

## 2 Alexis de Tocqueville on Class and Race

Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians,  
provided the end be their improvement.

– John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* ([1859] 1897: 6)

### Democracy as self-reliance

The scion of an old noble family in Normandy, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) grew up in an aristocratic milieu in the early nineteenth century. The mores and customs of his breeding were to determine his character for life. Unlike his close relatives, as a graduate student he began to distance himself from the wave of restoration that swept across post-revolutionary France and throughout Europe. For Tocqueville, a return to the *ancien régime* with an absolute monarch at the top was out of the question. Emancipatory ideas that were in vogue at the time led him to believe that a process of democratization was in the offing. As he completed his law studies, the question of how these ideas would work out in practice inspired him to travel to America. After being appointed a junior magistrate, he received official permission to study the penal system in the United States. The commission he received enabled Tocqueville to distance himself from the reign of Louis Philippe I, who had been sworn in as Citizen King of France in 1830. Together with his lifelong friend and companion Gustave Beaumont, he toured a sparsely populated country where colonists had thrown off the yoke of domination and set up a society based on democratic principles.

What the two travellers observed was a citizenry of Anglo-Saxon origins spread out across the countryside or in rural towns. These citizens, still mostly engaged in independent farming, trade and services, cooperated closely together to run the small-scale associations in the communities to which they belonged. Recording their observations in his book *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), Tocqueville found his belief confirmed that a democratic future was an ideal worth striving for. He warned, however, that the pathway to achieving this ideal was not self-evident. If democratization moved ahead too rapidly, it ran the risk that equality would go too far, leaving the citizenry fragmented, oppressed and in individualized apathy, succumbed to an all-powerful state machinery.

Barely a year after his return from America, Tocqueville embarked on a new journey, this time to England where he believed that a social revolution

was imminent. Here, the Reform Act in 1832 had extended the franchise to the petty bourgeoisie, the owners of means of production including farmers, artisans and shopkeepers. This wider political participation contributed to the introduction of an amendment to the Poor Law in 1834. During his short stay in the country, Tocqueville familiarized himself with the intent and scope of this imminent reform and so became acquainted with what was to develop into an important social question – How to provide care for the poor? – which was estimated to be a sixth of the population. The amendment essentially meant that destitute people who were capable of working would henceforth no longer receive relief if they became unemployed in their place of residence. That allowance dated back to the late Middle Ages, when the non-poor in local communities were obliged to contribute to the upkeep of households that were temporarily or permanently unable to fend for themselves. The amendment was considered necessary as this relief was seen to make the labouring poor work-shy and an unfair burden on the better-off. The shift from an agrarian-rural to an industrial-urban society which accelerated around the middle of the nineteenth century, meant the abolition of this customary support. The proletarianized class would have to seek its own solace for periodic or chronic incapacity to meet their basic needs.

The amendment to the Poor Law drove a growing army of land poor and landless people who could not find regular employment in agriculture and the countryside at large to the towns and cities. There, expansion of industry, construction and transport pushed demand for labour from the immediate and further hinterland to increasingly higher levels. In the report on his findings, *Mémoire sur le paupérisme*, published in 1835, Tocqueville declared himself an unconditional proponent of abolishing the right to public relief for the ‘undeserving poor’, i.e. all those of sound body and mind but bereft of the means of subsistence. He presented a number of arguments to back up this view: state relief would have the unfortunate tendency to strengthen bureaucratic centralization, destroy the bond of humanity between giver and receiver, and arouse feelings of inferiority and resentment among the propertyless. Tocqueville came to this conclusion after attending a meeting of a local council in the country’s rural south chaired by Lord Radnor, his host and peer. Radnor was owner of the local manorial estate and, as an unpaid justice of the peace, settled disputes between recipients and providers of traditional poor relief in the locality. In Tocqueville’s view, the remedy for poverty was not public support but private charity, though he had to admit that the latter was both inadequate and unpredictable. An aristocracy based on land ownership had been replaced by a new elite founded on

monetary wealth that was filled with a greed he abhorred. Although the pace of urbanization and industrialization had severely widened the gap between rich and poor, he believed that the chances of a social revolution around the corner were slight.

