decisions for themselves). Tocqueville discussed and illustrated his views about mores mostly in terms of American practices, which was the immediate focus of his work. But his larger

effort was to extract from this analysis an understanding of the general principles that support freedom: “The mores and laws of the Americans are not the only ones that can suit democratic peoples.” Other peoples in other situations might discover ways of following these principles “without imitating Americans in the particular application.”⁴⁷

Tocqueville’s Political Science

The study of transition, to reiterate, may treat two different, though overlapping, questions: when and if an attempt at change to liberal democracy will take place, and what factors make a successful outcome of sustainable free government more or less likely. Tocqueville was interested in both sorts of inquiries. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, he offered reflections on the first, or “predictive,” aspect of transition in the case of the onset of the French Revolution, albeit, of course, well after that event had taken place. Without ever offering a full-blown theory of transition, Tocqueville noted various factors in France in the mid-eighteenth century that made a political upheaval of some kind almost inevitable. Included were the widespread popular disgust at a class (the aristocrats) that held privileges without performing any service; a set of ideas, produced by literary thinkers wholly cut off from practical political experience, that favored abstract and radical ideas of change; and a government that had already embarked on major reform. This last, counterintuitive factor represents one of Tocqueville’s more famous observations, sometimes referred to as the law of rising expectations. Efforts at reform, far from appeasing people, often serve to increase the demand for more, and sometimes more radical, change: “Every abuse that is then eliminated seems to highlight those that remain . . . the evil has decreased, it is true, but the sensitivity to it is greater.”⁴⁸

In light of Tocqueville’s interest in the causes of historical change, it is natural to ask whether a general “model” of development might not be derived from his analysis of the case of France, in which

modern China is situated on a path to transition that tracks in some way the path of prerevolutionary France. Different parallels suggest themselves. Mao’s dictatorship, above all during the Cultural Revolution, would represent a dramatic attempt by a modernizing authority to use the central power to destroy the vestiges of the traditional Chinese regime, including attachments to family and village and social institutions, for the purpose of creating unattached individuals who could be remodeled into “new men.” The current authoritarian government, though a major modification of the Maoist regime and its excesses, might be seen as the final moment of the monarchical or prerevolutionary phase. The government, which is carrying a rapidly modernizing society entering into a democratic social state, has some of the same weaknesses of the late monarchy. It has lost its traditional theoretical foundation; it supports a resented *rentier* class (the party apparatchiks) that, like the aristocrats, performs no productive function; and it has engaged in major policies of reform, which paradoxically generate still-greater pressure for change. Under this scenario, China could well be on the verge of a major breakpoint—as France was in 1789. (There are, of course, alternative versions that could see the revolutionary phase as having already occurred, with the current regime being situated as an instance of a government of a failed transition.) No matter how one tries to use the historical analogies—they are never perfect—the key analytic question that arises is whether the mores that now characterize China’s citizenry are of the sort to help produce a transition to a more liberal order or, failing that, to support a sustained period of authoritarian, if somewhat fragile, rule.

Historical analogies can be helpful means to stimulate new ways of looking at the present. As strained as certain parallels may initially appear, they can be turned into interesting hypotheses and tested to see if they fit or appear to shed any light on the current situation. If this way of proceeding seems to lack rigor, it may be recalled that the activity of foreseeing the future was once thought to be exclusively the affair of soothsaying or prophecy before it was claimed as a

province of social science. How substantial the progress of social science has been in this respect, however, remains a question open to debate.

Whatever Tocqueville's account of the French Revolution may contribute to this branch of transitions studies, his main concern in political analysis was not historical prediction but the effort to identify the general factors that aid or detract from supporting free regimes. From this focus, too, derived his understanding of the role of "political science," a view that differs strikingly from the modern conception of a purely academic discipline that seeks to explain variance while supplying employment and prestige for its practitioners. Political science, for Tocqueville, was to be a force inside modern political life that would promote sustainable free government, not as an ordinary political advocate, but as an intellectual enterprise intent on shedding light on a certain set of questions. Tocqueville offered *Democracy in America* as the seminal text of this "new political science," but he also surely meant that it would be an invitation to further studies in the same vein. It was not the final word. Political science would help instruct "those who direct society." Students of Tocqueville obviously do well to study his writings and to delve ever more deeply into the meanings of his texts. But the fullest appreciation of his thought is to be found in continuing the enterprise of political science that he established.

