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Reconciling History with Sociology?

Strategies of Inquiry in Tocqueville's Democracy in America and The Old Regime and the French Revolution

LEONARD J. HOCHBERG Louisiana State University, USA

ABSTRACT This analysis of Tocqueville's thought is based on John R. Hall's strategies of sociohistorical inquiry. Historical sociologists have recognized Tocqueville as a master of the 'contrast-oriented comparison'. However, in *Democracy in America*, he also deploys a 'universal history', which posits the existence of four ages, with the United States arriving at an age of despotism despite the fact that the historical trajectory of the United States differed from France's. A reconstruction of Tocqueville's universal history is presented as a prelude to how the findings of his contrast-oriented comparison of the United States with France fit with those of his universal history. In seeking to assimilate both the United States and France to a universal history, Tocqueville's key analytical concepts, such as 'old regime' and 'revolution', are rendered highly ambiguous, resulting in surprising silences with regard to critical political events in pre-revolutionary France and in the pre- and post-revolutionary United States.

KEYWORDS historical sociology, revolution, strategies of inquiry, Tocqueville

With the emergence of history as an academic discipline, professional historians repudiated 'philosophical' or 'universal history'¹ on the grounds that events were contingently related; hence, history, it was argued, had to be shorn of any deterministic formulations.² Ironically, this explicit rejection of such theoretically or ideologically derived patterns of historical change did not solve the problem of how to construct concise narratives out of unruly chronologies; instead, as anyone who reads historiographic debates knows, those engaged in them often accompany the unmasking of an opponent's hidden biases and implicit theories with pious statements to the effect that the best antidote for any 'universal history' remains archival research. In order to avoid such charges, historians often claim that by thoroughly

collecting, sifting and collating the written artifacts of the past, it should be possible to reconstruct how a particular event or period occurred – all without relying on preconceived notions (Elton, 1967). One unanticipated consequence of this methodological imperative – i.e. the realization of a ‘scientific history’ through archival research – is particularly noteworthy: professional historians remain skeptical of any universal or even comparative history (Barracough, 1978; Gaddis, 2002: 51; McDonald, 1996).

Since the early 1970s, sociologists have attempted to reconcile history with sociology in their own synthetic studies by adopting such ‘strategies of inquiry’ (Hall, 1992, 1999). Although some sociologists, such as Skocpol and Somers (1980), Tilly (1984) and Isaac and Griffin (1989), have proclaimed the legitimacy of comparative-historical strategies of inquiry, the status of universal history remains contested (Moore, 1997). In assessing the way in which history allegedly unfolds, Wallerstein – in his work on the world-system³ – and John A. Hall (1986) – in his discussion of the origin and preservation of individual liberty – emphasized the causal significance of those metahistorical forces having an affinity with their own value commitments. Stinchcombe (1978: 10, 12–13), however, argues that such a strategy is merely ‘myth illustrated with historical events’ that, like ‘garbage’, needs to be tossed out by historical sociologists in order to get at the ‘causal structure’ of historical change.

Is history, then, best conceived of as a unilinear or master ‘social process’ that determines the nature of events while pushing deviant cases along converging trajectories toward a predetermined outcome? Or, does history, as Ragin (1987) implies, result in the multiplication of deviant cases, each of which is set in motion along a diverging trajectory by the resolution of particular historical situations and crises? If the former, then theoretical or universal history would seem to be warranted; if the latter, then comparative history might be privileged. These contrasting characterizations of temporality and historical process suggest that *a priori* beliefs in historical convergence versus divergence affect the methodology and epistemology of historical sociology (Abbott, 1991; Aminzade, 1992; Griffin, 1992; Sewell, 1996).

John R. Hall has responded to this challenge by constructing a sophisticated typology of ‘strategies of sociohistorical inquiry’ (1992: 174). Hall classifies the work of contemporary historians and sociologists according to whether their studies illuminate particular events or periods or generalize across related phenomena. This article builds on Hall’s effort by asking the following question: what, if any, conceptual difficulties arise when a single thinker deploys competing strategies – such as a ‘contrast-oriented’ comparative history and a ‘universal history’ – to characterize a single, critical event?

I have selected the work of Alexis de Tocqueville as a case study of this problem, for two reasons: first, he is widely considered one of the founders of historical sociology; and, second, he deployed several distinct strategies of inquiry in illuminating aspects of his overarching project.⁴ The first section of this article

asserts that Tocqueville's much applauded contrast-oriented⁵ comparison of France with the United States was supplemented, in *Democracy in America*, by another strategy of inquiry, specifically a universal history. The second provides an interpretation of the transitions in and fundamental direction of his universal history. The third derives the elements of Tocqueville's configurational history, in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, from his universal history, and then, in the fourth, I probe how his contrast-oriented comparison of France with the United States and his universal history enable him to claim respectively that the French Revolution resulted simultaneously in a dramatic break with the past even as it reinforced age-old trends. This article concludes with a cautionary note.

Strategies of Inquiry in Tocqueville's Historical Sociology

In preparing *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville 'distanced' himself in space from his object of inquiry, mid-19th-century French society (Hadari, 1989: 116–28). His travels through the United States provided the basis for an elegant 'contrast-oriented' comparison, one depicting how the absence of an aristocracy and the resulting democratic revolution in the United States and its presence in France affected mores and institutions of these two societies. Here, Tocqueville's comparative strategy de-emphasized the testing of hypotheses derived from social theory across a large number of cases – i.e. a 'macro-analytic' strategy – in favor of a 'contrast-oriented' one that explained how 'equality' was transformed in such unique historical contexts as the United States and France: in the former, equality coexisted with 'liberty', but not so in France, where equality threatened to undermine liberty (*Democracy*, Vol. I: liv–lv).

What is less well appreciated is how Tocqueville distanced himself also in time by assuming that

... there is in every [historical] age some peculiar and preponderating fact with which all others are connected; this fact almost always gives birth to some pregnant idea or some ruling passion, which attracts to itself, and bears away in its course, all the feelings and opinions of the time ...

(*Democracy*: 114)

During his own epoch, specifically the age of democratic revolutions, Tocqueville identified the ruling passion as the desire for the destruction of the social hierarchy. Tocqueville believed that his fellow citizens were prepared to sacrifice even their liberty – to which he himself had an abiding normative commitment – to secure equality. The timeless conflict between equality and liberty is one aspect of his universal history. Here, Tocqueville's strategy depends on the presentation of theoretically informed accounts of social change and persistence according to allegedly timeless, philosophical principles.

Commentators have taken a number of positions – all of them grounded in textual evidence – on the issue of whether or not Tocqueville deployed a philosophy of history. First, there are commentators who flatly deny that Tocqueville believed in any laws of historical development. Many claim that his normative commitment to individual liberty precluded his articulation of a universal history (Hadari, 1989: 109–12; Hereth, 1986: 83–9; Lamberti, 1989: 10; Lively, 1962: 33; Mélonio, 1993: 197; Pope, 1986: 28–31; Schleifer, 1988: 146–7; Welch, 2001: 29). Indeed, Tocqueville explicitly condemned ‘all those absolute systems that make all events of history depend on great first causes linked together by the chain of fate and thus succeed, so to speak, in banishing men from the history of the human race’ (*Recollections*: 62). Others downplay the presence of historical inevitability in Tocqueville’s thought by insisting that, despite his own pessimism over the long-term prospects for the preservation of liberty in the United States, he believed the import of American institutions could reverse the trend toward despotic rule in France (e.g. Richter, 1988: 138–41). Still others cite one of Tocqueville’s occasional articles (Tocqueville, 1836) in support of their belief that he had an optimistic philosophy of history (Drescher, 1968: 35; Herr, 1962: 83); while others note the pessimistic recurrence of administrative centralization in French history (Solé, 1997: 513–14). There are those who argue that the leveling of social conditions was the master force in Tocqueville’s philosophy of history (Nisbet, 1988: 178–83; Pierson, 1938: 746, 756, 762; Zeitlin, 1971: 56–7). And, finally, some political philosophers recognize that Tocqueville argued for both historical inevitability and human freedom, but did little to reconcile these disparate philosophical positions (Lively, 1962: 41; Mancini, 1994: 26–33; Zetterbaum, 1967: 12–17, 20–1).⁶

Despite this historiographic debate, what is certain is that, in his correspondence, Tocqueville deplored and, in one instance, apologized for falling prey to what he himself considered an absolute system (Boesche, 1983: 93; Schleifer, 1988: 157). But, as is apparent from the following description of his projected volume on Napoleon, he was never entirely able to free his thought of the tension between historical events and more deterministic, philosophical modes of thought.

