
THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF TOCQUEVILLE'S *L'ANCIEN RÉGIME ET LA RÉVOLUTION**

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*This essay shows that the central core of Tocqueville's book, its condemnation of the centralist state of the Old Regime, can be placed in a specific tradition in French political thought—the legitimist critique of centralization. Long before the publication of *L'ancien Régime et la Révolution*, the legitimists had made the problem of centralization into one of their central themes, and they had come to attribute all of France's ills to the centralist legacy. As this essay illustrates, the particular vocabulary and arguments used by the legitimists to describe the nefarious effects of centralization on the French body politic showed a considerable resemblance to the language used by Tocqueville in *L'ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Indeed, this resemblance is so striking that, while direct influence is difficult to pinpoint, the legitimist publicists and political thinkers discussed in this essay—many of whom were friends or acquaintances of Tocqueville's—contributed in an important way to shaping the linguistic universe in which *L'ancien Régime et la Révolution* was created.*

Alexis de Tocqueville holds a special place in the pantheon of nineteenth-century French political thinkers. More than any other publicist of his time, he is seen by French intellectuals ranging from François Furet to Marcel Gauchet as a writer who still speaks to us today, as our contemporary almost, more than as a thinker whose ideas are rooted in a bygone age.¹ Tocqueville's reputation as a quintessentially modern thinker is based in part on the visionary quality of his *De la démocratie en Amérique*. But perhaps even more important for his

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¹ François Furet in particular has played an important role in the rediscovery of Tocqueville's work in France; see his *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978). Marcel Gauchet's seminal article on Tocqueville is available in Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1994), 91–111. The Tocqueville revival in France is discussed in François Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth Raps (Charlottesville, 1998), 189–208; and Serge Audier, *Tocqueville retrouvé. Genèse et enjeux du renouveau Tocquevillien français* (Paris, 2004).

appeal in France today is *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. With its critique of the centralist legacy of the Old Regime, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* expressed a view on French political culture which has made a remarkable comeback in contemporary political discourse. Unlike his contemporaries (but like present-day historians), so the argument runs, Tocqueville understood that the French Revolution had not been a liberating event. Rather, its centralizing tendencies had strengthened the illiberal nature of the French state, preventing it from following the Anglo-Saxon model of liberal democracy.

This contemporary quality to Tocqueville's historical work has long discouraged an investigation into the intellectual context in which *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* was written. Especially since the publication of François Furet's *Penser la Révolution française*, it has become customary to stress the original nature of Tocqueville's historical views. Thus Furet describes *L'Ancien Régime* as "the stepchild" of the historiography on the French Revolution, "more often cited than read, and more read than understood," and as a "unique case" in his understanding of the weight of the centralist legacy on French political culture.² This view continues to be defended in Robert Gannett's recent study of the sources of Tocqueville's *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. While Gannett discusses Tocqueville's engagement with predecessors and contemporaries such as Edmund Burke, Benjamin Constant and Prosper de Barante, he concludes that Tocqueville's career as a historian was pursued with a "fierce individualism."³ Likewise, Françoise Mélonio has argued in her encompassing analysis of Tocqueville's engagement with his contemporaries that *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* "was not part of any particular intellectual lineage."⁴

This essay aims to show otherwise. More specifically, I will argue that the central core of Tocqueville's book, its condemnation of the centralist state of the Old Regime, can be placed into a specific tradition in French political thought—the legitimist critique of centralization. If this point has been overlooked by most historians, it is because legitimist contributions to political and historical debate in nineteenth-century France are usually dismissed as obscurantist or uninteresting.⁵ A substantial part of this essay will therefore be taken up by

² François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981), 16–17.

³ Robert Gannett, *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for The Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago and London, 2003), 27.

⁴ Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 107.

