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Saved by Danger/Destroyed by Success. The Argument of Tocqueville's Souvenirs

Abstract

Into the ironic narrative of his *Souvenirs*, Tocqueville weaves a schematic saved-by-danger vs. destroyed-by-success scheme to illuminate the conditions under which revolutionary movements are crushed or prevail. Emergencies focus distracted minds on a single aim-in-view and moderate competitive emotions, encouraging talented members of a privileged group to pool their resources cooperatively. Contrariwise, less salient dangers creep up on privileged groups, taking them unawares, especially if they have become inured to danger by a seemingly unchallenging environment.

Keywords: Attention; Cooperation; Danger; Defection; Envy; Revolution.

TOCQUEVILLE'S MEMOIRS of the 1848 revolution can be read uncharitably as the incoherent ruminations of a public man. Or, less primly, they can be relished for the vivid and pitiless descriptions they provide of Tocqueville's contemporaries – his satiric portraits, etched in the manner of Daumier. But the intellectual heart of the book, what accounts for its lasting theoretical interest, lies elsewhere, in its analytically acute assessment of the psychological conditions for political success and defeat.

Unlike Tocqueville's two great scholarly works, the *Souvenirs* is a painterly study of short-term political change. Here, if anywhere, we should expect to discover his account of purposive human agency, its effectiveness and its limits. Early in the book, Tocqueville's fatalism seems unyielding. In certain periods, he explains, the course of history cannot even be regulated or curbed.[1] In 1848, he reports, there was little to be done except watch and analyze the ongoing debacle:

[1] In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explicitly qualifies his insight into unstoppable historical trends with a moral affirmation of the human capacity to act, to deploy virtú against fortuna, that is, to channel the torrential current of social leveling away from despotism, toward political liberty (TOCQUEVILLE 1969, p. 705). In the *Ancien régime*, he reiterates this double claim, placing the accent on inevitability: "all our contemporaries are driven on by a force that *we may hope to regulate or curb*, but cannot overcome" (TOCQUEVILLE 1955, xii, my emphasis).

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> I felt that we were caught in one of those great democratic floods that drown those individuals, and those parties too, who try to build dykes to hold them. So for a time there is nothing better to do than observe the general characteristics of the phenomenon (Tocqueville 1987, p. 77).[2]

The sense that human effort is bootless and unavailing pervades much of the book. If we wished to compress the *Souvenirs* into a single phrase, in fact, we might be tempted to summarize it as a study of unintended consequences. It explores the lack of control that actors, however important or self-important, exert over social outcomes. At the extreme, it depicts human beings as straws gyrating in the wind. Neither the government nor the opposition wanted a revolution – to mention the most important example. But a revolution is what they jointly brought about. In an amazing variety of passages, self-defeat appears to be the book's controlling idea. A minor illustration is this. As a member of the Constitutional Commission in May 1848, Tocqueville insisted that the popularly elected President be made ineligible for a second term. But already in the spring of 1851, before Louis-Napoleon's constitution-circumventing *coup d'État*, he recognized that his well-meaning attempt to stabilize republican government by a paper barrier was doomed to backfire (*ibid*., pp. 179-180). This is a classic case of self-subversion. Tocqueville got exactly what he intended and therefore ended up with the opposite of what he desired.

The Fatal Slope

The *Souvenirs* were composed in 1850-1851. Their author, at this time, was recuperating from an illness. He was also consoling himself after his stint as Foreign Minister had been cut disappointingly short. Serving in the Barrot cabinet of 1849, Tocqueville and his allies had continued to struggle for a moderate republic. They tried to tread the thin line between revolution and reaction. This endeavor had been in vain. Once the second June uprising had been successfully put down by the ''forces of order'', nothing could prevent the nation from tumbling backwards into reaction (Tocqueville 1987, p. 165). That the book he wrote in such circumstances reflects some sense of futility is

[2] On the other hand, much later on, Tocqueville explains that Passy was a contemptible creature for suggesting that ''there is practically no way of saving us, and we must just wait for the total subversion of society'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 199).

not surprising. Such was the lesson Tocqueville might well have drawn from personal experience. Events are not masterable. They spin hopelessly out of control.

The *Souvenirs* are in large measure concerned with individuals who set in motion processes which they, pathetically, cannot then bring to a halt. For another characteristic example, consider the Montagnards elected to the Assembly in May 1849. They first whetted the appetites of the populace. They riled up the urban crowd. But, soon afterwards, they got cold feet: ''having half-drawn their sword, they seemed to want to sheathe it again, but it was too late'' (*ibid*., p. 207). You can start an avalanche by flinging a stone. But you cannot stop it that way. In discussing sequences which actors initiate but cannot interrupt, Tocqueville often uses the word ''slope'' (*la pente*). The image of a slope suggests that, whatever actors subjectively desire, there is objectively no stable stopping point, no intermediary position available, no halfway house. Once you start a boulder rolling, it will almost certainly end up at the bottom of the ravine.[3] Speaking about Odilon Barrot, for example, Tocqueville says: ''all day long that man had made heroic efforts to save the monarchy from the slope down which he himself had pushed it'' (*ibid*., p. 57). Agency is obviously involved here. Barrot intentionally destabilized the monarchy. But, in so doing, he loosed forces he could no longer personally govern or arrest.

Tocqueville begins his narration with an account of the public banquets organized in 1847 and early 1848 to circumvent a government prohibition on political meetings (Part 1, Chapter 2). The banquet campaign and its aftermath provide the main example of ''irreversibility'' and therefore of human impotence in the *Souvenirs*. Political speeches, attacking Louis-Philippe's minister Guizot and advocating electoral reform, were delivered in the guise of toasts. To increase pressure on the government, the middle-class reformers appealed to urban workers for support. Not surprisingly, the official ban on further banquets, issued on 21 February 1848, drew unemployed artisans and workers onto the streets. Some National Guard units defected. Crowds erected barricades and clashed with government troops. Chaos raged. Finally, on 24 February, Louis-Philippe abdicated the throne. The banquet campaign had set in motion

[3] Because it conveys unidirectionality, the image of a ''slope'' does not quite do justice to Tocqueville's thinking here. His thesis is better captured by the notion of no ''halfway house'' or what he calls a *mezzo termine* (Tocqueville 1988, p. 40). France could either tumble forward into socialism or fall backwards into reaction. What it could not do was to stabilize itself as a moderate republic.

a process that went far beyond, and even contrary to, its organizers' aims.

The toothpaste cannot be squeezed back into the tube. It is easier to loose a lion from his cage than to cajole him back into it. The toothpaste or the lion in this case is ''the people''. Tocqueville warned about playing with the fire of populism in a political speech, delivered before the revolution began, and cited here: ''if ... you do start a popular agitation, you have no more idea than I have where it will take you'' (*ibid*., p. 20).[4] The opposition believed it could excite the people against the government and then, when the government fell, call the people back to order. Middle-class reformers thought they could raise the social question to drive their enemies from office, but then bury it quietly once they had re-modeled the political regime. But a popular movement is not, as Max Weber would have said, a taxicab which one can stop and step out of at any time.

The general pattern Tocqueville has in mind could also be called a snowball effect. Individuals and groups are carried forward by forces which they have set in motion. Riding a crest of their own making, they achieve a provisional success. But the same forces which have taken them so far, by sheer momentum, go on to destroy the original beneficiaries. Political reformers may attain their aims by unleashing a social revolution. But this social movement, taking on a life of its own, goes on to ruin them completely. The actors involved soon became aware of this fatal dynamic:

> even the moderate Republicans were not slow to see that the victory which had saved them had left them on a slope that might send them sliding beyond a republic, and they immediately made an effort to pull back, but in vain. (*Ibid*., p. 165)

Victors watch on in horror as they are consumed by their own triumphs. Throughout Tocqueville's account of 1848, individuals and groups chase victory out onto a fatal incline. They do not feel the tug of gravity until it is too late. Somewhat less metaphorically: political actors fail to achieve their aims because they myopically neglect the self-defeating consequences of their political acts.