It seems to me there is in that the material for a very great book. But the difficulties are immense. The one that most troubles my mind comes from the mixture of history properly so called with historical philosophy. I still do not see how to mix these two things (and yet, they must be mixed, for one could say that the first is the canvas and the second the color, and that it is necessary to have both at the same time in order to do the picture.) I fear that the one is harmful to the other, and that I lack the infinite art that would be necessary in order to choose properly the facts that must, so to speak, support the ideas ...⁷

Here, Tocqueville conceded that the facts of history have to be selected with sufficient care so as not to undermine the ideas of his ‘historical philosophy’.

Tocqueville's Universal History in *Democracy in America*

Tocqueville's universal history rests on a single, fundamental philosophic premise: namely that the overall direction of European history was away from more artificial conditions as embodied in aristocratic political institutions and codes of honor, and toward a more natural set of social relations based on personal desire for material gratification. In adopting this stance, he takes issue with several crucial assumptions about historical change adopted by the Enlightenment *philosophes*. He was, for instance, extremely pessimistic regarding the long-term consequences of democracy. Although Tocqueville recognizes that democracy and material progress were closely associated, he insists that these advances were purchased at the cost of those political skills that are emblematic of human liberty. Tocqueville believes that the European and American development will end not in the realization of a utopia, but in a political 'dark age'. Thus, he adopts an ambivalent attitude toward progress reminiscent of Rousseau's (1964 [1754]); however, he turns the Rousseauian equation of injustice with inequality and artifice on its head by suggesting that human liberty originated in the hierarchical political arrangements of the European aristocracy. Tocqueville thereby buried in his universal history a fundamental critique of the Enlightenment ideology of progress and revolution. The textual exegesis presented below suggests that it is possible to extract from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* a universal history.⁸

Before turning to an explication of Tocqueville's universal history, a word of caution is in order. The historical periods in *Democracy* overlap in time, and the extent of cultural or institutional residues associated with earlier epochs varies through space, thereby muddling comparisons and the sequences of periods. Tocqueville argued that from the 12th through the 18th century, European history had progressed through several ages. The age of aristocracy roughly corresponds in Tocqueville's thought to the period between the Middle Ages and the outbreak of the French Revolution. Tocqueville characterizes the age of revolution as

... those sad and troubled times at which equality is established in the midst of the tumult of revolution, – when democracy, after having been introduced into the state of society, still struggles with difficulty against the [aristocratic] prejudices and manners of the country ...

(*Democracy*: 219)

Tocqueville hints that the age of revolution began when the absolute monarchs started leveling the societies that they ruled, and it continued through the aftershocks which followed the revolutionary earthquake of 1789. The age of democracy, the third epoch, is ushered in by the French Revolution but remains distinct from it. Europe realized social equality only incompletely during the 19th century, as both the vestiges of aristocratic society and the passions engendered by revolution

persist in France at the time of the writing of *Democracy*. Therefore, Tocqueville travels to the United States in order to discover a potentially benign future for democracy. Because the northern section of the United States allegedly never experienced either feudalism or a social revolution, America becomes, in Tocqueville's analysis, the 'contrast-oriented' comparison to the confused and unstable situation in European society. However, Tocqueville's universal history of the deleterious influence of equality on political liberty suggested that even in America despotic rule would eventually triumph. Lastly, Tocqueville foresees an age of despotism emerging out of the victory of democracy over aristocracy.⁹ For him, despotic rule in Europe appeared first as an organizational form during the rule of the absolute monarchs, with its full potential foreshadowed under the temporary rule of Napoleon, and its realization occurring with (what is now termed) the welfare state. The possibility for the permanent exercise of despotic control over social and economic relations increases dramatically with the victory of democracy.

Tocqueville suggests that a single set of mores and related institutions so dominated each period as to define its essential quality; however, the later periods (as will be noted below) contain residual cultural and organizational elements which have yet to be overcome. Careful attention must therefore be paid to the way in which Tocqueville deployed such crucial terms as 'aristocracy' (Lamberti, 1989: 15–17, 25). As an historical category, aristocracy might not only refer to a feudal period or the noble 'status group', but it might also indicate a timeless heritage or even a 'psychological' disposition. Thus, Tocqueville, who claimed to have been born after the destruction of the Old Regime but before the consolidation of democracy, appreciated how socially and politically unsettling it was for the remnants of the aristocratic era to persist into the age of democratic revolution (White, 1973: 197).

The Age of Aristocracy

While democratic society fostered a natural desire for isolation and personal gratification, aristocratic society required an artificial regard for political institutions and human cooperation. The things of the polis were, for Tocqueville, artificial in nature. Hierarchical, aristocratic institutions were a 'permanent and compulsory association, composed of all those who are dependent upon [the aristocrat]... or whom he makes subservient to his designs'. Because these hierarchical institutions were housed in a society that underwent few, if any, changes, the dependents and servants learned a code of honor, albeit a 'servile' one. Loyalty, respect and prompt obedience were the prime virtues. Aristocrats and, in particular, the household servants regarded 'themselves as children of the same family [and] cherish[ed] a constant and lively sympathy towards each other' (*Democracy*: 128 and 196). These artificial family ties were responsible for the servants' willingness to defend the dignity, status and honor of the master. In the process, the servants assigned to themselves portions of the master's code, the most visible aspect of his character.

The feudal aristocracy judged its own members according to whether they ‘honour[ed] those virtues which are conspicuous for their dignity and splendour, and which may easily be combined with pride and the love of power. Such men,’ Tocqueville alleges, ‘would not hesitate to invert the natural order of conscience in order to give those virtues precedence before all others.’ Sympathy, kindness and charity were denigrated; loyalty, military courage and generosity were highly esteemed. In Tocqueville’s estimation, acts of generosity served to ‘attach’ social inferiors to the aristocrat. To secure ‘the affections of some thousands of men ... appear[ed] to call for all ... [the aristocrat’s] exertions, and to attain it he will readily make considerable sacrifices’. The aristocrat granted material benefits to his followers in the hope of embodying these political values, or ‘he often ... [took] an interest in their lot by a last stretch of egotism’ (*Democracy*: 214, 223, 277).

In the final analysis, an aristocrat’s ability to realize his designs depended on his willingness to sacrifice material gain for personal influence.

Yet in [an] aristocratic society it constantly happens that he who works for honour [and glory] is not insensible to the attractions of profit. But these two desires only intermingle in the innermost depths of his soul: he carefully hides from every eye the point at which they join; he would fain conceal it from himself.

Given the widespread influence the aristocracy had on servants, dependents and tenants, a public display of self-seeking behavior, not obscured by impersonal justifications, corrupted the aristocratic ideal. Tocqueville attributes the decline of feudal society to the use of political power to wrest profits from the landed tenants. The English aristocratic landowners during the 19th century, for example, raise their tenants’ rents, ‘think[ing] they are making a clear gain, when it is in reality only an exchange: their influence is what they are parting with for cash; and what they gain in money will ere be lost in power.’ Once conditions have been so altered as to sever the ties binding these artificial hierarchies together, the aristocracy may retain political power, but only for a short while. Generosity then gives way to ‘indifference or contempt’; loyalty is replaced with ‘jealousy and hatred’ (*Democracy*: 182–3, 223, 224). Increased rents and shortened leases do not cause the decline of the aristocracy; instead, according to Tocqueville, they are the material indicators of their loss of power. Obviously, what comes naturally – a desire for personal gain – does not always pay politically.

The Age of Democratic Revolution

What were the dynamics of the revolutionary upheavals? Curiously, Tocqueville informs the reader on numerous occasions of the insurmountable difficulties confronting would-be revolutionary leaders once the political passions of revolution

have subsided and the democratic age is firmly established. Attempts to attract a following founder because democratic men will not

... easily allow themselves to be thrust into perilous risks by an imprudent leader or by a bold innovator. Not indeed that they will resist him openly, by well-contrived schemes, or even by a premeditated plan of resistance. They will not struggle energetically against him, sometimes they will even applaud him – but they do not follow him.