## Second thoughts on the social question

Tocqueville admitted that a second visit to England was required to corroborate his initial assessment. In 1835, he travelled first to the industrial north and then on to Ireland. He was now more aware than before of the huge gap between the extremes of the class spectrum. Yet, aristocrat as he was, he did not actually descend into the world of poverty and need. He sought the company of his peers and observed the lot of the working classes from a distance. He asked others with intimate knowledge of the situation and recorded what they told him in detail. But the descriptions of what he saw and heard during the few days he spent in Manchester impressed him deeply:

[Y]ou will see the huge palaces of industry. You will hear the noise of furnaces, the whistle of steam. These vast structures keep air and light out. In Threat of Redundancy of the human habitation which they dominate; they envelop them in perpetual fog; here is the slave, there is the master; there the wealth of some, here the poverty of most; there the organized efforts of thousands produce, to the profit of one man, what society has not learnt to give. Here the weakness of the individual seems more feeble and helpless even than in the middle of a wilderness; here the effects, there the causes.... From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilise the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles, and civilized man is turned back almost into a savage. (Bremner 2016: 242-43)

His evocative passages bear a striking resemblance to the account that Friedrich Engels wrote ten years later on the exploitation and repression of mill workers in the textile industry. Tocqueville was much more at ease with the industrialism found in Birmingham, the next city he visited, where small-scale production in craft workshops appeared to be surviving. The relationship between master and servant had not yet become one of despicable inequality and, in his view, still held out the possibility of social

mobility through training and experience. This was the direction in which Tocqueville sought the answer to the social question.

He continued his journey with a tour through Ireland, where a large proportion of the workforce in Manchester came from, fleeing the deprivation crippling their agrarian homeland. On arrival in Dublin, he visited a poor house that provided some 1,800 to 2,000 paupers daily with bed and board and described their dire circumstances with compassion. No less astute and harrowing were the notes jotted in his diary on the immense misery he saw from his coach as he toured the Irish countryside. He described it as the consequence of the country's colonial rule in the hands of a landed elite of Protestant denomination oppressing the Catholic peasantry. The great Irish famine of 1845-50 was still ten years away but his informants told him that the majority of the people lived on potatoes, and many often did not even have that to fall back on. Was voluntary charity the solution? Generosity for one's more unfortunate fellow humans had after all been his proffered alternative for public relief. Tocqueville left no doubt that the moral bond between poor and rich had been lost. The English estate owners were indifferent to the misery that surrounded them. The inescapable contrast between an impoverished peasant existence and the luxury of the landed estates conflicted with an interpretation Tocqueville would continue to advocate, that the opulence of the few and the destitution of the many should be seen as a consequence of industrialism. His works fail completely to address the early appearance of capitalism in the rural economy and the sea change it led to in relations between the agrarian classes.

Tocqueville's second journey gave him considerable pause for thought. He pointed out, for example, that poverty has a relative and relational significance. Deprivation must be understood in the context within which it occurs and in conjunction with the accumulation of wealth. As before, he minutely recorded his observations, but did not this time publish what he had learned. Perhaps he was already preoccupied with another agenda on his return to France. When he completed a draft manuscript in 1837, he decided to put it to one side for the moment, pressed by other priorities. That may be true, but it is more likely that what he had seen caused him to doubt the solution for destitution he had envisaged. The main thread of this sequel to his first *Mémoire*, not published until 1989, was to spread property more widely and redistribute land aggregated in the hands of a privileged class. Together with education and healthcare, acquiring means of production was a common denominator in the measures Tocqueville proposed – participation in management, workers' cooperatives, profit-sharing, savings schemes, etc. – to combat the pauperism of the proletariat in

the urbanizing economy. But he was well aware that his proposals would not meet with a warm welcome from the captains of industry. He did nothing to conceal his contempt for their desire to accumulate more and more wealth. This disdain, however, did not weaken his belief that owning property was an inviolable right, no matter how it was appropriated. He rejected any form of compulsion to make concessions to this sacrosanct principle. For Tocqueville, restoring the lost harmony between the social classes was the key to establishing a democratic society. In effect, he did not want to acquiesce in the sociological insights he demonstrated while reflecting on his visit to industrial England and agrarian Ireland. In the transition to large-scale industrialism, the classes at the upper and lower ends of society had become more distanced from each other. The polarity he had witnessed in the destitute countryside of Ireland and the cities of England had its origins in unfettered capitalism. This imagery troubled him but he did not want to see it as a vista for the future. He believed that, in America, he had found the ideal setting that underpinned his political engagement and refused to admit that the findings of his second journey to Britain had deprived him of the hopeful prospect of imminent human freedom and equality that he was restlessly seeking.