[4] A similar passage about playing-with-fire occurs in the *Ancien régime*: it was not until the bourgeois reformer had already put weapons into the hands of the peasants in 1789 ''that he realized he had kindled passions such as he had never dreamed of, passions which he could neither restrain nor guide, and of which, after being their promoter, he was to be the victim'' (Tocqueville 1955, p. 136).

The Publicity Trap

Irreversibility implies that there is a point of no-return.[5] In *Democracy*, a memorable illustration of this pattern is the abolition of primogeniture. Once destroyed, primogeniture cannot be re-established, or so Tocqueville claims (Tocqueville 1969, p. 53). In the *Souvenirs*, the most arresting example of this "Rubicon syndrome" is the binding commitment created by public speech. Something which is said publicly cannot be unsaid. Politicians are prisoners of their own utterances. They do not control their words. Their words control them. For example, the Constituent Assembly could not reconsider its opinion after having told the electorate that the President of the Republic would be chosen by a popular vote: "having announced to the nation that this ardently desired right would be granted, it was no longer possible to refuse it" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 178). Pronouncements uttered for everyone to hear cannot be safely disclaimed.

A parallel case concerns the socialists and radicals. They, too, were prisoners of positions adopted in public. According to Tocqueville, the revolutionaries perished because of their public adhesion to two ideas: popular sovereignty and the abolition of property. In the situation of 1848, from a "rational actor" point of view, both ideas were strategic liabilities. But neither could be jettisoned in an opportunistic manner. Tocqueville's obsession with self-defeating behavior leads him to focus directly on this theme: the "demagogues", he says, "remained crushed beneath the weight of their own dogma of the sovereignty of the people" (*ibid*., p. 99). In late February of 1848, France's electorate was expanded overnight from two-hundred-and-fifty thousand to nine million. Universal manhood suffrage turned out to be an anti-radical force, largely because the Church and the notables were immensely influential in the countryside. Conservative forces were well-placed to exploit provincial resentment and fear of Parisian radicals. (Notice that Tocqueville praises the peasants of La Manche both for exhibiting a manly independence from Paris [*ibid*., pp. 87-88], and for displaying a sheep-like deference toward himself [*ibid*., p. 95].) Committed publicly to an enlarged franchise, revolutionaries in Paris helped build the machine that destroyed them: "by establishing universal suffrage they thought they were summoning the people to support the revolution, whereas they were only arming them

[5] As Duvergier says about the Conservatives: "they had gone too far ... to retreat" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 274).

against it'' (*ibid*., p. 97). The Constituent Assembly elected on 23 April 1848 was hostile to the demands of the Parisian workers. Thus, the radical socialists were victims of their own public advocacy of universal suffrage. Exactly like the dynastic opposition, they found it impossible to control their tools.

The socialists' second doctrinal problem stemmed from their announced plan to abolish private property in a society where property was becoming widely diffused. In such a novel situation, if they had been perfectly rational, they would have backed down and advocated the cancelation of debts.[6] An attack on creditors would have won them substantial support in rural areas. But they were too rigidly committed to the property-must-be-abolished dogma to act strategically in this situation. Imprisoned by their own publicly proclaimed ideas, ideologically desensitized to new circumstances, they undid themselves.

False Polarization

Unlike his fellow liberals, such as Guizot or Mill, Tocqueville associated publicity, in many cases, with irrationality, mendacity, and baseness. The publicity trap is only one variant on a general theme. The memoirs begin, in fact, with the odd assertion that honesty craves secrecy: ''the only true pictures are those which are not intended to be shown'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 3n). Later, having made a futile attempt to aid or comfort the Duchess of Orleans, Tocqueville highlights the total purity of his gallant gesture by remarking that ''nobody saw me and I told nobody'' (*ibid*., p. 54). He also complains bitterly that he cannot say what he truly thinks in public, that he yearns for high office, for example, or that most others are despicably stupid and dishonest while he is incapable, by nature, of *mauvaise foi*.[7] Particularly annoying, he adds, is the taboo against self-praise universally accepted in the liberal public realm. We can fawn before others but we are frustratingly precluded from flattering ourselves.[8] In the

[6] ''Not the abolition of property rights, but the abolition of debts should have been promised'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 97).

[7] He announces his incapacity for self-deception without any trace of irony: unlike most others, ''I have never been able ... to persuade myself so easily that my advantage and the general weal conformed'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 84).

[8] If this cruel prohibition creates insincerity, ''the public is to blame, for it likes to hear one accuse oneself but cannot stand self-praise'' (Tocqueville 1987, pp. 80-81).

Souvenirs, as in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the public realm is presented, most of the time, as a domain of insincerity and distortion.

Tocqueville candidly discusses his own inadequacies as a parliamentary orator. But his underlying discomfort with public speech is most vividly expressed by his diagnosis of political irrationality in liberal regimes. As already explained, elected officials are irrationally committed to positions publicly announced. They cannot learn from others and cannot back down, even when they do change their minds, without losing face. Presumably, a parliamentarian could make a public pronouncement, for strategic reasons, in order to burn his bridges. This precommitment tactic would allow him to resist pressures, from colleagues or interest groups, to shift his stance. But Tocqueville never discusses such a case. The constraints of publicity can be shrewdly exploited to achieve political aims. But Tocqueville does not say so. He presents the Rubicon syndrome of public speech in an exclusively negative way. Publicity deforms. It mocks human attempts at mastery and control.

Although Barrot did not want to go along with the banquet program, announced on 20 February, he ''dared not disavow it for fear of offending those who, until then, had been marching with him'' (*ibid.*, p. 27). Face-saving retreat also becomes ticklish when one's enemies are openly menacing reprisals: ''the dynastic opposition on its part, though it wanted no more banquets, was also forced to follow this unfortunate path in order not to appear to retreat before the government's threats'' (*ibid.*, p. 27). Both government and opposition played foolishly at brinkmanship, each side hoping that the other would collapse. The opposition was carried forward by ''bravado'' and an unwillingness to appear concessive, while government egged the opposition on. Thus, ''both sides pressed toward the common abyss, and reached it without even seeing where they were going'' (*ibid.*, p. 21). The only honorable response to a public challenge, apparently, is to dig in one's heels, no matter how unreasonable that might seem from a self-interested point of view.[9] It was during a ridiculous game of chicken that the opposition imprudently decided to whip up the populace with the banquet campaign. Unable to recoil, government and opposition advanced together onto the treacherous slope.

In passage after passage, Tocqueville shows how actors are driven by the logic of adversarial politics to behave contrary to their interests,

[9] In fact, ''the government and the opposition seemed to be working together to push things to an extreme that might harm everyone'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 23).

rationally understood. Their incapacity for tactical retreat was only one feature of the problem. Also relevant was their tendency for exaggeration and counter-exaggeration – a tendency typical, Tocqueville believes, of all politics conducted in public. During the July Monarchy, for example, the ruling party and the opposition accused each other of jeopardizing the very survival of France: ''for several years the majority had been saying that the opposition was endangering society, and the opposition had been constantly repeating that the Ministers were ruining the Monarchy.'' Chronic exaggerations desensitize those who utter them: ''both sides had asserted these things so often, without believing them very much, that in the end they came not to believe them at all, just at the moment when events were about to prove them both right'' (*ibid.*, p. 16).[10]

They had cried ''wolf'' so frequently that even *they* ceased believing that a wolf might actually appear. They could see no threats on the horizon because they had spoken so cavalierly about threats in the past.