(*Democracy*: 306)

The period of democratic revolutions, however, witnessed servants and tenants acting to secure political ends. Previously mute and quiescent dependents of the aristocracy suddenly seize the center of the political stage. How does Tocqueville explain these dramatic transformations?

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville does not directly address the issue of how the authority of those who ruled during the age of aristocracy becomes illegitimate in the minds of those who had obeyed. In the 'Introduction', however, he states an essential principle of his universal history: namely,

Men are not corrupted by the exercise of power or debased by the habit of obedience; but by the exercise of a power which they believe to be illegal and by obedience to a rule which they consider to be usurped and oppressive.

(*Democracy*, Vol. I: lxxv)

Tocqueville's applies this principle to a revolutionary situation in his chapter dealing with the changing relationship – the 'domestic government' – between masters and servants.¹⁰

For a democratic revolution to occur at all, it is necessary that egalitarian notions exist to some extent within public opinion and the laws. As Tocqueville states: 'the laws and partially public opinion, already declare that no natural or permanent inferiority exists between the servant and the master' (*Democracy*: 219). The master still believes that he is a superior being but is unwilling to articulate his thoughts in light of prevailing public opinion or act on them given the law. Although he still desires the loyalty of his servants, he ceases to extend his patronage or his protection to those he has retained. Nor is the master's mind immune to the fluctuation 'between the aristocratic notion of subjection and the democratic notion of obedience' (*Democracy*: 220). Like the landowners Tocqueville describes in the following chapter of *Democracy* on tenant–landlord relations, the master of the household begins to consider his relationship to his servants from a monetary point of view: the landlord seeks to raise the rents and the master to cut wages.

According to Tocqueville, the aristocratic notion of subjection entails loyalty, sacrifice and a code of honor for the servants, but the democratic notion of

obedience requires that the servant obey only those commands that are legitimate when considered in the context of his contractual relationship with the master. Self-interest, as crystallized in the contract, determines the extent of the master's legitimate power. During the period of democratic revolution, however, the equality established by the contract is not entirely accepted by the master; for the servants it creates 'a confused and imperfect phantom of equality [which] haunts the[ir] minds' (*Democracy*: 220.) Neither side fully appreciates how a contract establishes a new form of formally voluntary cooperation. Has the servant been retained for a lifetime by the master, or merely hired in order to complete a specific task? The unclear extent of their equality also causes the servant to believe that the master's rule is oppressive whenever he expresses aristocratic arrogance or pride. Even the wages the servant receives may be interpreted as aristocratic patronage and therefore as patronizing. Thus, the servant reacts to even legal commands with a sullen attitude, as he or she believes that the master's rule is illegitimate. Why? During the age of democratic revolution there is confusion between the voluntary subordination engendered by a contract and the habitual political inequities found in aristocratic hierarchies. In perhaps the most compelling passage of the book, Tocqueville summarizes the situation as follows:

[The servants] consent to serve, and they blush to obey: they like the advantages of service, but not the master; or rather, they are not sure that they ought not themselves to be masters, and they are inclined to consider him who orders them as an unjust usurper of their own rights.

Then it is that the *dwelling* of every citizen offers a spectacle somewhat analogous to the gloomy aspect of *political society*. A secret and intestine warfare is going on there between powers, ever rivals and suspicious of one another: the master is ill-natured and weak, and the servant ill-natured and intractable; the one constantly attempts to evade by unfair restrictions his obligation to protect and to remunerate, – the other his obligation to obey. The reins of domestic government dangle between them, to be snatched at by one or the other.

The lines which divide authority from oppression, liberty from licence, and right from might, are to their eyes so jumbled together and confused, that no one knows exactly what he is, or what he may be, or what he ought to be. Such a condition is not democracy, but revolution.

(*Democracy*: 220–1, emphasis added.)

How close in fact the analogy is between private and public, or 'domestic government' and 'the world's theatre', is not discussed in *Democracy*. The dynamics of a concrete revolutionary situation – why and how men cohere to pursue purposes outside themselves – remains unexplored. Tocqueville does suggest that before aristocratic egotism dissolves into mere democratic individualism, before aristocratic ambition to realize great objectives seeks out petty and banal democratic objects, and

before aristocratic liberty gives way to democratic apathy, the artificial features of aristocratic rule are adopted – seemingly against all odds – by the populace to secure democratic ends.

It must be recollected, moreover, that the people who destroy an aristocracy have lived under its laws; they have witnessed its splendour, and they have unconsciously imbibed the feelings and notions which it entertained. Thus at the moment an aristocracy is dissolved, its spirit still pervades the mass of the community ...

(*Democracy*: 291; cf. *Old Regime*: 111)

In essence, tenants and servants learn the political arts from the aristocracy, and the political values associated with the hierarchic institutions become a weapon used in aristocracy's own destruction. Codes of 'servile honor', and the public nature of the artificial positions in the hierarchy – where 'no man is placed so low but that he has a stage of his own, and none can avoid censure or applause by his obscurity' – contribute to the continued loyalty followers show for leaders, to the continued willingness of followers to sacrifice themselves, no longer for an aristocrat, but for a cause (*Democracy*: 287). In any political crisis, artificial virtues such as self-sacrifice, comradeship and loyalty would be of the utmost significance. They would provide the crucial 'psychological' foundation which enables a few to lead, many to follow, and all to act.

The Age of Democracy

Tocqueville regarded the age of revolution as the stage of transition from aristocratic to democratic societies in his universal history. The principal desires of democratic man are, first, the attachment to equality before the law, and, second, a passion for physical comfort. The chief means by which these desires are fulfilled are, respectively, the contractual relationship and the creation of institutional opportunities to secure wealth. Contractual relationships reinforce democratic man's desire for equality. Contracts place even the most intimate of unequals – masters and household servants – on an equal footing. When two individuals sign a contract, this impersonal document defines the length and legitimate scope of service. In addition, the employee's voluntary assent suggests a formal equality that belies the substantive inequalities of wealth.

Tocqueville clearly recognizes that wealth is the salient dimension along which social inequality occurs; however, it does not order social relations between individuals or families for any length of time. The market provides fresh opportunities for the ambitious, even as the economic uncertainty it engenders unnerves those who have already arrived. The wealthiest, most successful individuals have spent a lifetime in pursuit of their success, and, therefore, their habits preclude a pursuit of loftier objectives.

The passion for physical comforts [and for the wealth necessary to satisfy this passion] is essentially a passion of the middle classes: with those classes it grows and spreads, and with them it preponderates. From them it mounts into the higher orders of society, and descends into the mass of the people. (*Democracy*: 155)

For Tocqueville, 'the love of wealth ... either as a principal or accessory motive' permeates all of the classes in democratic society, thereby giving to everyone's 'passions a sort of family-likeness' (*Democracy*: 272; cf. 183).

As the transition from the age of aristocracy to the age of revolution was heralded by the nobility increasing the rent, so too does the transition from the age of revolution to the age of democracy witness an expanded use of money. Money and contracts remain the one sure means in the democratic age to secure mutual cooperation; unfortunately, their use expands at the expense of the diversity of earlier forms of artifice. In so far as money 'attaches' one individual to another, it usurps ties created by political loyalty; nevertheless, money – when it operates as an impersonal standard for calculating the market value of material objects, personal talent and interpersonal relationships – overcomes democratic man's individualistic impulses. For Tocqueville it is this social significance of money which 'infinitely multiplies the purposes to which wealth may be applied and increases its value' (*Democracy*: 271–2). With the rise of the market in democratic ages, the demand for political talent and for political institutions declines and the supply of social interactions based on market transactions increases.

Tocqueville's analysis admits of one exception to this inverse relationship. In America, the decentralization of administration and local governance permits the citizenry to combine economic self-interest with political participation. On a local political stage, all the inhabitants – without regard to their class standing – immediately 'see' and 'feel' the effects of road construction, for instance, on their personal interests.¹¹ Participation in such political decisions not only causes democratic man to attend to the details of the route in relation to his property's boundaries, but also it demands that he glance at objects having a public, as opposed to a merely private, character. In America, a common interest in the pursuit of wealth fosters local governance; in France, by way of contrast, local governance atrophied partially as the result of a conflict, engendered by the absolute monarchy, between the privileged, noble landowner and his peasants (*Democracy*, Vol. I: 14–15, 29, 54–5; *Old Regime*: 47–51, 85–90, 130; Herr, 1962: 50, 52).