### **The imperative necessity of colonialism**

Back in France, Tocqueville remained true to his role as political philosopher and publicist, a dedication that earned him membership of the Académie Française in 1837 and recognition as a *maître-savant*. That fame did not stop him, however, from choosing a different path in his career and entering active politics. In 1839, the voters in his native district – mainly of peasant stock, though restricted to those who owned property and worked at their own cost and risk – sent him to the national parliament. In his role as representative of the people, he forcefully pushed for acquiring overseas territories. In the general assembly, he became an ardent proponent of and expert on the colonial question. As superior civilizations, the great European powers had a duty to subject less developed peoples elsewhere in the world to their domination. His argument was driven by unadulterated chauvinism. Colonialism was necessary for the sake of the greater honour and glory of the homeland. What drove him was not the desire for material gain but fear of the fragility of state formation at home. The urgent need to build up an integrated nation state was hampered by the growing economic and social divide between the property-owning and dispossessed classes, a

trend undermining political stability. Arousing and consolidating nationalist sentiments was above all the motive for his insistence on annexing overseas territories. In addition, territorial expansion acted as a safety valve, offering escape to colonists who left their homeland in search of a better life. In the emerging heyday of imperialism, occupying the coastal region of Algeria in 1830 had been the first choice of French domination overseas. In the decade that followed, the appropriated territory experienced an influx of colonists, many from other Mediterranean countries. Children born to these immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds acquired French nationality. France had come to stay and Algeria was from the very beginning established as a settlement colony. The newcomers, known as *pieds-noirs*, were part of an influx of small peasants, higher and lower civil servants, craftsmen, shopkeepers, liberal professionals and major landowners. They would eventually grow to account for a tenth of the population and, as a dominant class, took possession of most of the cultivable land and other immovable commodities. Their settlement in the country boiled down to large-scale theft of property, of which the indigenous population was to be deprived for good.

Tocqueville did not hesitate to voice his approval of the excessive violence that accompanied colonial conquest, saying as much in the report on his first visit to Algeria as a member of parliament in 1841. His expression of support displayed an undiluted racist tone. In two parliamentary reports submitted after this second journey to Algeria in 1847, he advocated splitting up the country into two circuits, the lower subjugated to the upper. The installation of apartheid was framed in a body of legislation, supplemented by an unwritten but closely monitored code of instructions and taboos regulating day-to-day interaction between the races. The guerrilla war that accompanied the occupation of the hinterland was quashed with military terror. The completion of pacification led Tocqueville to call upon the military command to practice its domination to the extent possible with human moderation.

## The 1848 revolution

Tocqueville felt impelled to focus in his political career on the escalating class conflict in France. The social question had become increasingly urgent with the expulsion of labour from agriculture and the rural economy. *Dépôts de mendicité* for impoverished country folk had already been opened in the late feudal era. They were meant to set these footloose drifters to work in

exchange for bed and board. As elsewhere in Europe, France had introduced laws against vagrancy, poaching and other offences that confirmed the image of the volatile proletariat as *la classe dangereuse*. Such attempts to restrain the immoral behaviour and wanderlust attributed to these paupers and thus put a stop to vagabondism, met with little success. They formed bands that came and went with the seasons and it proved impossible to place them under surveillance and transform their roaming existence into a sedentary one. How could this modern nomadism be brought under control? In his aristocratic perception, they were a motley mob made up of the poor, needy and homeless, work-shy, rebellious and insensitive to discipline in their precarious life on the margins of society.

Tocqueville's classification of the underclasses as an amorphous and flighty mass prevented him from noticing that in Paris and other large cities, a self-skilled contingent of factory labour had settled close to their work sites. In their resistance to exploitation and repression, this vanguard of the emerging large-scale mode of industrial production joined forces to collectively demand improvements in their living and working conditions from both employers and government. In Lyon the workforce in the silk industry had already revolted in 1831, 1834 and also joined the uprising in 1848. Though Tocqueville did not recognize this display of proletarian consciousness for what it was, his political antenna kept him sharp. In a speech to parliament at the end of January 1848, he signalled his anguish about the escalating unrest among the labouring poor. The immediate cause of the growing unrest was a recession combined with rising food prices. However, underlying this conjunctural crisis was in his perception the decisive battle between the propertied and the dispossessed classes that climaxed in Paris. The explosion he had predicted came after the reforms proposed by the radical camp were rejected in parliament. The abolition of the monarchy and its replacement by a republican constitution were broadly accepted. There was also little resistance to the hasty introduction of general suffrage, even though it still applied only to men.

Tocqueville had foreseen that the urban proletariat would, for the time being, remain a minority and could be outvoted by an electoral majority of the land-owning peasantry, by nature conservative. The breaking point in the negotiations proved to be the demand that paid work be made a constitutional right as protection against unregulated employment and irregular hiring and firing. There had been experiments with this form of job creation through *ateliers nationaux* for the execution of public works. Establishing them on a permanent footing became a precondition for political consensus. However, a parliamentary majority, with Tocqueville

at the forefront and in a counter-revolutionary role, refused to concede to this uncompromising demand. The immediate closing down of all public worksites led to the outbreak of the February 1848 revolution in Paris, which saw the victory of the liberal faction over the radical republicans.