Why did the opposition act contrary to its long-term interests?[11] Tocqueville suggests another reason, besides a general unwillingness to forswear positions publicly professed. By defending the middle class, the government exposed itself to lower-class resentment. But, as a rule, ''the members of the very class for whose sake [the government] becomes unpopular will prefer the pleasure of joining with everyone else in abusing it to the enjoyment of the privileges it preserves for them'' (*ibid.*, p. 41). As the great seventeenth-century French moral psychologists had memorably explained, people are more attached to vanity and the play of adjectives than to material self-interest. Criticism and ridicule of the government tickles the ego and therefore tends to create a bandwagon effect. Caught up in the sheer delight of vilifying those in power, the middle-class opposition was distracted from considering the likely consequences, for itself, of its own subversive behavior.[12]

But Tocqueville's main point in this context is that truth is inevitably mislaid in a partisan back-and-forth:

[10] Similarly, Sénard, the president of the Constituent Assembly, could not explain even his own first-hand experiences because, as a lawyer, he had contracted ''an inveterate habit of acting'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 154).

[11] More specifically, why did the middle-class National Guard refuse to protect the regime on 24 February (Tocqueville 1987, pp. 40-41)?

[12] This is why the government fell without defenders: ''Even those who in the depths of their hearts most regretted its fall had for a long time either fought against it or at least criticized it severely'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 73).

> There are plenty of analogies for such behaviour in the history of other assemblies; one constantly finds one party exaggerating sentiments it does feel in order to embarrass its opponents, while the latter feigns sentiments it does not feel in order to avoid the trap. Thus an impetus common to both drives one beyond the truth and the other in the opposite direction to it. (*Ibid*., p. 99)

This is a distressing story for those who believe in the free market of ideas. The logic of parliamentary confrontation is not rational. It breeds false polarization. It leads deputies publicly to support causes they do not really believe in, to sacrifice truth for the sake of scoring points. The sunlight of publicity clouds the mind. It makes people do what they really do not want to do. Through public confrontation, ''men drive each other from their intended courses'' (*ibid*., p. 28). Their actions escape from their own control. In the ''long parliamentary comedy'' of the July Monarchy, the typical parliamentarian contracted the ''inveterate habit of colouring the expression of his feelings outrageously and exaggerating his thoughts out of all proportion, and in this way they had become unable to appreciate the true and the real'' (*ibid*., p. 16). He lost a sense of reality and even ceased to understand what he was saying and doing.[13]

False polarization occurs because conflict takes place *in public*, that is, before an audience. Auditors serve as a kind of resonance board. When one party addresses another, it is also addressing a third party as well – in this case, either the voting public or the Parisian street. Consider again the passage cited above about the Montagnards in the Assembly who, regretting their mob-rousing pronouncements, nevertheless could not recant: ''having half-drawn their sword, they seemed to want to sheathe it again, but it was too late; the signal had been seen by their friends outside, and from thenceforth they no longer led but were led'' (*ibid*., p. 207). False polarization results from the gallery-pandering that infects all parliamentary and extraparliamentary debates. Not only is retreat forbidden. But marginal parties have an incentive to exaggerate the differences that separate them from mainstream opinion:

> the leaders of the radical party, who considered a revolution premature and did not want one yet, felt obliged, in order to make some distinction between themselves and their allies of the dynastic opposition, to speak in revolutionary terms at the banquets and fan the flames of insurrection. (*Ibid*., p. 27)

[13] In his first book, Tocqueville made this general comment about French democracy: ''in the heat of the struggle each partisan is driven beyond the natural limits of his own views by the views and the excesses of his adversaries, loses sight of the very aim he was pursuing, and uses language which ill-corresponds to his real feelings and to his secret instincts'' (Tocqueville 1969, p. 16).

Political speechifying is hopelessly skewed by attempts to impress and charm the onlookers. To titillate a consuming public, for one thing, product differentiation is required.

Radicals were not the only ones to blow unwisely on the revolutionary flame. Even moderates, and for many of the same reasons, began to claim that something sacred or ultimate was at stake in the battle at hand. This is what occurred, once again, in the debate about the banquets. Hysterical exaggeration set the tone:

> Speakers for the moderate opposition were led by the heat of the argument to assert that the right of assembly at the banquets was one of the most assured and necessary of rights; that to dispute it was to tread liberty itself under foot and to violate the Charter – not seeing that by talking in this manner they were unintentionally making an appeal not to arguments but to arms. (*Ibid*., pp. 24-25)[14]

Legitimate disagreement becomes impossible in a climate of doctrinal intransigence. Once you demonize your antagonists, you exclude the possibility of legitimate disagreement. Without knowing it, you bar the path to honorable retreat. Chances for compromise or splitting the difference disappear. A hardening of battle fronts results, even though it was intended by no party or individual.

The Psychology of Success

What does Tocqueville say about the success and failure of would-be political leaders? For one thing, he discusses the way rulers fail because they focus compulsively on avoiding the terminal faults of their predecessors: ''I have always noticed in politics how often men are ruined by having too good a memory'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 37).[15] In general, his approach to victory and defeat is overwhelmingly psychological. There is something ungraspable about both achievement and failure. Success often comes easily to people who have an

[14] In the grain trade debate of 1772, the French King and the Parlement of Toulouse collaborated, against their wills, in awakening the lower classes to a sense of their oppression: ''each party blamed the other for the sufferings of the laboring class'' and ''on one point, it will be noticed, both parties concurred: on giving the public to understand that their superiors were to blame for the evils that befell them'' (Tocqueville 1955, p. 182); competing elites tease the people awake, broadcasting to the poor that social superiors are responsible for their suffering. Neither side notices the self-destructive character of such mutual recrimination, because they are both fixated exclusively on each other.

[15] See also Tocqueville 1987, p. 64.

irrationally high estimate of their abilities, for example. On other occasions, unjustified optimism leads directly to defeat.

Consider Tocqueville's description of "the moderate party" whom he finds, in May 1849, stunned by the surprising electoral strength of the Montagnards who won about 150 seats in the new Assembly of 700. The moderates fell into "an extraordinary state of stupefaction" (*ibid.*, p. 280) even though they had resoundingly won the election, because they did not win by such a wide margin as they had predicted. Thus: "people felt lost because the success achieved was less complete than what they had expected" (*ibid.*, p. 280).[16] Here, an objective triumph is approached from a subjective point of view. Achievement is not gauged by absolute standards but is relative to prior expectations.

Psychologizing tendencies of this sort can be observed in Tocqueville's commentary on his April 1848 electoral campaign in La Manche (Part 2, Chapter 4). Political failure, he argues, is partly due to an intense desire to succeed: "nothing makes for success more than not desiring it too ardently" (*ibid.*, p. 88). This aphorism suggests that intentional behavior – such as aiming at success – is worse than pointless. The self-defeating dynamic Tocqueville has in mind here functions in two ways. It affects character on the one hand, and cooperation on the other. First, if a passion for success takes over your soul, you lose your inner poise. Instead of focusing coolly on your political aims, shrugging off the follies of the time, you furtively survey the scene, trying to gauge how you are doing from the reaction of onlookers. Such fidgety distraction and longing for approval precipitate disaster. Second, if others perceive that you are an instrumental and ambitious personality, they will not trust you. They may even hesitate to collaborate with you. As a result, if you really want to succeed, you must be sincerely indifferent about whether you succeed or not. Insouciance about success may not be the easiest emotion to cultivate or feign, of course. It certainly was not in Tocqueville's own case. (He succeeded in his bid for reelection because, without making any strategic calculations, he genuinely did not care if he won or lost.) The dilemma here can be formulated as a paradox: only people who are burning with ambition would be motivated to act on Tocqueville's dictum; and they are precisely the ones who are psychologically unable to do so.

This paradox, combined with Tocqueville's discussions of self-defeat, the fatal slope, the publicity trap, and false polarization, suggest

[16] As mentioned, relative lack of success can also be *caused* by excessively sunny expectations.

a general pessimism or fatalism about political success. Pessimism, however, is but a state of mind. One thing that makes the *Souvenirs* theoretically engrossing is the way a vaguely melancholic outlook is translated into a conceptually sharp analysis of the conditions for political defeat.