Tocqueville is known for his beautiful passages on liberty, which many consider to be illustrations of his poetic qualities rather than an integral part of his social science. This judgment is mistaken. Once one understands the function Tocqueville envisaged for political science, it becomes clear that his discussions of liberty were part of an actionable agenda and have a practical objective. Tocqueville sought to keep alive and, if possible, to strengthen the infrastructure of freedom. This aim was something to be pursued, to the extent possible, in whatever situation in which a society might find itself, whether in an authoritarian regime, where liberty might blossom later, or in a liberal democracy, where liberty is in danger of weakening and

drying up. No matter what the circumstance, there is always room for strategies that, where they cannot promote, at least seek to minimize the damage to the infrastructure of liberty. In this sense, every society is continually in transition. To be sure, the threshold issue of the legal character of the political regime—whether it is an authoritarian order or a liberal democracy—remains the central political question. But liberty for Tocqueville is more than a political concept; it is a human ideal, one that points as its highest goal to the person who is able to think, act, and feel in a grand way. Tocqueville's objective was to create not just a free society, but a free society with space for free human beings.

There is a final reason to emphasize the distinction between the two types of causality (historical and logical). The fact that the same word, "cause," is used in both instances can engender confusion and lead to practical errors of judgment. Although it is no doubt the case that many of the factors that encourage an attempt at transition to liberal democracy also would work to sustain it over the long run, the correlation is far from perfect. Countries, like France in 1789, that have sought a transition to some kind of republic have often failed, and certain of the causes that hastened the attempt, like radical philosophy, contributed to the failure. Awareness of such tradeoffs is a part of the knowledge of political science, especially in the measure that it might serve to guide action. In the opposite case, there may be causes that help sustain liberal democracy, but that, if artfully used by an authoritarian regime, can reduce the pressure for transition. The existence of associations is known to be an important correlate of a sustainable free government, but an authoritarian government, like that in China today, may have tolerated or encouraged certain associations, especially in the area of charitable services, that have lessened pressure on the regime to provide for its aging and still, in many places, poor population. Political science, in helping to guide the strategies that promote free government, must understand and take all of these factors into account.

The Tocqueville on China Research Project

The Tocqueville on China research project brings together scholars of Tocqueville and of Chinese politics with the aim of generating new perspectives for the study of contemporary China. (That a deeper appreciation of Tocqueville's work, derived from the challenge of asking how it can contribute to the study of comparative politics, may also have emerged is a welcome byproduct.) The seminars sponsored so far by the project followed Tocqueville's basic diagnostic method, which combines a bottom-up and a top-down approach to the study of any particular country. This method is the same one Tocqueville himself employed in his famous encounter with America.

The bottom-up approach looks at a state almost as it presents itself, observing how it has evolved and searching for the underlying and enduring traits of its populace, that is, the "prejudices, habits, and dominant passions" that compose national character or characters. Chiefly historical and developmental, this perspective focuses on the special and particular aspects of a society, the forces that operate beneath the surface and that carry a nation along toward a goal that most are unable to see.⁴⁹ The bottom-up approach is informed by the top-down approach of political science, which supplies the basic categories of analysis and defines general criteria of relevance. Here is to be found Tocqueville's formal schema of the two main variables (social state and regime) and the three specific causes that shape a society: its accidental and physical features, its laws (constitutional, statutory, and civil), and its mores.