Behind the momentous economic malaise, the structural development of the socialist movement instigated a wave of insurrection throughout Europe. At the end of 1847, in the prelude to the conflict that erupted in the streets of the French capital, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had drawn up the *Communist Manifesto*, published when the revolt broke out. Conspicuous in Tocqueville's detailed account of the rebellion is that, besides the slum inhabitants, the retinue of servants that the wealthy elite surrounded themselves with in their opulent quarters turned against their masters and mistresses. The liberal philosopher and practitioner left no doubt on which side of the dividing line his sympathies lay. He was sharply critical of socialist ideology which, according to him, would culminate in centralized administration of a statist Moloch. His judgement of the support that socialism enjoyed among the proletariat was no less damning. They were a malevolent class lacking in discipline, order and regularity, without a sense of responsibility and with no respect for their superiors and betters. Ridden with radical aspirations – like the right to work and their insistence on collective action – that were impossible to grant, they went on strike and turned violent. Yet, he realized that his liberal credo implied the universal applicability of freedom and equality. The classless society of his dreams ultimately required admitting to mainstream society the working class that had so far been excluded from economic, political and social rights. Accepting the social justice of that claim and the right to a life of human dignity, he attached the condition that such admittance should not take place too quickly but in an orderly and gradual manner. And it should be accompanied by a willingness to adjust to the existing power and authority.

During the brutal suppression of the rebellion, Tocqueville took it upon himself to act as an intermediary between the parliamentary directorate, which he provided with information on the ongoing combat, and the military command, to which he passed on messages and orders. To be prepared for anything, he carried pistols when venturing into city districts where fighting was going on. It showed a dauntless determination that brought admiration from the partisan clique around him. His lack of oratory skills had proved no obstacle to his rise through the parliamentary hierarchy, where the fame he had acquired as a scholar played an important role. After Louis Philippe I had been dethroned, the transition from monarchy to republic was chaotic and halting. Tocqueville was a prominent member of

the parliamentary committee that drafted the constitution for the Second Republic and was appointed foreign minister in the new government. He held the post for only a few months, soon becoming disillusioned by the ambitions to greater power of President Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. Louis Napoleon's conversion from royalty – his father had been nominated king of Holland by his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte – to republican statesman was not to last long. Shortly before his term of office expired, he seized power and a year later, after a national plebiscite, declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. Tocqueville had already expressed his displeasure and was dismissed, along with the rest of the cabinet. At the end of 1851, after speaking out against Louis Napoleon's coup along with a number of fellow parliamentarians, he was briefly detained. After this denouement, and partly due to failing health, he withdrew from active politics to focus on his academic interests. The result of this exertion – *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* – was based on extensive archival research. When the book was published in 1856, it signified the completion only a few years before his death of scholarly work praised for lasting quality. It is a legacy seen as insightful and relevant up to the present day.

### Exclusion from equality

How does this retrospective praise relate to the leading principle of Tocqueville's political credentials? The liberal ideology he adhered to was founded on the desirability of freedom and equality for humanity in its entirety. In my assessment of his life and work, I have already shown myself to be critical of the way he presented the dynamics of his time and his reservations about the progressive trend of democratization, bringing that worthy goal within reach. He grossly misconceived the spirit of his time, the capitalist ethos that set the pace and the direction of societal transformation. His preference was for a small-scale economy and localized governance founded on the bond between members of the community. Tocqueville believed that, in America, he had observed this much desired outcome in actual practice. The rural and small town way of life which became his focus was in stark contrast to the industrial mass production that would soon evolve in rapidly growing cities. He observed this shift in the economic landscape with apprehension, fearing an expanding and excessively regulatory government. He saw it as frustrating genuine democracy by destroying the equity and autonomy of the citizenry. The foresight with which he warned against the bureaucratization of a state that considered

itself all-powerful was indicative of his sociological acumen. However, I have strong reservations about his views on two problems pertinent to his investigations: the social and colonial questions. These two issues are severely underexposed in the widespread praise for his scholarly work and his liberal convictions. In both cases, the limits he imposes on qualifying for freedom and equality – despite being presented as universal rights – are justified with the same arguments. The majority of humanity with a history of exclusion from such rights belonged either to the swelling proletarian masses at home or the nations outside Europe which remained excluded from the drive of progress. Both were alleged to uphold a way of living and working that bore testimony to their pitiful lack of the moral standards required for civil rights. I will first look at Tocqueville's belief in the need to exclude lower classes in his own society and then at his urgent call to confine all humanity other than his own race in colonial dependency.