Destroyed by Success

Tocqueville sometimes seems intent on reviving the ancient and medieval myth of a wheel of fortune. He repeatedly refers to individuals and parties being ''buried in their own triumph''. The cycle of virtue and corruption appears to make every victory futile, however splendid the triumph initially was. A destroyed-by-success dynamic undoubtedly plays an important role within the *Souvenirs*. Proof is that the very same pattern emerges repeatedly in wholly different contexts. Consider three striking examples of this theme: if you try to get x, you will get x, which, it turns out, has consequences you do not really want.

First there is the paradoxical judgment Tocqueville passes on the Barrot cabinet, to which he belonged, in the wake of the insurrection of June 1849: ''We would have been much stronger if we had been less successful.'' What does this mean? How could a group have been better off if it had won a less decisive victory? By way of clarification, Tocqueville adds the maxim that ''it is after some great success that the most dangerous threats of ruin usually emerge'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 214). His explanation for this paradox, in fact, is fairly simple. Before victory, you have only your declared enemies against you. Afterwards, you begin to have problems with yourself – with your softness, pride, and rashness – as well as with your allies, who suddenly become stubborn, uncooperative, impossible to control. Success is an ambiguous good because of two predictable but frequently unnoticed side-effects. It both enfeebles character and dissolves alliances.

The second variant on this theme occurs in Tocqueville's discussion of the King of Prussia. The fear of revolution had driven the German princes into Frederick Wilhelm's arms. After Prussia had everywhere crushed the revolutionaries, however, his allies recovered their taste for independence: ''the King of Prussia's enterprise was of the unhappy sort in which success itself makes ultimate triumph harder.'' Indeed, ''he was fated to fail when he had re-established order and because he had re-established it'' (*ibid.*, p. 248). Here, the self-defeating dynamic is

simply a matter of alliance-dissolution. No mention is made of any impairment of the victor's character. You forfeit the pliant submissiveness of confederates once you destroy the threat which impelled them to seek your protection. Implicitly, this analysis suggests the strategic usefulness of a weakened but not totally defeated enemy.

The third example reinforces this suggestion. The poet Alphonse de Lamartine, leader of the Provisional Government in 1848, needed the Mountain. He depended, for his own power, on the enduring leverage of enemies to the left. The center and the right perceived him as a savior, or chose him as an ally, but only because he could plausibly threaten: either me or disaster! He was bound to lose power if he fully subdued the Montagnards: ''their complete defeat would render him useless, and sooner or later it could and should make rule slip from his hands'' (*ibid.*, p. 108).[17] Thus, he had to follow a ''tortuous path'', keeping the radical left just alive enough to scare others into his arms, but not so alive that it would oust him from power –

> striving to dominate the Mountain without overthrowing it and to damp down without quenching the revolutionary fires, so that the country would bless him for providing security, but would not feel safe enough to forget about him. (*Ibid.*, p. 110)

Only when people feel threatened are they prone to shop around for a protector. In Tocqueville's analysis, in fact, Lamartine sounds like a man who would be willing to ignite a fire in order to get credit for helping put it out. His attack on the Mountain, in any case, could not be uninhibited. It had to take the form of a ''pulled punch''. His ultimate failure to survive politically suggests that the fine-tuning of one's attacks, the attempt to keep a useful enemy alive and just-threatening-enough, is an impossible task. The enthusiasm necessary to make an assault successful invariably interferes with carefully dosed last-second concessions.[18]

Finally, Tocqueville stresses weakness of character in his analysis of the ruin of Louis-Philippe. He does not mention success in this context, only good luck. Louis-Philippe had the bad luck of having

[17] Similarly: Lamartine ''saw almost as many disadvantages and dangers for himself in victory as in defeat''; and, if he had led them to victory, ''he would very soon have been buried under his own triumph'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 108).

[18] Lamartine's dilemma in the spring of 1848 is quite similar to the problem that confronted Tocqueville, Dufaure, and Barrot in the summer of 1849. After the elections of May 1849, in which the Montagnards did surprisingly well, conservative leaders such as Thiers and Molé supported the creation of a moderate-liberal cabinet. In other words, Tocqueville became Foreign Minister because he (not unlike Lamartine a year earlier) was considered a useful buffer against dangerous forces to his left. Once the Montagnards were driven from the Assembly, in the wake of the abortive uprising of 13 June 1849, it was only a matter of time before the Barrot cabinet had to fall.

good luck: ''his mind had retreated long ago into the sort of haughty loneliness inhabited by almost all kings whose long reigns have been prosperous'' (*ibid*., p. 64). What looks good is really bad. The actor's perspective is erroneous. Indeed, there is something pathetic about the actor's point of view. Louis-Philippe's reign had been outwardly calm and thus his warning signals were dimmed. He was not on the lookout for dangers. Nothing even vaguely interesting had occurred for so long. If he had had to face a steady stream of small dangers during his whole reign, he could not have fallen asleep at his post. If he had not been so ''lucky'', he might have been prepared for insurrection.

Saved by Danger

Tocqueville's focus on the destroyed-by-success dynamic is complemented and qualified by his attention to the opposite pattern: saved-by-danger. Here, and here alone, he clarifies the limits to his fatalism, explaining the mechanism that reconciles, in some circumstances, human control over events with mankind's general puniness and disability. His entire analysis of the urban uprising hinges upon the idea that the perception of danger enhances human mastery of historical change. Agency, while seldom heroic, can be gratifyingly effective. Individuals can, at least temporarily, take control. Such brief moments at the helm are made possible by an external stimulus – by a threat. Danger provides an indispensable crutch for a weak species.

In response to the Assembly's moves to close the National Workshops, barricades were thrown up in Paris toward the end of June 1848. With troops largely recruited from the countryside, General Cavaignac put down the rebellion. Hundreds were killed in the fighting and many thousands were arrested and condemned to death or deported. Tocqueville's *récit* of this insurrection occupies Chapters 8 and 9 of Part 2. The organizing idea of these chapters is that ''it was exactly the element that made it so terrible that saved us'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 144). He even cites Condé's paradox, uttered two centuries earlier, during the wars of religion: ''we should have perished, had we not been so near to perishing'' (*ibid*., p. 144). The clear suggestion here is that a less conspicuous or salient danger would have been more dangerous. Why? Tocqueville's answer is double: perceived danger has a positive influence, once again, on both character and cooperation. When we are palpably threatened, we rise to the occasion and gain allies much more easily than in safer times.

A greater danger is better for the threatened party than a lesser danger because it breaks through the threshold of consciousness and provokes more intelligent defensive behavior.[19] Most people want to preserve themselves but, unfortunately, their minds wander. They drift asleep. They often do not notice the oncoming threats to their existence until it is too late.[20] The human penchant for self-preservation is natural and given. What varies enormously is alertness to threats. A dramatic danger focuses the mind usefully on the possibility of destruction.[21] As Descartes argued, the main source of human irrationality, and hence of self-destructive behavior, is the inability to control the focal point of one's attention.[22] Good fortune is pernicious if it dulls one's senses. Danger is beneficial when it catches fire in the eye, affixing human consciousness to the gravest problem at hand.[23]

Why do the middle classes defend Paris energetically against the insurrectionaries? They do so "because they know defeat means slavery" (*ibid.*, p. 152). This disturbing foreknowledge is driven home by the violence of the revolt. If it had been less furious and noisy, it would have been more successful because the defenders of property might have remained asleep until it was too late:

[19] As Keynes wrote, "there is nothing worse than a moderate evil! If wasps and rats were hornets and tigers we should have exterminated them before now" (Keynes 1971, p. 156).

[20] Similar considerations underlie Tocqueville's analysis, in the *Ancien régime*, of the fatal obliviousness to popular unrest displayed by the privileged classes before 1789.