The basic constitutional laws may temporarily define the outward character of a regime, but the real support for sustaining it derives mainly from its mores (and from its other laws insofar as they shape mores). Thus, there are constitutions, like some in Latin America in Tocqueville's day, that look like a liberal democracy for a single election, but then revert to an authoritarian regime more consistent with their mores. Laws and mores are also the causes that human actors can in measure shape or adjust, with laws obviously being more portable and manipulable

than mores, but also less powerful and effective in their consequences. The analyst of any society will therefore concentrate on mapping its existing laws and mores and attempt to determine, from consulting the principles of political science, how they might be adjusted to promote the cause of a free society. Discerning the analogous causes and effects of laws and mores in different contexts is a primary task for political science, one made more difficult, insofar as learning from Tocqueville is concerned, in the measure that the society under consideration differs from the ones he had occasion to study. There is no question that in moving from the West to the East, from the "Christian nations" to a country shaped by an entirely different set of traditions, the challenge posed grows even greater. Political science may nevertheless still be of assistance. Tocqueville acknowledged that "if men showed themselves to be different in America than they are elsewhere, what takes place in the American democracies would teach us nothing about what will take place in other democracies," but having mentioned this possibility, he then went on to deny that this was the case.⁵⁰ There is a common human nature and a common influence in human affairs of causes and effects.

The seminars moved continually between the bottom-up and top-down approaches in the study of modern China. One session was devoted to the various preexisting ethnic groups and cultures and explored in what measure these groups have shaped and perhaps still shape distinct sets of mores. Is China one people, or a state in which one people dominates others, or a state consisting of a multiplicity of peoples? Other sessions analyzed existing mental and intellectual mores in China, looking at the basic "levers" (the traditions and the current institutions) that influence their character. How do various modes of thought, beginning with epistemological premises and religion, and continuing with philosophy and literature, form ideas and sentiments? Finally, some sessions looked more closely at practices and habits, especially those bearing on the skills of participating in associational activity and the disposition to connect and interact with

other citizens. In all these instances, the discussion turned from what now exists and the trends that were afoot to a consideration of what adjustments might promote a transition and strengthen the infrastructure of liberty.

Under the guidance of Tocqueville's thought, the range of questions considered relevant for political inquiry extends well beyond that treated in ordinary political analysis today. With so enormous an array of subject matter to be covered, the Tocqueville on China project has sought more to propose a syllabus of study than to provide a definitive set of answers at this point. The syllabus poses great challenges at the same time that it opens up enormous opportunities. It calls to mind one of Lao-Tzu's best-known proverbs: a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 86, translating *emblème* as symbol. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent references refer to the Mansfield/Winthrop translation.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 213.

4. The expression was that of the physiocrat Mercier de la Rivière, whom Tocqueville discussed in his unpublished notes to *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres Complètes II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 369–73.

5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 602. The novel to which Tocqueville refers was almost certainly Wu Ching Tzu's *The Scholars*, written in 1751. My thanks to Professor Brantly Womack for this suggestion.

6. *Ibid.*, 86.

7. *Ibid.*, 298.

8. Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2006).

9. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 395.

10. *Ibid.*, 396.

11. From Tocqueville's unpublished notes and writings, cited by Eduardo Nolla in his critical edition of *Democracy in America*. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009), 2:13.

12. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 13.

13. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoirs, Letters and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1862), 2:38.

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 396.

15. *Ibid.*, 676.

16. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 86.

17. Cited in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, 1:117.

18. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 675–76.

19. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 310. This point is developed further in Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 87.

20. "Constitution of the People's Republic of China," available at <http://english.people.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html> (accessed January 7, 2010).