Although these artificial phenomena – such as vibrant local government, newspapers and political associations – are widespread in Jacksonian America, Tocqueville considers the natural passions which animate them as an uncertain foundation for their continued existence.

An American attends to his private concerns as if he were alone in the world, and the next minute he gives himself up to the commonwealth *as*

if he had forgotten them. At one time he seems animated by the most selfish cupidity, at another by the most lively patriotism. The human heart cannot be thus divided[!] The inhabitants of the United States alternately display so strong and so similar a passion for their own welfare and for their freedom, that it may be *supposed* that these passions are united and mingled in some part of their character. And indeed the Americans believe their freedom to be the best instrument and surest safeguard of their welfare: they are attached to the one by the other.

(*Democracy*: 169, emphasis added)

Tocqueville repeatedly expresses concern over the fact that the Americans, on whom he rests all his hopes for fending off the age of despotism, assign no independent value to political participation:

... they believe, on the contrary, that their chief business is to secure for themselves a government which will allow them to acquire the things they covet, and which will not debar them from the peaceful enjoyment of those possessions which they have acquired.

(*Democracy*: 169)

Unlike the aristocrat who ‘hides’ the connection between public spiritedness and ‘the attractions of profit’, the American avows that economic ends are best secured through the exercise of political means.

Americans also rarely justify altruistic, generous or public-spirited actions by referring either to traditional codes of honor or to those virtues which should be sought for their own sake. According to Tocqueville, the doctrine ‘self-interest rightly understood’ suggests to Americans that virtuous acts are conducive primarily to one’s own happiness, utility or ultimate profit – either in this life or ‘to earn the blessings of a future state’ (*Democracy*: 151).

[Americans] show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist each other, and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the State. In this respect ... they frequently fail to do themselves justice; for in the United States as well as elsewhere, people are sometimes seen to give way to those disinterested and spontaneous impulses which are natural to man: but Americans seldom allow that they yield to emotions of this kind; they are more anxious to do honour to their philosophy than to themselves.

(*Democracy*: 146–7)

Because the American philosophy glorifies self-interest, it does not serve to direct the individual’s attention to virtues outside one’s self.

By itself [this doctrine] ... cannot suffice to make a man virtuous, but it disciplines a number of citizens in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, self-command; and, if it does not lead men straight to virtue by the *will*, it gradually draws them in that direction by their *habits*.
(*Democracy*: 147, emphasis added)

However, Tocqueville realizes that political virtues do not result from habitual behavior, but they arise from the taking of self-conscious decisions, from choosing among radically different, and perhaps even fatally risky, courses of action. It is precisely during the democratic age that institutional and psychological supports for grand projects disappear. Thus, although Tocqueville considers 'self-interest rightly understood' as an appropriate ethic for democratic man, it may also be mankind's last code of honor.

The Age of Despotism

The speed with which despotic institutions are adopted may be hastened or retarded by the frequency and intensity of democratic revolutions. Tocqueville is well aware that the tyranny of the absolute monarchy was responsible for the initial leveling of social conditions in Europe (*Democracy*, Vol. I: lxi.) The destruction of social privileges during the age of democratic revolution made it possible for centralized governments to universally apply uniform rules to those residing within their jurisdictions. Indeed, the 'family likeness' of the passions of democratic man may be viewed as an historical project of the modern administrative state, which seeks to regulate efficiently all social and economic activities.

Uniformity relieves [the state] from inquiry into an infinite number of small details which must be attended to if rules were to be adapted to men, instead of indiscriminately subjecting men to rules: thus the government likes what the citizens like, and naturally hates what they hate.

(*Democracy*: 354)

In the French context, one unintended consequence of every counter-revolutionary movement is the strengthening of the demand for a state to enforce equality. Thus, Tocqueville condemned aristocrats who, during his own lifetime, engaged in conspiracies to restore the Old Order; they never realized that their efforts to reestablish their privileges would probably hasten the administrative destruction of social diversity and political privilege.

Even in the absence of such repeated revolutionary crises, the transition from the age of democracy to the age of despotism was likely. Initially, the expansion of the state was a response, according to Tocqueville, to the wretched and miserable conditions of a newly emerging working class. New political institutions

are created for the redistribution of wealth and property. The development of what Tocqueville calls 'despotic' government occurs gradually, almost insensibly, as administrators in democratic ages seek to limit the economic uncertainty experienced by an entire category of citizens, the workers. In the end, despotic government serves the population by providing for its welfare; the despot promotes no creative and original projects. Although 'the country [becomes] his manufactory, and the inhabitants his workmen', the new despotic regime and its bureaucracy represent in Tocqueville's thought the last remnant of artifice in increasingly natural social circumstances (*Democracy*: 228, 370, 360). Eventually, the modern administrative state gradually influences or brings under its direct control all of the formerly autonomous economic and civil associations. Once a state provides the favorable conditions for the accumulation of wealth, and then directs economic activity for the ultimate benefit of the majority of the populace, the need for political vigilance disappears: the economic foundations of political freedom are undermined.

What, then, are the hidden affinities between equality of conditions and the emergence of modern despotism?¹² In the age of democracy, the tendency toward despotism is reinforced as specialization of economic function progresses. Democratic man is forced to obtain support from some quarter in order to carry out his economic schemes, ideally from independent associations. Yet, within the recesses of his character exists 'a secret feeling of fear and jealousy against the ... very associations' which provide a remedy for his personal and private weaknesses (*Democracy*: 373). In turning to these intermediate associations, he must, however, seek the support of his equals.

His independence fills him with self-reliance and pride amongst his equals; his debility makes him feel from time to time the want of some outward assistance, which he cannot expect from any of them, because they are all impotent and unsympathizing. In this predicament, he naturally turns his eyes to that imposing power [i.e. the state] which alone rises above the level of universal depression. Of that power his wants and especially his desires continually remind him; until he ultimately views it as the sole and necessary support of his own weakness.

(*Democracy*: 352)

Whatever the overt ideological beliefs of economic actors regarding the unfortunate consequences of state interference in the economy, democratic man can always justify (to himself at least) his desire for aid from the state in terms of his own self-interest (*Democracy*: 352–3).

It may be suggested, without undue violence to Tocqueville's thought, that the 'preponderating fact' of the age of despotism is the fulfillment of the citizens' desire for economic certainty by a welfare state. The fulfillment of this desire endows such a state with extraordinary stability.

For their happiness such a government willingly labours, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness: it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and sub-divides their inheritances – what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?

Thus it every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range, and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself.

(*Democracy*: 381)

During the age of democracy, citizens combine together in economic associations to obtain life's necessities for themselves; however, in the age of despotism, the welfare state endeavors to regulate the economy not merely for the material benefit of the working class, but for the well-being of all citizens.

Tocqueville's universal history suggests that hierarchical social relations were infused with artificial political institutions and codes of honor during the age of aristocracy. While democratic revolutions occurred in Europe, revolutionaries used liberty, an aristocratic means, to secure equality, a democratic end. Tocqueville felt that the social and political disorder associated with revolutionary change obscured an understanding of the trajectory along which democratic societies moved; he therefore sought to contrast France with the United States, a democratic society that had escaped a social revolution. In the American democracy, he recognized that an independent and egalitarian citizenry routinely engaged in local politics to obtain beneficial economic ends. Initially, these two democratic countries embarked on divergent trajectories, so divergent that Tocqueville travels to the United States in order to identify opinions and institutions supportive of liberty that could be imported into France.

Tocqueville also identified the idiosyncratic origins of the new despotism in France and the United States. Although the Americans successfully combined liberty with equality, they, like their counterparts in France, were destined for despotic rule. During the age of despotism, the administrators, whom Tocqueville characterizes as a pale reflection of the aristocrats of an earlier epoch, provide for the well-being of the citizens (*Democracy*: 365–6, n. 1). Unlike many Enlightenment political philosophers who sought to discover the origins of society and the principles of political legitimacy by stripping humanity back to their 'naturals', Tocqueville predicts that, in the post-democratic epoch of despotic rule, there will be a convergence of historical outcomes, with the realization of a veritable 'state of nature' for France as well as America (*Democracy*: 273).