Tocqueville's ideas on the social question were no different from those of many of his contemporaries. It was a class-defined bias suggesting that the labouring poor themselves, deprived of their earlier right to public relief, did not endeavour and deserve to achieve inclusion in mainstream society by refusing to embrace the qualities required for the accumulation of property. It was considered their own fault that they failed to meet these requirements, caused by a lack of industriousness, thrift, sobriety and other virtues associated with decent behaviour. This school of thought would subsequently – from the 1870s onwards – be most potently expressed in the theory of social Darwinism, which stigmatized the victims of exclusion and explained pauperism as driven by sheer obnoxiousness or incapability to equip oneself for citizenship. Impelled by class-based narrow-mindedness, this odium came close to a racist judgement of pauperism in the advancing industrial-urban transformation.

I return to my earlier argument that Tocqueville's aristocratic identity led him to judge the nature of the social underclass with contempt. In his categorical view, society was divided into two nations, which were each other's opposite in appearance and behaviour. He described the difference between respected civility and despised vulgarity in candid racist jargon. When a frontman of the radical party known as the Montagnards arrived in the newly elected parliament, he denigrated him as of Lumpen class-cum-ethnic identity:

His body was very large and fat, and his expressive head was triangular and sunk deep between his shoulders; his eyes were cunning and mischievous, but the rest of his features had a good-natured look. In short, it was a pretty

shapeless lump of stuff, but within it was a mind subtle enough to know how to turn vulgarity and ignorance to advantage. (Tocqueville 1896: 148)

It was the same language used in social Darwinist publications to describe the Irish who crossed to England in search of factory work and found themselves treated as a degenerate and rebellious species of humanity. Charles Darwin himself wrote of them as modern savages who multiplied as rabbits and went through life careless, squalid and unambitious (Bremner 2016: 10). Tocqueville, too, had no qualms about describing these paupers as half-savages (Jardin 1984: 206), a clear reference to what he saw as their barbaric and wild lifestyle.

### **From propertyless to property-owning?**

Remarkably enough, Tocqueville's boundless curiosity did not drive him to find out where the propertylessness came from that made the social question so impossible for him to solve. He adroitly avoided attributing the cause to capitalist accumulation and concluding that the concentration of property in the hands of a privileged class led to proletarianism at the bottom of society. This interrelationship had not escaped him, however, as is clear from the link he made between the spiralling enrichment and impoverishment he had encountered in Ireland. He argued that the concentration of land in the hands of estate owners was the consequence of inheritance law as practiced in the United Kingdom, which gave all property rights to the first-born son. But in his account of his tour through the Irish countryside, he described how fields fenced off for sheep grazing were earlier held communally or let out to tenants and sharecroppers. Declared private property during the enclosure movement, the agrarian property that was transferred into the hands of alien estate owners occurred at the expense of the peasantry, depriving them of the ability to use the land to grow food crops.

In the capitalist transition, property registered as privately owned was unattainable. From this perspective, the acquisition of property was considered the outcome of one's own efforts. That it may have been alienated from stakeholders who possibly had a more legitimate claim was not considered relevant. In Tocqueville's analysis, the fact that the peasantry – which he saw as an undifferentiated class of petty producers – continued to exist in France longer than in England was due to land being distributed equally among the males of the next generation. This difference in inheritance law did indeed seem to have resulted in a broader distribution of agrarian

property in France than in England. Yet, despite Tocqueville's familiarity with the rural milieu in France, he showed himself completely unaware of the capitalist intrusion into agriculture. The division of the rural population into landowners, tenants, sharecroppers and farmhands was a consequence of the proletarianization trend that had already started in the late-feudal era and resulted in the progressive expulsion of land-poor and landless segments from the countryside (Lefebvre 1954). Tocqueville noted the emergence of these modern nomads in his scholarly work, but without exploring – let alone explaining – their sizable presence or their origins.

The denial of the right to waged work was the immediate cause of the call to revolt in 1848. The ruthless suppression was seen as a triumph for civilization. And yet the right to work was the only possible alternative to the acquisition of property that the proletariat could hope for. Dispossessed, they had no other choice than to demand the security of paid employment at a rate sufficient to make ends meet. In both respects, what the working class ended up with fell short of what was required to satisfy their meagre needs. In the first place, there was no regular, continual employment. Tocqueville correctly attributed this to the persistent fluctuations in the industrial production process. The cycle of peaks and dips in the rhythm of work had many causes: expansion or contraction in business activity, mergers, divisions and bankruptcies, interruptions in the delivery of raw materials and difficulties in marketing the end product. Factory owners would hire or dismiss workers as they experienced successes or setbacks, without them having any say in the matter at all. Dismissed labourers would seek other employers, but the latter's tendency to hold a workforce in reserve, to keep wages at the lowest possible level, meant that workers had no guarantee at all that they would actually succeed in finding a new job. The situation was exacerbated by rising prices, exerting even greater pressure on the already tight budgets of working-class households.