[21] Albert Hirschman argues, in a quite Tocquevillean manner, against the mysteriousness and "heroic" implications of Arnold Toynbee's famous idea of challenge-and-response. Tasks that carry stiff penalties, where poor performance entails immediately drastic consequences, are actually *less demanding*, he says, than tasks where failure entails no swift costs. In other words, a situation that imperiously requires careful planning and a high level of alertness helps the individuals involved in their ongoing efforts to master their flagging concentration. Here is Hirschman's example: "a person whose attention is apt to wander is likely to drive quite well in heavy city traffic, but is in great danger of landing in a ditch as soon as he reaches an 'easy' country road" (Hirschman 1958, p. 144). And he adds: "intense traffic helps him in the task of focusing his attention" (*ibid.*, pp. 144n-145n). A situation which offers a high tolerance for incompetence deprives the mind of the external stimuli it needs to keep itself functioning at a high level. The assumption here is that mastering a situation always requires us first to master ourselves and that, in turn, dangerous situations are attention-getters that help us whip our unruly faculties into shape. Hirschman uses this argument to explain, for example, why airline maintenance is so much superior to highway maintenance in developing countries (*ibid.*, p. 142).

[22] Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (Descartes 1967, pp. 362-366).

[23] For danger to have this effect, however, it must be both real, and serious. A stream of false or wholly petty alarms is just as desensitizing as good fortune: "Assemblies, like individuals, get used to living in a state of continual alarms, so that in the end they cannot discern, amid all the signs of imminent peril, the one that shows it is actually upon them" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 115). Monotony comes in many forms. Uninterrupted calm and uninterrupted agitation both blunt the mind.

> if the rebellion had been less radical and seemed less fierce, probably most of the bourgeoisie would have stayed at home; France would not have rushed to our aid; perhaps even the National Assembly would have yielded. (*Ibid.*, p. 144)

It was the ferocious and radical *appearance* of the revolution that triggered the healthy immune response of the urban middle classes and the conservative peasantry during the June civil war. All property-owners had common interests, objectively threatened by a socialist revolution. But an objective interest is not yet a subjective motivation. Divided irrationally between Catholics and anticlericals, legitimists and Orleanists, Parisians and provincials, moderate royalists and moderate republicans, France's property-owners would never have cooperated in defending their common interests. To pull together they needed the high drama of "a sort of 'Servile War'" (*ibid.*, p. 136). Alarm welded them into something like a compact corps, at least temporarily.[24] In politics, Tocqueville explains, "shared hatreds are almost always the basis of friendships" (*ibid.*, p. 73).[25] Fear of confiscatory urban revolutionaries forged a kind of class solidarity, however short-lived. Imminent danger transformed a latent interest into an urgent reason for action. Free-riding became less frequent. For once, even the spineless commercial classes acted like manly soldiers. A common threat caused various subgroups to bury their differences. Petty dislikes, inherited resentments, and personal touchiness – which normally divide faction from faction and interfere with rational cooperation – were put to one side. Because it drove the propertied into each others' arms, in sum, perceived danger stifled the proto-socialist revolution of 1848.[26]

[24] As he says: "fear had acted upon them as physical pressure might on very hard substances, forcing them to hold together while the compression continued, but leaving them to fall apart when it was relaxed" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 87).

[25] This is why, in June 1848, "all the landowners [*propriétaires*], whatever the origins, antecedents, education, or means, had come together and seemed to form a single unit" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 87).

[26] The idea that a perceived danger is beneficial because it provokes cooperative behavior is also useful for understanding another aspect of the defeat of the left. What saved the parties of order was a temporary rift between the socialists and the Montagnards: "it was this that saved us" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 101). Lamartine inadvertently reinforced and perpetuated this ideologically-motivated division by bringing certain members of the Mountain into the government, giving members of the right and center an opportunity to organize a counter-attack: "it is possible that Lamartine's subterfuges and semi-connivance with the enemy, although they ruined him, saved us" (*ibid.*, p. 112). By the time the socialists and the Montagnards perceived the common threat and were willing to cooperate, it was too late. Strategically, then, the defeat of the left depended on a keep-them-divided-and-conquer strategy. But Lamartine's flirtations with the Mountain had a positive effect only because the danger hanging over the heads of the leftist parties did not penetrate into their consciousness and thus did not provoke a strategic alliance. This did not occur, in turn, because the parties of order – by sheer chance – did not present a common front (*ibid.*).

To supplement the account of saved-by-danger found in the *Souvenirs*, we must turn to an important passage in *Democracy*. In some respects, this is the most complete account he ever provided of the dynamic in question:

> It has been noticed that a man in imminent danger hardly ever remains at his normal level; he rises above or falls below it. The same thing happens to nations too. Sometimes extreme dangers, instead of elevating a nation, bring it low; they may arouse its passions without giving them direction, and bewilder, not clarify, its thoughts. The Jews were still killing one another amid the smoking ruins of the temple. But just as frequently, with nations as with men, the very imminence of danger calls forth extraordinary virtues. At such times great characters stand out in relief like monuments at night illuminated by the sudden glare of a conflagration. Then genius no longer hesitates to come forward, and the people in their fright forget their envious passions for a time. (Tocqueville 1969, p. 199)

First, danger does not necessarily serve as a challenge provoking an heroic response.[27] Sometimes danger floods the mind with confusing or stupefying emotions. Sometimes it may even incite pointless butchery. Under certain conditions, danger has a positive effect. Under different conditions, it has a negative effect. That is all Tocqueville has to say about the matter.[28] He makes no effort to specify the empirical conditions under which one dynamic or the other is triggered.[29] He is satisfied with identifying and describing a variety of mechanisms likely to be encountered by students of political behavior and social change.

Second, the final phrase in the passage cited makes explicit an idea that is presupposed but never stated in the *Souvenirs*. Danger can be valuable because, on the one hand, envy is enormously destructive and, on the other hand, danger has great envy-repressing power. More specifically, danger helps quash democratic resentment toward superior individuals, thereby allowing a natural aristocracy to mount upon the public stage.[30]

Harder Problems are Easier to Solve

A similar paradox surfaces in Tocqueville's account of his days at the foreign ministry. The larger a problem becomes, he explains, the simpler

[27] The most amusing example of this theme in the *Souvenirs* occurs when a frightened Thiers, throwing his arms around General Lamorcière, tells him that he is a hero. Tocqueville remarks: "I could not help smiling at that sight, for they did not love each other at all, but danger is like a wine in making all men sentimental" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 161).

[28] See Elster 1990, pp. 135-186.

[29] This can be construed as a criticism of Tocqueville only by those who believe, implausibly, that such an account is possible.

[30] *Cf.* Tocqueville 1969, p. 223.

it is to resolve or dissolve: ''problems do not always increase in difficulty in proportion to their importance, as from a distance one tends to assume; indeed the opposite is more often the case'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 230). Heavier loads are lighter.[31] In this case, Tocqueville's reasoning runs as follows. More difficult problems are easier to cope with because problem-solving resources – such as one's own talents, energy, and attentiveness as well as the cooperation of others – are not constant.[32] Capacities grow with the task, and faster than the task.

This argument is not precisely parallel to the saved-by-danger thesis discussed above. True, Tocqueville is discussing a situation of perceived crisis here; and that has an important effect on his analysis. But what concerns him most is status or rank. As an individual scales the administrative ladder, he faces bigger problems, but these problems become more tractable. They are heavier and therefore lighter because the office-holder rises to the occasion and many helpers and advisors come to his support. The second factor is described as follows:

> when a man's decisions will influence a whole nation's fate, he will always find plenty of people at hand to enlighten and help him, to take charge of details, and to encourage and defend him, all of which is not the case of anybody in a subordinate office dealing with matters of secondary importance. (*Ibid.*, pp. 230-231)

Large problems attract willing and competent collaborators. But the effect on the official's own character should not be neglected. Difficult challenges focus the mind and ''bring out the best'' in an individual: ''all one's powers are so stimulated by the consciousness of the importance of the task that, although it may be a little harder, the workman is at the top of his form'' (*ibid.*, p. 231).[33] This is the opposite of the traditional idea that those who reach the top are debilitated because they become swollen with arrogance, hear no frank criticism, and are surrounded by flatterers. One reason why Tocqueville hated mediocre times was that, in his view, they deprived talented individuals of the challenges necessary to unleash their dormant powers.