21. The perception of an economic miracle in China over the past two decades is now nearly universal, and it has much evidence to support it. Although, now that economic performance has become a key component in the dictatorship's justification of its *political* legitimacy, there are reasons to be skeptical about accepting all of the official figures as well as some of the more optimistic prognostications of further growth. There may be huge distortions in parts of the Chinese economy resulting from the operation of inefficient state sectors, from political corruption, and from "political" interventions into segments of the market economy. Even the impressive office-building boom in Shanghai may be the result of a bubble, with some reports that a substantial portion of the new office space is empty. For a more pessimistic account of China's economic situation, see Derek Scissors, "Deng Undone," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (May/June 2009); and John Lee, "The Chinese Economic Miracle—What Lies Beneath," in *Will China Fail?* (Australia: Centre for Independent Studies, 2007), 47–79. As for Shanghai, as one Chinese real estate developer noted recently, "In Manhattan, they have vacancy rates of 10–15 percent and they feel like the sky is falling, but in Pudong [the central business district in Shanghai] vacancy rates are as high as 50 percent and

they are still building new skyscrapers. . . . If you look at GDP growth, then China looks like a new engine driving the global economy, but if you look at how the growth is being created here by so much wasteful investment you wouldn't be so optimistic." See Jamil Anderlini, "Fears of China Property Bubble," *Financial Times*, November 18, 2009.

22. "Constitution of the People's Republic of China."

23. "Constitution of the People's Republic of China."

24. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 101.

25. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 485.

26. Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

27. The argument here is about perception, not necessarily about reality. There is a continuing dispute over what in fact led to the massive downturn of the Russian economy in the 1990s, with some contending that it resulted from a sudden cessation of political liberalism and others contending that many of the programs of economic liberalism, despite their appearance, were in fact quite far from being genuinely liberal or market-oriented. See, for example, M. Steven Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

28. Mark Leonard, *What Does China Think?* (Philadelphia: Public Affairs, 2008).

29. Clifford J. Levy, "In Chinese Communist Party, Russia's Rulers See a Role Model for Governing," *New York Times*, October 18, 2009.

30. It is no small irony that one reason the Chinese Communist Party believes it has been able to sustain itself, while other communist regimes, like the Soviet Union, fell, is because the party extensively analyzed the mistakes it believed were made by then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. See David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2008), 41–102.

31. Ezra Vogel, "But Deng Is the Leader to Celebrate," *New York Times*, October 4, 2009.

32. Thomas L. Friedman, "One Party Democracy," *New York Times*, September 8, 2009.

33. Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Resilient Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003).

34. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 89. Tocqueville defined ideas as the factor that holds a society

together: "without common ideas there is no common action, and without common action men still exist, but a social body does not" (407).

35. Fareed Zakaria, "A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew," *Foreign Affairs* 73 (March/April 1994): 109–27.

36. Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

37. Gordon D. Chang, "Sixty Years of Communism," *Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2009.

38. Francis Fukuyama, interview by John Keane, "On the Road to Utopia," *The Independent*, June 19, 1999, available at www.johnkeane.net/other/otherjk_interview_fukuyama.html (accessed January 7, 2010).

39. Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition*, 4.

40. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

41. *Ibid.*, 572, altered translation.

42. *Ibid.*, 298. The case Tocqueville makes for America applied only to the free states, not the slave states. Tocqueville could never quite claim the same clinical detachment in his study of France, although he could try to achieve objectivity in practice: "I hope I have written the present work without prejudice, but I do not pretend to have written it without passion. It would hardly be possible for a Frenchman to feel nothing when he speaks of his country and ponders his times." Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 86.

43. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 5.

44. *Ibid.*, 298.

45. *Ibid.*, 295. Tocqueville writes, "The happiest situation and the best laws cannot maintain a constitution despite mores, whereas the latter turn even the most unfavorable positions and the worst laws to good account. The importance of mores is a common truth to which study and experience constantly lead back."

46. *Ibid.*, 275. Later, he provided another, equally expansive definition: "the sum of the intellectual and moral dispositions that men bring to the state of society" (292).

47. *Ibid.*, 298.

48. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 222.

49. The language here draws on Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 28.

50. *Ibid.*, 297.

About the Author

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About the Tocqueville on China Project

This paper was commissioned by the American Enterprise Institute in conjunction with its Tocqueville on China project. Directed by AEI's Gary J. Schmitt and Dan Blumenthal, the project examines topics and issues designed to provide greater insight and an enhanced understanding of contemporary Chinese civic culture. For more, see www.aei.org/tocqueville.