This income deficit was behind the insistent demand for a wage linked to what was required for a decent livelihood. The call for higher living standards through both regular and government-regulated employment and pay was rejected by the dominant political class as excessive. Tocqueville fell back on his basic argument on the undesirability of unprecedented state interference in economic affairs, which would strengthen the trend towards bureaucratic centralization. Another criticism he put forward was that, behind what was presented as poverty, lay a steady improvement leading to a pressing desire for more. In his view, the prevailing form of employment and pay had risen to the maximum that could be conceded for the labour power provided. His argument was essentially that agreeing

to a higher wage would erode the legitimate share of gains between capital and labour. The political patrons of the propertied classes, including Tocqueville, rejected the right to guaranteed work because capitalism could not do without thoroughly proletarianized labour. It was a *conditio sine qua non* for the extraction of surplus value to increase a higher return on capital. The desire for ever more wealth that Tocqueville had spoken of in such disparaging terms in his second *Mémoire sur le paupérisme* was now endorsed as the right to accumulate capital. The dangerous radicalism with which this diverse social residue was obsessed came, as he argued, from a misplaced claim on more than they were due. He added that it was a steady improvement in their plight, rather than a deterioration, that had instigated them to revolt in 1848. Aside from whether his allegation is factually accurate, he suggested the emergence of a new mood in the ongoing transition to industrialism, which implied that what used to be wants had now become basic needs. Tocqueville was expressing a sociological phenomenon later described as relative deprivation or, alternately, as an expression of rising expectations. The politician who claimed that his engagement was driven by liberalism left no doubt that the deserving ranks stopped with the lower middle class, the very sizable contingent of petty owners of property. Excluded from civil order, the working classes stagnated in a state of inferiority. Once dispossessed, they did not merit the privilege of citizenship and thus, in his argumentation, belonged to the ranks of the 'undeserving poor'.

### Rejected as undeserving on grounds of class and race

The colonial question can be discussed more briefly as Tocqueville's main concern was how it could be helpful in solving the social question at home. The call to subjugate non-Western regions and their peoples to European domination is, of course, irreconcilable with the enticing ideal of universalized freedom and equality. Tocqueville did not attempt to justify foreign conquest as inspired by the noble desire to bring civilization where it was lacking, as suggested in proper imperialist fashion. In his view, expansion beyond Europe was intended to defuse the escalating class struggle in the European metropolises and ensure that the intricate process of multinational state formation proceeded as it should by appealing to patriotism on the home front. Enlightenment thought at the end of the eighteenth century declared the fundamental equality of all people and the associated right to self-determination. By the beginning of the nineteenth century this credo,

which inspired the slogans of the French revolution, had already been revoked and reversed to imply the opposite. The liberalism Tocqueville advocated stopped at the borders of his own country. In the pursuit of colonial domination, freedom and equality were out of the question. But he disagreed with John Stuart Mill, who considered despotism justified in combating barbarism. Nor did he go as far as his fellow liberals in excluding non-Western races from all progress.

Tocqueville saw the path to civilization as a series of phases that started with primitive savagery as a way of life in which individuals were equal to each other in weakness and ignorance. In the final stage, as yet not achieved, he envisaged a social order in which people would live in classless equality and share the resources required to ensure their joint welfare and mutual protection against adversity. Between these two extremes was the reign of inequality, which he referred to as the 'middle ages' of humanity. He described the scaling up to this intermediate phase in detail for India (Jardin 1984). It was achieved when nomadic savages settled down to a sedentary and agrestic way of life. The unequal claim to land resulted in a stratified social structure that was constituted and consolidated in feudalism. The ongoing development of an industrial economy in Europe was immanently unstable and led inevitably to enrichment at one extreme and impoverishment at the other. In Tocqueville's view, democratization would offer an escape from the class struggle and complete the civilization process, climaxing in nationwide homogeneity.