Tocqueville's Discussion of Revolutions

Before proceeding to analyze how Tocqueville applied his universal history to the study of the French Revolution, it is necessary to note that he claims the pre- and

post-revolutionary epochs give rise to distinctive historiographic genres. During the age of aristocracy, Tocqueville argues that historians delved deeply into the particular actions and intentions of the leading politicians. They believed that momentous, particular events were the result of accident. In democratic ages, however, historians rely on the alleged existence of impersonal, all-powerful forces that influence the beliefs and behaviors of many relatively weak individuals at once. Tocqueville claims that neither historiographic genre is intrinsically wrong; instead, he establishes the historical 'scope conditions'¹³ during which each of the two is most efficacious:

For myself, I am of opinion that at all times one great portion of the events of this world are attributable to general facts, and another to special influences. These two kinds of cause are always in operation; their proportion only varies. General facts serve to explain more things in democratic than in aristocratic ages, and fewer things are then assignable to special influences. At periods of aristocracy, the reverse takes place: special influences are stronger, general causes weaker, – unless indeed we consider as a general cause the fact itself of the inequality of conditions, which allows some individuals to baffle the natural tendencies of the rest.

The historians who seek to describe what occurs in democratic societies are right, therefore, in assigning much to general causes, and in devoting their chief attention to discover them; but they are wrong in wholly denying the special influence of individuals, because they cannot easily trace or follow it.

(*Democracy*: 104)

In *Democracy* and in *The Old Regime*, Tocqueville treats the inequality of social conditions as the fundamental characteristic of the age of aristocracy, and, when mixed historically with egalitarian conditions, as a significant general cause of the French Revolution. Even in describing the events leading up to the Revolution, Tocqueville ignores special influences: the intentions of individuals are not revealed, their speeches are not quoted, and their actions are not recounted. Narrative is absent.

When considered from the perspective of Tocqueville's universal history, individuals and events are portrayed as epiphenomena of a providential fact, that is, the emergence of social equality.¹⁴ Consider, for instance, Tocqueville's appreciation of the *cahiers* in the *Old Regime*. It is well known that the Crown, by inviting the Estates to present their grievances prior to the convocation of the Estates General, in effect established a public stage on which the Third Estate articulated its demands. Tocqueville is justly remembered for having emphasized how this anonymous call for piecemeal reforms in the *cahiers* of the Third Estate in fact added up to a call for the wholesale restructuring of the Old Regime (*The Old Regime*: 142–3). He treats the *cahiers* as, in effect, an indicator of public

opinion; hence, the content of such democratic speech is indicative of a general, not special, influence on the course of the revolution. Thus Tocqueville is caught in a dilemma: although he thinks of himself as ‘discussing history’¹⁵ so as to contribute to the preservation of individual liberty – the value commitment which informs his universal history – he nonetheless is, according to his own distinction, a historian writing for a democratic audience that believes in the primacy of general causes.

How, then, does Tocqueville account for the occurrence of the seemingly most contingent of all political events, the outbreak of revolutionary crises? He argues

... that chance, or rather the concatenation of secondary causes, which we call by that name because we can’t sort them all out, is a very important element in all that we see taking place in the world’s theatre. But I am firmly convinced that chance can do nothing unless the ground has been prepared in advance. Antecedent facts, the nature of institutions, turns of mind and the state of mores are the materials from which chance composes those impromptu events that surprise and terrify us.

(*Recollections*: 62)

In *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Tocqueville explains the outbreak of the Revolution by writing what amounts to a ‘configurational history’. This strategy, according to John R. Hall, requires that an ‘epochal shift ... [be] decomposed via social theory into a series of historically emergent components, each of which is held to be necessary, but not sufficient, for the change to occur’ (1992: 186). The author of a configurational history need not rely on a metaphysical scheme for the selection of ‘historically emergent elements’, or what Tocqueville calls ‘secondary causes’. Although Tocqueville himself does not explicitly derive the secondary causes of the French Revolution from his universal history, I contend he selected them by virtue of their intimate relationship to the ‘preponderating fact’ of the age of democratic revolution. As I argue below, the connotations of such crucial concepts as ‘revolution’ and ‘old regime’ in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* depend on whether these phenomena are considered from the perspective of his contrast-oriented comparison of France with the United States or his universal history. Note that I am not claiming that my delineation of Tocqueville’s strategies of inquiry resolves the ambiguities in his historical sociology; rather it is the tension among the strategies that creates these ambiguities.

At first glance, the Table of Contents of the *Old Regime* (pp. v–vi) appears to be a check-list of necessary conditions required to achieve a configurational history of a single event; indeed, Tocqueville groups ‘antecedent facts, the nature of institutions, turns of mind, and the state of mores’ into long- and short-term ‘secondary causes’, in order to better determine how their ‘concatenation’ result in the French Revolution. Part I accomplishes two purposes. First, the secondary causes of the

French Revolution are shown to dovetail with more inclusive themes highlighted in Tocqueville's universal history: social revolutions concentrate power in the hands of a central authority, which secures equality through the abolition of those artificial privileges upon which the feudal order rested. Second, he suggests that during the Middle Ages, feudal law and institutions were roughly similar in England, Germany and France. Why, then, he asks, did the Revolution take place in France?

Tocqueville addresses this question in Chapter I of Part II by arguing that in France the subversion of feudalism by the centralizing monarchy and by the economic avarice of the nobility had proceeded further than anywhere else in Europe. In a passage reminiscent of the discussions of legitimate power and of the English aristocrats in *Democracy*, Tocqueville suggests that the rents levied by the nobility were tolerated so long as they provided protection for the tenants, but once the Crown stripped the nobility of their political and juridical functions, the French peasants – who, by the middle of the 18th century, were by and large autonomous landowners – resented not only the remaining feudal rights (which had been commuted into cash payments) but also the legal and social privileges of the nobility (*Old Regime*: 30, 98).

The bulk of Part II is devoted to probing two structural aspects of French 18th-century history: Chapters 2 to 7 explore the implications of the centralization and bureaucratization of the French monarchy, most notably highlighting the persistence of the conflict between the monarchy and aristocratic institutions despite the concentration of power in the hands of the Crown and its servants; and Chapters 8 to 11 recapitulate in detail many of the sociologically relevant themes first presented in *Democracy*, for instance the rise of individualism during the age of democracy.¹⁶ The rise of an administrative regime and the simultaneous appearance of democracy were both causes and consequences of the French Revolution.

Tocqueville rounds this discussion out by returning to the question of why the French peasantry became a revolutionary force. Here he summarizes the significance of the political and social structures as they impinged on the daily existence of the peasants. Tocqueville argues that, although the material conditions of the peasantry were improving, their 'lot' or fate had deteriorated. As the aristocrats moved to the national or provincial capitals, their concern for the peasantry disappeared. Even when the aristocrat was physically present on his estates, he experienced a 'spiritual estrangement' from the peasantry:

For in his dealings with his tenants the landowner ... often developed sentiments and views that would, were he an absentee, have been those of his agent. Like an agent he came to regard his tenants as mere rent-payers and exacted from them the uttermost farthing to which the law, or ancient usage, still entitled him, the result being that the collection of such feudal dues as still existed was apt to seem more galling to the peasants than it had been in the heyday of feudalism.

(*Old Regime*: 121–2)

The isolation of the peasants was furthered by government policy; the granting of fiscal privileges to the aristocrat ensured that they had no sentiments in common with the peasantry. 'In short, they were no longer his subjects and protégés, but he was not as yet their fellow citizen – a state of affairs unique in history' (*Old Regime*: 121). The analogy, then, between revolution and the 'domestic government' of the master and his servants depicted in the universal history of *Democracy* is recapitulated in Tocqueville's interpretation of the social relations between the French aristocrat and his tenants in the Old Regime: social and legal inequalities persisted in French society despite the introduction of leveling tendencies associated with contracts, money and the centralization of administration.