⁵ The neglect of the legitimist contribution to the debate about centralization in France is especially pronounced for the Restoration period and the July Monarchy, on which this paper focuses. Recently, Sudhir Hazareesingh has published an excellent study of the debate about decentralization in the Second Empire, *From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy* (Princeton, 1998), in which the legitimist

reviewing the legitimist contribution to the debate about decentralization in order to correct this view. I will show that the legitimists made the problem of centralization into one of their central themes, in particular during the July Monarchy, and that they had come to attribute all of France's ills to the centralist legacy long before the publication of *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Moreover, I will argue that the particular vocabulary and arguments used by the legitimists to describe the nefarious effects of centralization on the French body politic showed a considerable resemblance to the language used by Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Indeed, this resemblance is so striking that, while direct influence is difficult to pinpoint, it can safely be argued that the legitimist publicists and political thinkers discussed in this essay—many of whom were friends or acquaintances of Tocqueville's—contributed in an important way to shaping the linguistic universe in which *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* was created.

By drawing attention to the legitimist sources of *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, I do not wish to argue that Tocqueville was an unoriginal or less important writer than he has been made out to be. However, I do hope to give the reader a better grasp of the intellectual context in which Tocqueville's ideas took shape, similar to the way in which the political thought of thinkers such as Locke, Hobbes or Machiavelli has been historicized over the past few decades. Like these thinkers, Tocqueville must be seen, if we want to come to a more historical understanding of his work, as a historical agent who took part in particular debates. By doing so, I also aim to demonstrate that legitimist thinkers had a far greater impact on the development of French political thought than is usually assumed.⁶ The myth of French exceptionalism, it will become clear, was a legitimist myth, and in propagating this myth Tocqueville was making use of arguments that had first been developed in an intellectual environment he had renounced in 1830.

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The question of decentralization was raised almost immediately after the return of the Bourbons to France in 1814. Among the politicians and publicists urging Louis XVIII to reform the administrative system were prominent liberals,

contribution to the debate about centralization in the Second Empire receives ample attention. For an equally informed, if more traditional, account of legitimist decentralist thought under the Second Empire see Steven D. Kale, *Legitimism and the Reconstruction of French Society 1852–1883* (Baton Rouge and London, 1992).

⁶ On this subject see also Annelien de Dijn, "Aristocratic Liberalism in post-Revolutionary France," *Historical Journal* 48 (2005), 661–81.

such as Benjamin Constant, who in 1814 described decentralization as one of the most pressing issues of the day.⁷ However, the most committed critics of the centralist legacy were to be found among Constant's political opponents, the royalists (also described as ultra-royalists or ultras).⁸ Prominent politicians such as Joseph de Villèle, the royalists' parliamentary leader, repeatedly pleaded for a reform of the local administration, and a first attempt to decentralize was made when a royalist government came to power in 1821.⁹ Royalists condemned centralization because it made administration slower and less efficient. Many of them were also convinced that local communities had a right to administer their own interests, because they were, like individuals, "natural" bodies pre-existing the state. An even more important theme in the royalists' anti-centralist critique, however, was that the continued centralization of the administration posed a major threat to the survival of the restored monarchy.

This view was based on a particular analysis of the effects of centralization on the body politic. The elimination of independent local bodies on the municipal and on the provincial level, royalist publicists warned, had created an all-powerful government. The French state had effectively eliminated the checks and balances which were such a prominent feature of the English political system. This had led to the isolation of individual French citizens from one another, so that they had become unable to resist despotism. But the process of centralization had not just undermined the liberty of the French state. It had also made France more vulnerable to revolutionary upheaval, since the atomization of society had paradoxically made the state more fragile while expanding its powers. As a result, royalist advocates of decentralization emphasized, France was in danger of descending again into the revolutionary cycle of anarchy and military despotism. This conviction was fuelled by the collapse of the restored monarchy in 1815, when Napoleon had managed to recapture the French throne without great difficulty after his escape from Elba.

The dangers of centralization were highlighted in particular by Joseph Fiévée, a former supporter of Napoleon who had transferred his loyalty to the Bourbons in 1814.¹⁰ Fiévée, whose one-man journal *Correspondance politique et administrative*

⁷ Benjamin Constant, *Réflexions sur les constitutions, la distribution des pouvoirs, et les garanties, dans une monarchie constitutionnelle* (Paris, 1814).

⁸ On the royalist party see J. J. Oechslin, *Le Mouvement ultra-royaliste sous la Restauration. Son idéologie et son action politique* (Paris, 1960).