[31] ''The complications of problems do not grow with their importance; often they look simpler when their consequences spread wider and are more menacing'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 230). This may be the flip-side of the pattern discussed in the *Ancien régime*: lighter problems are heavier, that is, frustrations are more acute in a society where people are relatively better off.

[32] Compare this claim to the better known Tocquevillean thesis that, even though inequality causes frustration, more inequality does not cause more frustration. This does not follow since frustration also depends on the sensitivity of individuals which tends to decrease with increase of inequality.

[33] *Cf.* ''I also find that it is very much easier for me to be kind, friendly, and attentive when I am without a rival than it was when I was one of the crowd'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 285n).

The Argument Schematized

We are now in a position to summarize the saved-by-danger and destroyed-by-success patterns in the following two-by-two table:

TABLE I

	character effect	cooperation effect
danger	talents mobilized alertness increased	allies mobilized envy suppressed
lack of danger	distraction and chronic sleepiness induced	envy uncorked defection encouraged

From this table, in fact, we can readily see that the two mechanisms – one fatalistic, the other voluntaristic – are part of a single more general thesis about the complex psychological conditions for political success and failure.[34]

The saved-by-danger/destroyed-by-success dynamic pictured here is interesting in itself, of course. But what exactly does it tell us about the *Souvenirs* or about Tocqueville's thinking as a whole? Perhaps it is a mere curiosity, irrelevant to larger themes, such as the fate of modern democracy, normally associated with the book or the man. This is unlikely. Consider, in the light of the destroyed-by-success idea, the main thesis of the *Ancien régime*. The French nobility was ruined because it achieved exactly what it wanted. The nobles were searching for tax-exemptions, but "the more their immunities increased, the poorer they became" (Tocqueville 1955, p. 135). The story of the monarchy is quite similar. By tearing down all obstructions to central rule, the French crown also successfully eliminated those forces which might have helped it during a crisis.[35] By intentionally weakening the

[34] As the passage cited from *Democracy* suggests, Tocqueville assumes that *excessive* danger can have debilitating effects on both character and cooperation. But he does not indulge in futile attempts to specify, in general, what an "optimal" amount of danger might be.

[35] "Nothing had been left that could obstruct the central government, but, by the same token, nothing could shore it up" (Tocqueville 1955, p. 137).

nobility, the king decapitated his potential peasant army – the sole force that might have defended him against the Parisian mob. In other words, the monarchy was undermined because it achieved its goals: centralizing all power in one place (making the kingdom easy to seize), habituating the nation to ground-sweeping reforms, and so forth. Both the king and the nobility were destroyed by success.[36]

Tocqueville also reports that his father's generation had no idea of what a violent revolution might be. Eighteenth-century nobles could not even imagine such a cruel and catastrophic upheaval. No wonder they were not prepared for it. They were destroyed by what they could not imagine, and because they could not imagine it. Tocqueville means this diagnosis to be an argument for some measure of democracy. Republican government, he assumes, is always somewhat rowdy and turbulent. It therefore tends to keep political rulers awake:

> The small disturbances which, when there is political freedom, inevitably take place from time to time in even the most stable social systems are a constant reminder of the risk of large-scale cataclysms and keep the authorities on the *qui vive*. But in the eighteenth century, on the very eve of the Revolution, there had been as yet no warning that the ancient edifice was tottering. (Tocqueville 1955, p. 143)

If eighteenth-century Frenchmen had had some public liberty, with its small disorders, they would have been more likely to have thought clearly about the possible consequences of disorder. France had been so peaceful and restrained during the eighteenth century, that ruling elites had become oblivious to the consequences of disorder. The old regime was destroyed by success, or perhaps by good luck. It could have been saved by danger.

Political Aesthetics and Anaesthetics

The saved-by-danger/destroyed-by-success dynamic is not a marginal but a central theme in Tocqueville's thought. Consider, as further proof, his lifelong fascination with situations of political crisis. Tocqueville loved danger, almost for aesthetic reasons. This enchantment is strikingly recorded in the *Souvenirs*: ''I have a natural inclination for

[36] Tocqueville discerns the same dynamic at work in the ultimate discrediting of the radical Enlightenment. Once the philosophe's anticlerical passion had destroyed the political power of the Church, the ability of the Church to irritate people and rouse strong hatreds dramatically decreased. By achieving its goals, anticlericalism undermined the conditions of its own existence: ''this part of eighteenth-century philosophy, stemming as it did from special conditions that the Revolution did away with, inevitably tended to lose its appeal once those conditions had been removed and it was, so to speak, *submerged by its own triumph*'' (Tocqueville 1955, p. 6, my emphasis).

adventure'' and ''I have always found that a touch of danger lends spice to most of life's actions'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 106). A small crisis puts zing into life. It allows heroes to storm to the rescue. It gives risk-takers a sense that life has ''meaning''. During the electoral campaign of April 1848, Tocqueville concedes to a group of electors that deputies in the new National Assembly may have to face physical violence: ''but with the danger there is glory, and it is because of the danger and the glory that I am here now'' (*ibid.*, p. 91).

Tocqueville's spice-of-life interpretation of danger is supplemented by his interesting suggestion that sitting on a powderkeg is the best possible remedy for chronic skepticism. Focused fear is the most effective antidote against diffuse existential anxiety. Exposing yourself to extreme hazards is incompatible with doubt. When the July monarchy came crashing down, Tocqueville at first claimed to be inconsolably aggrieved (*ibid.*, pp. 66-68). But he soon felt exhilarated simply because there was no room for hesitation: ''the choice lay between salvation and destruction for the country'' (*ibid.*, p. 85). Throughout his life, he had been plagued and harassed by uncertainty. He loved the dramatic either/or situation of 1848 precisely because it extinguished his usual vacillations and anxieties. Crisis was a great relief: ''I am less afraid of danger than of doubt'' (*ibid.*, p. 85). Faced with a brewing storm, he was free, as he says, ''to plunge headlong into the fray, risking wealth, peace of mind and life'' (*ibid.*, p. 85). Danger provides a welcome provocation for high-strung and qualm-stricken people to throw themselves uninhibitedly into life.

The Tedium of Consensus

Tocqueville's complaint about false polarization, discussed above, can be usefully juxtaposed to his eloquent lament about the deadening consequences of consensus politics. Missing from the July Monarchy were dramatic confrontations with real enemies. The political class holding a vice-grip on power was too homogeneous to permit genuine conflicts to erupt in the Assembly:

> in a political world thus composed and led, what was most lacking, especially at the end, was political life itself. Such life could hardly emerge or survive within the sphere delineated for it by the constitution. (Tocqueville 1987, pp. 9-10)

To say that political life was boring in the 1840s was, for Tocqueville, to say that it did not exist. ''The political'', by definition, is

interesting and even thrilling. Parliamentary debate seemed meaningless because there were no large issues, no extraordinary leaders, no groups inspired by abstract principles clawing at each others throats: ''as every matter was settled by the members of one class, in accordance with their interests and point of view, no battlefield could be found on which great parties might wage war'' (*ibid.*, p. 10).[37] What was missing from the July Monarchy? Danger. Absent, more precisely, were great parties locked in portentous conflict.

The homogeneity of the middle classes deprived parliamentary exchanges of ''all originality, all reality, and so of all true passion'' (*ibid.*, p. 10). Distaste for base self-interest and longing for ''true passion'' are expressed everywhere in Tocqueville's writings. The *Souvenirs* are no exception. The deputies during the July Monarchy were not petty men; but their circumstances – namely their insulation from perilous political conflict – doomed them to squander their energies on petty concerns. Greatness was beyond reach:

> I have spent ten years of my life in the company of truly great minds who were in a constant state of agitation without ever really becoming heated, and who expended all their perspicacity in the vain search for subjects on which they could seriously disagree. (*Ibid.*, p. 10)[38]

They pined for the tension of discord. They were nostalgic for a sharply polarized political scene. Why? What psychic benefits would they have reaped from a momentous dispute? The electroshock of confrontation, it seems, gives a strong figure-ground organization to the world. Grave disagreements make it easy to be serious, to distinguish the important from the trivial. A dramatic face-off gives participants the sense of being involved in significant affairs. It lends not only warmth but meaning to existence.[39] This entire discussion of enlivening polarization again shows that Tocqueville's discussion of the psychologically advantageous side-effects of looming danger cannot be dismissed as marginal to his thought.