In Part III, Tocqueville reveals how these various causes of the Revolution crystallized in discrete intellectual and institutional innovations. First, he shows how the physiocrats and other intellectuals of the Enlightenment promoted social reforms that were in accord with the characteristics of their newly discovered 'natural' human. Then he demonstrates how these ideas gained a foothold in the thinking of the administrators of the absolute monarchy, with the result that, whenever the intendants of the Old Regime acted to ameliorate the economic and social conditions of the peasantry, they necessarily attacked the artificial privileges of the aristocracy. In response, the aristocracy responded by voluntarily calling for the alleviation of the taxes paid by the lower orders, all the while insisting on the preservation of their own tax privileges and publicly denouncing as ill-conceived and illegitimate the policies of the monarchy. Tocqueville argues, in effect, that these maneuvers by the administrators of the absolute monarchy and counter-maneuvers by the aristocracy had significant unintended consequences: specifically, the debate among the political elite served to alienate the literate among the third estate, who came to identify aristocratic privilege with injustice, and monarchical authority with tyranny (*Old Regime*: 184–6, 192).

It is also in Part III that Tocqueville mentions several surprising events that occurred in France prior to 1789. From the perspective of his universal history, the most surprising occurrence to which he alludes in the *Old Regime* was the revival of the desire for freedom on the part of the French. Tocqueville claims that, as of 1750, the French people as well as the intellectuals (that is physiocrats, etcetera) were unenthusiastic in their regard for liberty as compared with their passionate desire for equality. Indeed, he suggests that most of the French would have insisted, if asked, that the ideal form of government was an enlightened despot in the form of a strong, wise and just monarch who oversaw the leveling of social conditions through the uniform application of the laws. Tocqueville contrasts the situation at mid-century with the one that held as of 1770:

Twenty years later things were very different. By now the idea of freedom had found its way into the minds of Frenchmen and was appealing to them more and more. There were many symptoms of this change of heart. The

provinces began to show a desire to administer their own affairs once again and the feeling that every French citizen had the right to take a share in the government of his country was gaining ground. Memories of the old Estates-General were revived; this, in fact, was the only feature of its early history to which the nation looked back without repugnance.

(*Old Regime*: 165)

What had brought about this change in the intervening twenty years? Although Tocqueville subsequently discusses the economic expansion that began between 1749 and 1759, he does not attribute the revived commitment to political participation to this economic spurt *per se* (*Old Regime*: 169–79). Nor does he claim that the physiocratic thinkers abandoned their commitment to enlightened despotism. Indeed, Tocqueville does not explicitly explain in the *Old Regime* how the idea of freedom came to appeal to the French!

Consequently, 1770, as a turning point, is an inexplicable, though significant, historical ‘accident’. The commitment to freedom appears to have been another unintended consequence of the monarchy’s assault on aristocratic privileges. Professional historians typically treat the Crown’s assault in 1771 on the privileges of the parlements as an antecedent event in a historical narrative that builds toward a dramatic conclusion; Tocqueville, however, considers it as emblematic of the conflict between the aristocracy and the absolute monarchy. He grounds his argument regarding the short-term causes of the French Revolution in the public reaction to the assault by the monarchy on the independence of the parlements. In discussing these regional judiciaries of France, Tocqueville describes them as the last institutional bastion of aristocratic liberty. He notes that once the Estates General ceased to convene, the parlements secured various political functions that led to an unhealthy mixture of judicial and administrative activity. Modern historians have shown that in the years just prior to 1770 and again on the eve of the Revolution, the parlements frequently exercised their right to remonstrate, that is, they refused to register the edicts of the Crown. According to Tocqueville, they became a ‘demagogic body’, and appealed directly to the people for support of their privileges and policies (*Old Regime*: 34, 59; Tocqueville, 1987b: 168–9). In 1771, the monarchy determined to pacify them by exiling to the country the judges and appointing new, more compliant individuals to the bench. As Tocqueville put it:

When in 1770 the parlement of Paris was dissolved and the magistrates belonging to it were deprived of their authority and status, not one of them truckled to the royal will. . . . Yet more conspicuous was the stand made by the leading members of the Bar practicing before the parlement; of their own will they shared its fate, relinquished all that had assured their prestige and prosperity, and, rather than appear before judges for whom they had no respect, condemned themselves to silence. *In the history of free*

nations, I know of no nobler gesture than this; yet it was made in the eighteenth century and in the shadow of the court of Louis XV.

(Old Regime: 116–17, emphasis added)

The assault on the independence of the judiciary by the monarchy had, according to Tocqueville, the following effects: first, it ‘unsettle[d] men’s minds and ... render[ed] them at once servile and revolutionary-minded’ – another psychological condition reminiscent of the relationship of the servants to their master in a domestic government; and, second, it taught the populace that, in the absence of violence, reforms could not be achieved (*Old Regime*: 55, 188). Whenever it appealed to the populace, the Parlement of Paris stimulated the growth of what Tocqueville described as a perverse ‘craving’ for freedom. The ‘craving’ for freedom in pre-revolutionary France was not – as in America – highly regarded for its ability to facilitate economic ends, nor – as among the aristocracy – esteemed for its ‘intrinsic [and artificial] glamour’, instead it ultimately ‘prove[d] to have been merely hatred of a tyrant’ (*Old Regime*: 168).

Implicated in this single pre-revolutionary event one finds many of the secondary causes of the Revolution itself: the conflict between the aristocracy and the absolute monarchy; the common desire for increased wealth felt by the aristocracy and the populace as the former mobilized the latter against increased taxes; and the parlements fostering the democratization of political skills. But the event itself remains unexplained, except in so far as it represents a ‘concatenation of secondary causes’ or an emblem of a wider cultural transformation. Tocqueville provides no narrative of the relevant events leading up to the assault on the parlements, no discussion of the intentions of the main actors, and, most important of all, no satisfactory account of why the idea of freedom had by 1770 – just before the assault – undergone a revival. Here again individuals are banished from history.

Applications and Ambiguities

Tocqueville’s discussion of the assault on the parlements reveals a fundamental ambiguity in his thinking about the French Old Regime (see Table 1). From the perspective of his contrast-oriented comparison with the United States, the Old Regime in France may be defined as the entire aristocratic order, from the monarch to the Breton *hobereaux* (i.e. the petty provincial nobility), whose privileges are ultimately inherited. However, Tocqueville also analyzes the issues that brought the monarchy and aristocracy into conflict, a conflict that appears inevitable when viewed from the perspective of his universal history: the absolute monarchs stripped the nobility of almost all their powers in the name of uniform application of the law, and then ‘duped’ them into accepting, in compensation, social and fiscal privileges (Herr, 1962: 80). The most telling act in this high drama was the monarchy’s attempt to abolish the parlements.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE FRENCH OLD REGIME AND REVOLUTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPETING STRATEGIES OF INQUIRY*

Strategy of inquiry	Conceptualization of key concepts	
	French Old Regime	French Revolution
Universal history	<i>Conflict</i> between the absolute monarchy (goal: 'leveling') and aristocracy (goal: preservation of privileges as emblem of liberty).	<i>Continuity</i> : Administrative centralization carried out by the absolute monarchs initiates revolution; project realized through reforms of Napoleon and Napoleon III.
Contrast-oriented comparison	<i>Commonality</i> of interest between king and nobles by virtue of their noble lineage, titles and privileges in a <i>hierarchic society</i> .	<i>Discontinuity</i> : Destruction of the king and aristocracy via the Terror; rapid undermining of institutions associated with liberty; creation of a democratic political culture and social structure.

**This table summarizes how diverse analytical strategies give rise to divergent accounts and characterizations of the French Old Regime and Revolution.*

Tocqueville insists that, from 1770, a revolution was both inevitable, for the reasons discussed earlier, and undesirable. Why? He argues, in a remarkable counterfactual analysis, that the chances for the eventual realization of political liberty would have been far better if an enlightened monarch had carried out some of the political reforms associated with the Revolution (*Old Regime*: 167). Tocqueville considers the revolutionaries as having been too radical: the changes they effected swept away too many of the aristocracy's institutions and customs, all of which were necessary conditions for the preservation of freedom. Moreover, 'under new princes, the children of their own achievements [e.g. Napoleon?], whose birth, prejudices, propensities, and habits appear to bind them indissolubly to the cause of equality ... centralization must increase' (*Democracy*: 361–2). Only under the monarchs of the Old Regime was it possible for the centralization of administration to be resisted, and the aristocratic displays of liberty to persist. One suspects that Tocqueville's willingness to gamble on the enlightenment of the monarchs stems from his characterization of them as Janus-faced historical actors:

having a vision of the future when equality would be realized, and peering backward toward a past when the monarch was the highest ranked nobleman. Here Tocqueville suggests, following the logic of his universal history, that feudalism could have been gradually abolished in the absence of a popular uprising, thereby arguing that the absolute monarchs were capable of truly revolutionary reforms.