In this perception, it was the half-developed civilizations that France and other European powers should focus on in their imperialist projects. Tocqueville was full of praise for the way India had become subjected to British authority:

A country almost as large as Europe has been conquered within a space of sixty years by a few thousand Europeans, who landed as merchants upon its shores. A hundred million people have been subjected and ruled by thirty thousand foreigners who, for their laws, religion, language and customs, have nothing in common with them and who, moreover, do not let them take any part in the management of their own business. (Bernard 2014: 18)

Tocqueville was no less jubilant about the imminent European conquest of China. He urged this course of expansion in unadulterated jingoism and applauded the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839, aimed at subjugating China:

So at last the mobility of Europe has come to grips with Chinese immobility! It is a great event, especially if one thinks that it is only the continuation, the last in a multitude of events of the same nature of all which are pushing the European race out of its home and are successively submitting all the other races to its empire or its influence. Something more vast, more extraordinary than the establishment of the Roman Empire is growing out of our times, without anyone noticing it, it is the enslavement of four parts of the world by the fifth. Therefore, let us not slander our century and ourselves too much; the men are small, but the events are great. (Cited in Pitts 2000: 301)

The imperialism Tocqueville fervently advocated can also be seen as compensation for the French loss of territorial *Lebensraum* that had expanded so substantially under Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. In that sense, the conquest of Algeria was a response to the political constraints the European allies imposed on France at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15. But France's urge to colonize extended further than Algeria and led to the occupation of parts of North and West Africa and on the Southeast-Asian peninsula. All the territories already earlier conquered in the Caribbean region were retained.

Tocqueville was much interested in South Asia and in a hefty, never published minute, narrated the introduction and implementation of British rule in India. Drawing on published documents which were at his disposal in the early 1840s, he argued that British rule had redeemed the subcontinent of South Asia from barbarism by coaching its people to incipient civilization. The Indian mutiny in 1857 implied, however, that the progress made still fell short of adequate and effective governance. Repression of this rebellion was needed to forestall a return to barbarism. Shortly returned from a scholarly trip to England, Tocqueville wrote this advice to one of his high-level contacts:

To see the English rule in India being overthrown without anything to replace it and leaving the indigenous people to barbarism would be to me a very sad prospect. Such a situation would be a disaster for the future of civilization and the progress of mankind.... It is often said in France that you have oppressed the Hindus. I think the opposite, and I believe that your present danger comes on the contrary from bringing them closer to civilization and giving them, in governance and administration, sounder ideas, so that you have made them more of a danger to their masters and decreased your authority thereby. (Bernard 2014: 25)

Tocqueville's analysis of Asia's backwardness differed from that put forward by Karl Marx. Marx's appraisal was no less Eurocentric but was inspired by the assumption that colonial expansion was preconditional for breaking through the immanent stagnation ascribed to a stultifying Asiatic mode of production. A crucial obstacle in his analysis for progress was the absence of private property which prevented transition from the stage of feudalism to capitalism (Avineri 1969). The division of the world in the manner Tocqueville had insisted on was decided at the 1878 Congress of Berlin. This alliance of the leading European power mongers settled the Eastern question, as Bismarck called the usurpation of the non-Western world, to the satisfaction of the aspiring colonizers among them.

Despite his racialized prejudices, the liberal thinker explicitly turned against the biological determinism on which Arthur de Gobineau based his racist theories. Gobineau's preaching was not compatible with the ideas of Rousseau, to whom Tocqueville owed his belief in the universal validity of freedom and equality. The idea of civilization proceeding in phases that Tocqueville adhered to prevented him from classifying ethnicity in terms of genetic inferiority. He also rejected Gobineau's designation of Aryan tribes as the master race. In Tocqueville's view, people could free themselves from savagery and elevate themselves to a higher level of society, demonstrating their capacity to achieve progress. On the other hand, no nations other than those of Europe (in Gobineau's terminology, the Nordic race) had succeeded in attaining the mature phase in the linear process of civilization. That could not be coincidence. The clear contrast between domination and subjugation only exacerbated the differences, illustrated by Tocqueville's controversial statement that in America 'the abolition of slavery in the South will increase the repugnance felt by the white population for the blacks' (Tocqueville 2000: 328). He was equally outspoken on his doubts whether black and white people could ever live together on equal terms. Michel Onfray is sharply critical of the way in which, in his tour around America, Tocqueville commended the colonists who had fought to end their colonial subordination. But the freedom and equality that marked their democracy was reserved for members of the white race. Citizenship and the rights associated with it were out of the question for ethnic minorities – i.e. the imported slaves and the indigenous people, killed or held captive in marginal tracts – whose exclusion Tocqueville justified in blatantly racist language (Onfray 2017). The impossibility of their integration in a multiracial state inspired him to propose the idea of full-fledged and indefinite segregation, a duality in the colonial state set up that effectively and indefinitely blocked release to freedom and equality. Various American historians have strongly

contradicted Tocqueville's racialized bias. In his case study focused on colonial Virginia, Edmund S. Morgan (1975) wrote that the colonists owed the freedom they gained to their slaves. Independence, he concluded, was bought with and at the cost of slave labour.