Tocqueville's complaints about parliamentary government in the 1840s prepare us to understand one of the most remarkable passages in the *Souvenirs*. Listen to the way Tocqueville forthrightly confesses his psychological exhilaration at the coming of the Revolution:

[37] Tocqueville defines ''great parties'' as those based on principles rather than material interests (Tocqueville 1969, p. 177).

[38] ''Greatness'', here, is conceived as an end-in-itself, apart from any instrumental goal.

[39] This may also explain the ''selfless'' enthusiasm of the National Guards: ''they loved war in itself much more than the cause for which they fought'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 160).

> when I come to look carefully into the depths of my heart, I find with some surprise a certain relief, a sort of joy, mixed with all the sorrows and fears engendered by the revolution. This terrible event made me suffer for my country, but it is clear that I did not suffer for myself; on the contrary, I seemed to breathe more freely after the catastrophe. (*Ibid.*, p. 81)

It was obviously an emotional relief, this outbreak, this escape from passionlessness, dangerlessness, and lack of serious conflict, this reprieve from "the languor of parliamentary life" (*ibid.*, p. 12). Here at last was a world-historical drama, however comic when viewed under a microscope. The political change was personally satisfying, of course. Tocqueville had finally seen the last of Guizot, for one thing. Far from playing a brilliant role in the Assembly, moreover, he had been an utter failure (*ibid.*, p. 81). So the revolution destroyed the scene of his public humiliation.[40] But, unlike Lamartine (at least as described in the *Souvenirs*[41]), Tocqueville would not have destroyed society simply to satisfy his *amour propre*. The whole country was suffering from parliamentary government. A safe middle-class politics of consensus was numbing the entire French élite.

Parliament itself was both laughable and pitiable.[42] There is something embarrassingly Hamlet-like and indecisive about most legislatures, in fact:

> assemblies are very subject to nightmares of this sort in which some unknown, invisible force seems always to be interposed at the last moment between thought and act, preventing the one from ever becoming the other. (*Ibid.*, p. 147)

This was especially true in the 1840s. Luckily, such a frustrating arrangement could not endure. Already in 1847, Tocqueville had foreseen that "the time is coming when the country will again be divided between two great parties" (*ibid.*, p. 12). This was a hopeful not a fearful prognosis. Such a polarized situation would force the legislature, despite its inherent torpor, to leap ahead from thought to action. *Grandeur* would be re-introduced into political life in the unlikely form of class warfare, a socialist revolution ripe for violent repression by an awakened and resolute middle class. This crisis would allow political elites to escape from "the labyrinth of petty incidents, petty ideas, petty passions, personal viewpoints and contradictory projects" where they had been frittering away their lives (*ibid.*, p. 4). Remember Tocqueville's main complaint against the July Monarchy. There, "no battlefield could

[40] "It was that parliamentary world, which brought me all the miseries just described, that the revolution had just smashed" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 84).

[41] Lamartine "always seemed ready to turn the world upside down for the fun of it" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 108).

[42] "Assemblies are like children in that idleness never fails to make them do or say a lot of silly things" (Tocqueville 1987, p. 153).

be found on which great parties could wage war'' (*ibid.*, p. 10). Now, finally, a true confrontation was about to occur, a climactic showdown between the propertied and the nonpropertied: ''the political struggle will be between the Haves and the Have-nots; property will be the great battlefield'' (*ibid.*, pp. 12-13). In a sense, this is bound to be the greatest battle of human history, for the simple reason that property is ''the foundation of our social order'' (*ibid.*, p. 75). Here was a crisis worthy of great leaders.[43] When elected to the Constituent Assembly in April 1848, Tocqueville felt ''a new and delightful sensation'' (*ibid.*, p. 105). The earth was quaking. Events were careening unstoppably toward ''a great battle'' (*ibid.*, p. 99). Civilization itself was at stake. The Assembly itself remained pathetic, to be sure.[44] But Tocqueville was elated because, at last, he found himself clearly aligned with one side in a world-historical, struggle. ''In spite of the seriousness of the situation'', he writes, ''I had a sense of happiness'' (*ibid.*, p. 105). But the ''in spite of'' here is patently insincere.

If we look briefly at the shape of the battle he foresees, we will find all of the typical Tocquevillean themes. The lower classes are driven by the burning passion of *envy*, elsewhere euphemistically described as ''the love of equality''. While envy is an anthropological universal, it is exacerbated by social circumstances. The envy eating away at the lower classes explains, among other things, their uppity desire to wear fine clothes and eat good food (*ibid.*, p. 143). It can be traced to four causes: (1) social leveling which encourages the poor to compare themselves with the well off, (2) the *enrichissez-vous* politics of Louis-Philippe and Guizot, (3) socialist theories that deny the inevitability of poverty,[45] and (4) the decline of religion, especially the evaporation of the compensatory effect of belief in an afterlife.[46] To counter the massive

[43] With these conflict-extolling passages in mind, one leftist historian refers disdainfully to ''Tocqueville's taste for a decisive confrontation'' (Magraw 1986, p. 129), without mentioning, however, what Marx might have felt about the subject.

[44] Consider: ''this Assembly was more susceptible than any I have known to the deceits of eloquence'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 111).

[45] The causal efficacy Tocqueville attributes to ideas here should not be neglected. But he is careful to say that the urban crown was predisposed toward socialist ideology not only by the miserable harvests of 1846 and 1847 (which greatly increased food prices, depressed wages, and caused unemployment) but also by half-a-century of publicly acclaimed political reform that had failed to improve by one iota the plight of the working poor. Political reform taught all Frenchmen that change was possible. Thus, it removed the ''anaesthetic of inevitability'' that had traditionally reconciled the poor to their poverty.

[46] Concerning this fourth factor, Tocqueville says: ''how could it have failed to occur to the poor classes, who were inferior but nonetheless powerful, that they might use their power to escape from their poverty and inferiority.'' And he adds, in a passage marked for omission in the manuscript: ''especially at a time when the prospect of the other world has become hazier, and the miseries of this one are more important and seem more intolerable'' (Tocqueville 1987, p. 75).

psychological force of envy, Tocqueville proposes a strategic use of republican political institutions:

> To protect the ancient laws of society against the innovators by using the new strength the republican principle could give to government; to make the clear will of the people of France triumph over the passions and desires of the Paris working men, and in this way to conquer democracy by democracy, such was my only design. (*Ibid.*, pp. 105-106)

This passage could easily serve as an epigraph for *Democracy*, where, as is well known, a project of damage-limitation led Tocqueville to propose the use of democratic politics as a cure for the worst side-effects of democratic social leveling. No fatalist could propose such a strategy. Tocqueville is assuming here that purposive action can be successful, that attempts to achieve one's aims are not always self-defeating. But whatever success can be achieved is due, in large measure, to an acute consciousness of the danger of failure.