If Tocqueville's two strategies of inquiry in *Democracy*, that is, his universal history and contrast-oriented comparison, lead to different images of the French Old Regime, do they then have similar consequences for how he interprets the French Revolution itself? In *Democracy* Tocqueville emphasizes the fact that from the absolute monarchy through the authoritarian rulers of the age of revolution to the post-democratic despotic regimes, an administrative state repeatedly attempts to level social conditions (*Democracy*, Appendix K: 419), and that the activities of such a state remain inimical to the realization of freedom. Further, in *Old Regime*, he criticizes the widespread belief of his contemporaries that the Revolution weakened government; instead, he insists that the primary consequence of the Revolution was the continuity and intensification of bureaucratic centralization. Here, true to his universal history, Tocqueville seems to be using the notion of 'revolution' in a decidedly old-fashioned sense, as the cyclical reappearance of administrative institutions that level social conditions and eventually eliminate social diversity. Thus, the ultimate result of the French Revolution was not the realization of freedom, but the imposition of despotic rule under Napoleon. Was the revolution of 1789, then, 'merely a hoax' (Furet, 1981: 158)?

Significantly, Tocqueville is also well aware that the French Revolution was revolutionary in the modern sense, that is, it resulted in discontinuity with the past.¹⁷ Here, true to his American–French, contrast-oriented comparison (see Table 1), Tocqueville mentions the unprecedented violence of the Revolution, the mobilization of the populace against privilege, and the destruction of the aristocracy. He anticipates the modern sensibility according to which the classification of an event as a revolution depends on the occurrence of dramatic changes in the political institutions and culture. What historical sociologists need to remember here is that by deriving the conditions necessary for the occurrence of the French Revolution from both his contrast-oriented comparison and his universal history, Tocqueville characterized it as having not only changed abruptly the course of history, but also accelerated the ongoing process of administrative centralization.

But how is it possible for Tocqueville to combine a contrast-oriented comparative strategy with a universal history? In other words, if the French Old Regime and Revolution represent the paradigmatic case for Tocqueville in his universal history, what is the status of the American colonial Old Regime and Revolution in his contrast-oriented comparison and, above all, in his universal history?

Tocqueville clearly appreciates the differences between the French and the American revolutions (see Table 2): the American Revolution was not a great social revolution as was the French, but merely a political revolution in which the New England commercial elite and the Southern slave-owners – neither of which were

disabled from leading the people by virtue of having secured privileges – led the people in a war of independence, all in the name of liberty (*Democracy*, Vol. I: 37–8, 117–19). Thus, whereas the French revolutionaries destroy the aristocracy and ultimately weaken liberty, the American political elite, after the revolution, proceed to found a government in which liberty would be preserved.¹⁸

This point, in turn, raises the question of how Tocqueville characterizes the American Old Regime and Revolution from the perspective of his universal history. This question is difficult to answer for the simple reason that he never wrote a configurational history of the American Revolution. A few tantalizing passages reveal his belief that the American historical experience was largely an anomaly. The divergent trajectory of the Old Regime in America from the European is the result, for Tocqueville, of what amounts to a grand historical accident: geographical isolation

TABLE 2. CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE US OLD REGIME AND REVOLUTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPETING STRATEGIES OF INQUIRY

Strategy of inquiry	Conceptualization of key concepts	
	US Old Regime	US Revolution
Universal history*	<i>Discontinuity due to an accidental</i> creation of a democratic society via the transatlantic migration of English commoners to the New World; absence of an age-old aristocracy and preservation of local government.	<i>Continuity:</i> Constitutional Convention considered a ‘novelty in the history of society’ and deliberations are characterized as ‘calm’ despite local rebellions during and in the aftermath of the American revolution.
Contrast-oriented comparison	<i>Commonality</i> of interest between colonial elite and the people <i>in an egalitarian society</i> ; both favor local government and oppose English imperial project.	<i>Continuity:</i> Temporary preservation of liberty and an egalitarian social structure; without a true aristocracy, America does not undergo a social revolution.

**From the perspective of Tocqueville’s ‘universal history’ strategy of inquiry the American Old Regime (i.e. the colonial period) and the Revolution are curious accidents; nonetheless the American case eventually converges with European experience during age of despotism.*

when coupled with the failure of the English aristocracy to migrate to the New World gave rise to a social elite without privileges, and this in turn allowed for the remarkable preservation of local democratic political institutions. Specifically, Tocqueville claims that as the American colonial elite's enlightenment was enhanced, they did not – as did the European aristocracy – grow disaffected from the populace; instead, they participated with their status inferiors in the ‘consolidation’ of those bastions of liberty, the town meetings (*Democracy*, Vol. I: 54).

The overall impression Tocqueville provides of the American Old Regime is one in which the local elites were in uncontested authority, and this enabled them during the Revolution to lead the (white, male) citizenry against the British. When Tocqueville compares the American War for Independence with the French Revolution, he declares that many countries have won their independence in history, but the French destroyed their aristocracy and then proceeded to conquer Europe; however, he does emphasize that the American Constitutional Convention as a ‘novelty in the history of society’ because the ‘calm’ negotiations of the delegates took place during a time when even sovereignty had been suspended (*Democracy*, Vol. I: 118–19). From the perspective of his universal history, Tocqueville must divorce the Convention from both mere politics and rebellion; thus, he never mentions Shays’ Rebellion, which, in part, prompted the call for a convention (Hall, 1972; Szatmary, 1980), or the Whiskey Rebellion, which was, in part, a response to the imposition of Federal taxes on the farmers of Western Pennsylvania (Slaughter, 1986), or Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, whose struggle for independence along the Vermont frontier was associated with a social rebellion against a New York landowning elite (Bellesiles, 1993). In short, the logic of contrast-oriented comparison, which would have demanded an analysis of the extent to which the American Revolution was a social revolution like the French (Wood, 1992: 7, 231), was suppressed in favor of the logic of the universal history, which favored the treatment of the American Revolution as emblematic of American exceptionalism.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly those who defend historicist narratives would accuse Tocqueville of selecting and suppressing events according to preconceived notions. But Tocqueville thought that he was incapable of writing a complete ‘scientific’ narrative of the age of democratic revolutions. He believed that those who have lived through revolutionary upheavals are

... still too close to the events to know the details (this seems strange, but is true); the details become known only by posthumous revelations and are often unknown to contemporaries. What contemporaries know better than posterity is the movement of minds and general passions of the times of which they feel the last tremors in their own minds and hearts. It is the

true relationship between principal actors and the principal facts, and between the great historical movements, which those close to the times ... perceive ... better than posterity. It is for posterity to write the history of details. Those close to the events are better placed to trace the general history and general causes, the grand movement of facts and current of opinion of which men who are placed too far away cannot form an idea because such things cannot be learned from memoirs.

(1987b: 150–1)

The irony of this last quote should not be lost on historians, who Tocqueville argued were rendered incapable, by virtue of their professional commitment to ferreting out memoirs in the archives, of understanding the essence of a past epoch. Nor do historical sociologists escape unscathed from the implications of Tocqueville's comment.

Tocqueville believed that only an appreciation of the 'great historical movements' of the age of revolution in which he himself lived enabled him to assess its true historical significance. Although a contribution to the understanding of general causes of revolution remains a lodestar of contemporary historical sociologists, they frequently rely on secondary historical sources, comparative techniques and grand sociological theory as substitutes for a sympathetic understanding of particular cases.