The ban on slavery in the colonies introduced during the revolution was rescinded under Napoleon. When he entered parliament in 1839, Tocqueville was appointed rapporteur to the committee established to abolish slavery again. His report, submitted within two months, proposed abolition as of 1853 and was a compromise that went far to appeasing the colonial lobby. While slaveholders would receive compensation for their loss of property, the former slaves – some 250,000 in the West Indies – remained deprived of all means of production. They were banned from buying land for a fixed period of time. The transformation of this enslaved contingent into a landless proletariat was intended to turn them into bonded labourers. The decision confirmed that the propertied class required a subaltern class kept firmly dispossessed to secure an adequate pool of labour which would continue to work at the lowest possible price. Tocqueville was equally disparaging about the working class of his own nation as he had been about its colonial subjects. This set his declaration of the fundamental universality of the human race at odds with the enduring domination of the overwhelming majority by a small minority, whether within or beyond the boundaries of the nation state.

Colonial expansion was founded on the permanent domination of the conquered lands and peoples. At least, as long as resistance to deprivation of the right to self-determination could be repressed. That was the purpose of the dividing line between the dominating and the dominated race. For Tocqueville, stringent segregation was the perfect way to consolidate the exercise of colonial power in Algeria. He expressed his admiration for how a handful of Englishmen held the entire population of South Asia locked up in their power from a distance. Such despotism was incompatible with the universal validity of the liberal order he aspired to achieve. This paradox could be negated, or at least extenuated, with the argument that the superiority of one group and the inferiority of the other was due to lacking development rather than exclusion. I conclude that the democracy that Tocqueville held dear did not extend beyond the propertied classes of the supreme white race. His avowed determination to achieve emancipation for all and sundry collapsed in its denial in political practice. The onslaught of imperialism meant that, by the turn of the century, the doctrine of racial inequality had become respectable wide and far. It is difficult to argue persuasively that Tocqueville resisted this retrogressive mindset intellectually and politically. His version

of liberalism denied freedom and equality to the lion's share of humanity, which remained excluded from both fundamental rights. His judgement on the colonial question was in no way different to his reactionary perspective on the social question both within and beyond the borders of his homeland.

## In hindsight

The significance of Tocqueville's political stance is not restricted to the past. Although the ideas he stood for and heralded declined after his death, less than a century later his name was once again in the political and academic spotlight. Politics and governments in the Atlantic economies initially seemed to have succeeded in restraining the free marketing of capitalism by introducing centrally controlled reforms to protect the workforce and the population as a whole. The relative ease with which this occurred marked the advent of the Western European welfare state. But as it was further expanded in the decades after World War II, known in France as *Les Trente Glorieuses*, resistance from the dissenting camp, which had never disappeared completely, began to gather momentum. Conservative and liberal proponents of a radical change of course cited Tocqueville's writings as the source of their criticism of state interference. Friedrich Hayek, seen by many as the founder of neoliberalism, revered Tocqueville as an early apostle of his ideas and as a mine of inspiration for his anti-socialist manifesto *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). This admiration should be matched with less enthusiastic appraisals. Seymour Drescher (1968a), familiar with Tocqueville's work as no other, draws up a different balance, concluding that the political thinker's sociological astuteness lost out to his political prejudices. He summed up his verdict by saying that Tocqueville had described a society that did not exist and never would.

In my discussion of Tocqueville's legacy, I have focused on his views on the social and colonial questions. Regarding the former, his rejection of public poverty relief has been welcomed with great enthusiasm in the neoliberal camp, especially in America. Tocqueville's unequivocal condemnation of public welfare explains why the Institute for Economic Affairs, a neoliberal think tank, decided to bring out his first essay on pauperism in its Rediscovered Riches series. It comes as no surprise that his scornful comment on the costly, bossy but useless bunch of bureaucrats in charge of public relief is much appreciated by today's anti-state cabal. Has the gist of Tocqueville's more sophisticated argumentation in his second memoir been dealt with fairly and fully in the introductory commentary which precedes

the republication of the first one in 1997? Not really, and I fully agree with other critics who take the editors to task for having misread the author's thoughts on how to tackle pauperism. Tocqueville's sociological insight induced him to highlight dispossession as the outcome of a civilizational trend towards increasing inequality. What Tocqueville described as a historical process is stereotyped in their editorial diatribe as the innate indolence of an undeserving underclass. This neoconservative caucus devotes less attention to his praise for colonialism. The imperialist ideology, manifest of the nineteenth century, lingers on in the juxtaposition of frontrunners versus latecomers and the racism inherent to it has taken root in a virulent ultranationalist gospel. Tocqueville's recommendation to anchor the nation state in a fabricated profile of commonality excludes people who do not share that *Blut und Boden* legacy from enjoying equal rights in full citizenship. His attempt to cover up the contradictions and disparities between social classes culminates in a politics of categorical segregation, both beyond and within the homeland.

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