In Part 2 of the *Souvenirs*, the conflict between the haves and the have-nots is described as dangerous enough to call forth political talents and forge political solidarities. Danger can temporarily overcome the ''atomism'' of the new bourgeois order. Crisis stifles the democratic envy most people feel for political elites. When the situation deteriorates far enough, leaders will emerge. The socialist/antisocialist conflict will not be *too* dangerous so long as the main threat can be cushioned by a diffusion of property and an increase in political participation. This last insight is crucial. It implies that Tocqueville's relish for dramatic confrontation was not wholly childish or irresponsible. Indeed, his personal taste for conflict is nicely balanced by his proclivity for conflict-avoidance. Reticence about agonic confrontation is largely invisible in the passages where, nauseated by the blandness of political life in the 1840s, he longs for great parties locked in battle. But it comes to the surface when he witnesses first-hand the inglorious results of class warfare: ''everything in the heroic game of war is not heroic'' (*ibid.*, p. 160). His ''joy'' at the collapse of the July Monarchy faded at the sight of ''armed socialists'' (*ibid.*, p. 94), unemployed workers with crazy theories in their heads and lethal weapons in their hands. He was soon overwhelmed by ''the utter bitterness of revolutions'' (*ibid.*, p. 95). Witnessing the parades on the Champ de Mars, for example, he roundly denounced ''the foolish delight'' of his friend Carnot (*ibid.*, p. 130).

In a way, these passages reveal the characteristic tragedy of Tocqueville's life. He loathed parliamentary wheeling and dealing.

But he was also terrified by civil war. He was trapped depressingly between the monstrosity of a socialist revolution and the tedium of bourgeois politics. The conditions of meaningful politics are the conditions of political catastrophe. He spent the 1840s longing for a politics full of ''real passions''. When he finally got what he had been looking for, he realized he did not want it (*ibid.*, p. 74). Underlying political consensus, pock-marked by petty partisan squabbling, bored him utterly. But class confrontation and a society ''cut in two'' were obviously more intolerable still (*ibid.*, p. 98). Conflict or consensus? Tocqueville did not know which was worse.

In a passage that unites many of the themes discussed above, Tocqueville underlines the paradoxical nature of his position:

> the Constituent Assembly had been elected [in April 1848] to face civil war; that was its main merit; as long as it was necessary to fight, it was in effect splendid; it only became a wretched sight after victory [in June 1848], when it felt itself disintegrating *as a result of and under the weight of that victory.* (*Ibid.*, p. 104, my emphasis)

The central institution of republican self-government can operate effectively only in an emergency. Only when its back is up against the wall, can a legislature avoid Hamlet-like paralysis. Since no assembly can cultivate the ''optimal'' amount of civil war, however, the implication of this analysis seems quite bleak.

The Primacy of Foreign Policy

The basic dilemma of Tocquevillean politics can be summarized as follows. For political life to be interesting, it must be enlivened by dramatic conflicts. Political actors must be inspirited by strong passions, and that includes passions of enmity. This is a recipe, however, for more revolution, which Tocqueville notoriously does not desire. Does he offer any ''solution'' to this problem? Indirectly, yes. Tocqueville clearly had a preference for the executive over the legislative branch of government. Notice the sexual metaphor he applies to the ''impotent'' Assembly when its active member, the executive, is removed:

> there is nothing more wretched than an Assembly in a moment of crisis when the government is not there; it is like a man still full of passion and desire but impotent and tossing childishly about in physical frustration. (Tocqueville 1987, p. 140)

Given Tocqueville's simmering contempt for the legislative branch, it is not surprising that he finds his true political happiness only when he joins the second Barrot ministry as Minister of Foreign Affairs.[47] His greatest achievements in that office, as he recounts them, involved bullying Austria and Switzerland, on separate occasions, and forcing them both to back down (*ibid.*, pp. 243, 249). Foreign policy obviously allowed Tocqueville to resolve the problem of combining internal social order with the aesthetics of confrontationalism. International contests provide a middle path between the excessive danger of class warfare and the tedium of bourgeois politics. By uniting the nation around France's military *grandeur* abroad, he can have his cake and eat it too. Tocqueville's tendencies toward nationalistic militarism shocked and dismayed John Stuart Mill. But they represent an attempt to solve the basic dilemma of his political thought: how to reconcile a "meaningful" politics of dramatic confrontation with a more sober politics of internal stability, representative institutions, and respect for property.

Tocqueville's detailed account of his five months in the Barrot cabinet, in Part 3 of the *Souvenirs*, is interesting in many respects. Especially striking is his demonstration of the claim that human vanity is stronger than self-interest. People invariably prefer to be asked for their advice without it being taken than to have their advice taken without being asked for it. To succeed politically, one must keep this rule in mind. Tocqueville himself apparently followed this maxim to great effect in his dealings with the "*rue de Poitiers*" group of conservative leaders, including Theirs and Molé.

But another argument is more pertinent to the main themes of the book. What Tocqueville considered his fundamental contribution to the reshaping of Europe, apparently, was his advice to abandon France's centuries-old policy of keeping Germany divided. By pressing for German unification, France could convert its neighbor into a useful tool in the defense of Western Europe against the Russians. His specific advice was: "we must . . . not be afraid to strengthen our neighbor so that he may one day be in a position to help us repulse the common enemy" (*ibid.*, p. 247). With the benefit of hindsight, we can

[47] According to Larry E. Shiner, "the *Recollections* tells the story of Tocqueville's transformation from a hesitant and marginal political figure into a confident and effective statesman" (SHINER 1988, p. 65). The considerable calm and tranquillity of spirit he exhibits in Part 3 apparently derives from the difficult series of crises he had to confront. Any reader patient enough to survive Shiner's long-winded and hyper-chic methodological detours, it should be mentioned, will be rewarded with many clever insights into the rhetoric of the *Souvenirs*.

turn Tocqueville against Tocqueville here. The danger posed by a common enemy (Russia) provokes the formation of strategic alliances or, in this case, the decision to strengthen a political ally (Germany). Once you set a boulder rolling, however, you may find that it becomes quite impossible to stop. In the event, a united Germany turned out to be a ''tool'' just as difficult for France to control as the street had been for the French middle-class.

Conclusion

A close reading of the *Souvenirs* reveals a series of sharp analytical insights buried in a flow of picturesque narrative. As in his other books, Tocqueville focuses on the unintended consequences and unperceived causal chains that impede conscious direction of historical events. His reflections on the irrationalities associated with liberal ''publicity'', for example, underscore the limits of human control. But the fatalistic picture he presents is relieved by his insight that hindrances, difficulties, crises, and dangers can help overcome both interpersonal and intrapersonal problems of coordination. Under the stimulus of salient threats, political actors can, for brief moments, discipline themselves and secure the cooperation they need to achieve their goals. Contrariwise, total suppression of eye-catching dangers will unravel useful alliances and promote a desultory and self-destructive style of political choice.

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Résumé

Dans le récit plein d'ironie que donne ses *Souvenirs*, Tocqueville esquisse un schéma d'opposition entre Sauvé par le danger et Perdu par le succès qui éclaire les conditions sous lesquelles les mouvements révolutionnaires s'effondrent ou réussissent. Les situations critiques concentrent les esprits avec un seul objectif en vue, modèrent les appétits concurrents en encourageant les membres talentueux du groupe qui tient l'avantage à coopérer avec toutes leurs ressources. À l'opposé, des dangers moins pressants endorment la vigilance des groupes privilégiés, surtout s'ils se sont habitués au danger dans un environnement apparemment peu inquiétant.

Mots clés : Vigilance ; Coopération ; Danger ; Défection ; Jalousie ; Révolution ; Tocqueville.

Zusammenfassung

In der ironischen Erzählung *Souvenirs* skizziert Tocqueville den Gegensatz zwischen gerettet vor der Gefahr und verloren durch den Erfolg, um den Untergang oder Sieg revolutionärer Bewegungen zu erklären. Kritische Situationen führen zur Begrenzung auf ein Ziel, verringern das Konkurrenzdenken, wobei talentierte Mitglieder von der Gruppendynamik profitieren. Im Gegensatz dazu verringern weniger dringende Gefahren die Wachsamkeit der privilegierten Gruppen, vor allen Dingen wenn sie an Gefahr in einer scheinbar harmlosen Umgebung gewohnt sind.

Schlagwörter: Aufmerksamkeit; Zusammenarbeit; Gefahr; Abwendung; Neid; Revolution.