Nor do historical sociologists fully appreciate the consequences of combining one strategy of inquiry with another. As has been shown, Tocqueville's combination of a contrast-oriented comparison with a universal history leads to difficulties in his configurational analysis of the causes and consequences of the French Revolution. From the perspective of the American experience, the French 'Old Regime' is the entire aristocracy, but when it is viewed from his universal history, the monarchy is characterized as the great destroyer of aristocratic privilege; likewise the French 'Revolution' is depicted as a fundamental break with the past when it is compared with the American case, but when Tocqueville deploys his universal history, the image of the 'Revolution' shifts to one of the continuity and recurring acceleration of administrative control over society. Furthermore, to the extent one reads Tocqueville as having suggested a transhistorical significance to such peculiar institutional features of the American experience as voluntary associations, local government, an independent judiciary and a free press, the all-encompassing quality of his universal history is undermined. However, if one reads Tocqueville as having privileged his universal history – as I have done – then the American experience presents the reader with only a temporary anomaly: the unique joining of liberty with equality in the United States will, according to his predictions, inevitably disintegrate with the emergence of the new despotism. Thus, it is possible, for Tocqueville, to articulate a contrast-oriented comparison of cases which move along divergent historical trajectories during one historical epoch, while predicting the future convergence of an anomalous (American) case

with those exemplifying his universal history.¹⁹ However, the combination of a universal (or philosophical) history, through which predictive power is obtained, with contrast-oriented comparisons, which suggest subtle variation across historical trajectories, may result in the loss of historical accuracy and conceptual clarity.

Notes

The author thanks Eldon Eisenach, Steve Newman, John Meyer and Marc Ventresca for their comments on earlier drafts. I am grateful to William B. Allen for inviting me to a Liberty Fund colloquium devoted to a discussion of *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. Allen first raised the question of what Tocqueville meant by 'revolution'. This essay is my belated attempt to answer his question. Over the years, the Liberty Fund has been a reminder of all that the university should be but rarely is. I also owe thanks to the Hoover Institution for a fellowship in support of my research. Finally, this essay is dedicated to the memory of Edward W. Fox; many years ago he taught me to be skeptical of philosophers masquerading as historians.

1. For how the term 'philosophic history' was used in the past, consult Manuel (1965); and, for a review of the relevant sources, see Lowith (1949).
2. For a defense of history as the study of contingent events, see Leff (1971: 46). Attacks on universal or philosophical history abound: Aron (1961); Berlin (1954); Nisbet (1969).
3. A full exposition of the teleological aspects of Immanuel Wallerstein's work may be found in Sewell (1996). Green (1993: 159) notes the opposition of historians to Wallerstein's teleological reasoning.
4. References to *Democracy in America* are drawn from Tocqueville (1974 [1835/1840]), and, unless I otherwise specify, all references are to Volume II; those to *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* are drawn from Tocqueville (1955 [1856]) and to *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848* from Tocqueville (1987a [1893]). For the purpose of citing these works, the title of the first volume is abbreviated as *Democracy*, the second as *The Old Regime*, the last as *Recollections*.
5. Tocqueville's comparative work centered on France and the United States; he was, however, also interested (as an ethnographer, perhaps) in other cases: Ireland, England (Tocqueville, 1958) and Algeria (Tocqueville, 2001). Further analysis might reveal how these cases fit into Tocqueville's universal history.
6. Two authors stand outside this characterization: Mitchell (1996:10–13) presents a masterful attempt to reconcile the structures of necessity with the possibility of choice for both individuals and entire societies; and Wolin (2001: 98, 185–6) gives scant attention to Tocqueville's philosophy of history, though he does argue that Tocqueville regarded social equality as the 'premier fact' of what amounted to a 'prophesy' regarding the outcome of the history.
7. Tocqueville's letter to Louis de Kergolay dated December 15, 1850 (Tocqueville, 1985: 256).
8. Tocqueville's philosophical history is buried in what Boesche (1983: 82) refers to as a 'cultural mobile': the explication of a multiplicity of contrasting features of French and American society. A second reason why it must be extracted from the text is that in Volume II, Book 4 of *Democracy*, Tocqueville occasionally lapses into historicism, which results in a chapter title like 'That Equality Naturally Gives Men a Taste For Free Institutions'. Despite this lapse, I believe 'nature' and 'artifice' are generally used in a transhistorical fashion.

9. Although Tocqueville does not explicitly refer to the 'new despotism' as a distinctive period, the thrust of his argument suggests that it will fully emerge in the future (Wolin, 2001: 569). Schleifer (1980: 225) notes that Tocqueville, in an unpublished portion of *Democracy*, likened the new despotism to a new dark age. The anonymous reviewer of this article suggested that Tocqueville deploys a three-stage theory of history, with Tocqueville's despotism as 'less an age, than a possibility, if not a probability, inscribed in all ages, though it takes on a new form under democracy'. However, Tocqueville treats despotism as an institutional form (bureaucracy), an historical foreshadowing (absolutism and Napoleon), a socio-economic formation (welfare) and a political outcome (loss of political efficacy among citizens). Similar to the other 'ages', the age of despotism is multifaceted and its characteristics overlap with those of earlier periods. The reviewer also states that 'The universal history provides the background categories on which the foreground comparisons are made. The foreground comparisons matter, I believe, because the universal history bears a certain indeterminacy, that is, contrary to the author's "convergence" theory, despotism is not inevitable.' I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for his/her sophisticated critique, with which I happen to disagree, and for his/her having engaged my interpretation.
10. Bendix (1969: 57–73) offers an extensive analysis of these crucial passages, but he does so without relating Tocqueville's 'law' to the French Revolution as depicted in the *Old Regime*.
11. Here Tocqueville developed the idea of how local government fostered a tie between participation and economic interests. Thucydides has Pericles claim in his third speech that the Athenian maritime empire fosters a tie between national greatness and the realization of personal economic fortune (Thucydides, 1998: Bk II.60.2–4; compare Hochberg and Hardy, 2004). I strongly suspect that the similarity in these two positions may partially account for the elective affinity between democratic republics and maritime empires.
12. Elster (1991: 278) provides a comprehensive list of Tocqueville's explanations as to why equality engenders despotism.
13. I borrow this useful phrase from Cohen (1989).
14. Although the precise nature of Tocqueville's personal faith in God has been questioned (Lamberti, 1989: 4, 158), Tocqueville himself attributes the emergence of equality to Providence:

The various occurrences of national existence have everywhere turned to the advantage of democracy; all men have aided it by their exertions: those who have intentionally laboured in its cause, and those who have served it unwittingly; those who have fought for it and those who have declared themselves its opponents, – have all been driven along in the same track, have all laboured to one end, some ignorantly and some unwillingly; all have been blind instruments in the hands of God.

The gradual development of equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact, and it possesses all the characteristics of a Divine decree.

(*Democracy*, Vol. I: lxxi)

This passage emphasizes Tocqueville's commitment to individual free will and his recognition of the conflicts that arise from its exercise; however, his philosophy of history also emphasizes that the consequences of historical conflicts (including revolutions) lead inexorably toward equality and more natural conditions in society.

15. In his 'Unfinished Book', Tocqueville reminds himself, 'I am discussing history, not narrating it' (1987b: 160).
16. Richter (1988: 141) and Herr (1962: 43, 46–7, 50–1) present a case for considering *Old Regime* in the light of *Democracy in America*.

17. Kramnick (1972: 31) provides a useful discussion of the traditional and modern understandings of 'revolution'.
18. Toqueville (*Democracy I*: 449) warns of a 'remote', though 'inevitable' conflict between white and black inhabitants of the Southern States.
19. Optimists of the American experience emphasize the contrast-oriented comparison of Volume I in *Democracy*, whereas pessimists who analyze the emergence of mass society and the welfare state rely on the universal history of Volume II.

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Leonard Hochberg earned his doctorate from Cornell University, where he specialized in political philosophy, comparative politics, early modern European history and geopolitics. After teaching at the School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Miami University (Ohio), he accepted a position at Stanford University in the Department of Sociology. In 1988–9, the Hoover Institution named him a National Fellow. He left Stanford in 1994 to co-found and co-direct the Center for Geopolitical Studies at Louisiana State University, from which emerged Strategic Forecasting, Inc. (stratfor.com), which he also co-founded. He has recently published several articles on geopolitics, including 'The Language of National Insecurity: Prediction, Strategy, and Geopolitics' (*Advances in Competitive Research*, 2002). With Professor James D. Hardy, Hochberg is working on a book devoted to the emergence of geo-strategic thought. Hochberg is currently the coordinator of the Mackinder Forum-US.

Address: DSM, Howe Russell Geoscience, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA.
[email: hochberg@lsu.edu]