⁹ On the royalists' initial enthusiasm for decentralization see Rudolf von Thadden, *La Centralisation contestée*, trans. Hélène Cusa and Patrick Charbonneau (Paris, 1989), 158–77; François Burdeau, *Liberté, libertés locales chéries!* (Paris, 1983), 83–9.

¹⁰ On Fiévée's political thought see Jeremy Popkin, "Conservatism under Napoleon: The Political Writings of Joseph Fiévée," *History of European Ideas* 5 (1984), 385–400; Benoît Yvert, "La Pensée politique de Joseph Fiévée," *Revue de la société d'histoire de la Restauration*

was one of the most influential royalist publications, had become interested in the problem of centralization early on in his career as a journalist. Under the Empire he had shown his concern for the organization of local administration in his *Des Opinions et des intérêts* (1809), an analysis of the causes of the French Revolution, and in his correspondence with the Emperor. "Oh! How much better I like the old days when the government only occupied themselves with governing, when they left each locality, each profession, each trade to police and administer itself, after granting each group the regulations it had sought in its own interest," he wrote to Napoleon.¹¹ After the return of the Bourbons in 1814, he continued to develop these themes in his journal and in other publications. In Fiévée's view, a reform of the administrative system was absolutely necessary if Louis XVIII wanted to safeguard the stability of the restored monarchy.

In the very first article he wrote after the return of the Bourbons, entitled "Réflexions sur la Constitution à venir, relatives aux biens des Communes et à la liberté compatible avec la Monarchie," Fiévée explained that a reform of the administrative system was of paramount importance to the establishment of freedom and stability in France. Indeed, in his view, the question of decentralization was by far the most important problem the French would have to address, more important even than the problem of the separation of powers which had so preoccupied liberal constitutional thought since the outbreak of the Revolution. According to Fiévée, liberals were mistaken to believe that the creation of a balance of executive, legislative and judiciary power would suffice to safeguard liberty in France. The idea that liberty depended on the existence of bicameral representation was derived from a mistaken interpretation of the English example. Instead, English history taught that liberty resided in the existence of a more or less independent municipal power. "C'est là l'origine et la base de toutes les libertés dans les Etats modernes," he wrote, "c'est le fondement de l'édifice où nous apercevons deux Chambres; c'est le principe actif de la constitution anglaise; et je ne vois pas qu'il en soit question dans les projets qu'on nous représente."¹²

Fiévée further elucidated this idea by making an innovative distinction between governmental and administrative centralization, which was to have a central role in Tocqueville's reflections on this theme. He made clear that in each state a distinction could be made between on the one hand a "governing power" and on the other hand an "administrative power". In France, however, these two powers

et de la monarchie constitutionnelle (1990), 11–25. Fiévée's career is discussed in Jean Tulard's *Joseph Fiévée, conseiller secret de Napoléon* (Paris, 1985).

¹¹ Quoted in Popkin, "Conservatism," 392.

¹² Joseph Fiévée, "Réflexions sur la Constitution à venir, relatives aux biens des Communes et à la liberté compatible avec la Monarchie," *Correspondance politique et administrative, commencé au mois de mai 1814; et dédié à M.le comte de Blacas d'Aulps* 1 (1815), 4.

had become confused when under Mazarin the executive had started to usurp all administrative functions. The Revolution had further increased this tendency, so that France was now characterized by a highly centralized administration. This development, Fiévée warned, posed a major threat to freedom, because liberty depended much more on the organization of the administrative system than on the existence of a representative institution. “Si la liberté ne tient qu’à des discussions dans deux Chambres,” he wrote, “point de liberté. Si l’administration générale est, au contraire, contrariée quelquesfois dans sa marche rapide par le pouvoir municipal, il y aura liberté; les administrateurs auront besoin des talens, et surtout du talent assez rare de conduire des hommes qui ont quelque chose à défendre.”¹³

Fiévée’s concern about administrative centralization led him to introduce a second, and even more important, Tocquevilleian theme in an article entitled “Du pouvoir souverain et de l’isolement des français.”¹⁴ In this article he explained that the abolition of local liberties had atomized French society, leaving individual citizens isolated and powerless in face of central government. He described how the rise of the absolute state, a process which had started with Louis XIV and which had been completed by the Revolution, had dispersed the corporations of the Old Regime, destroyed the local institutions and created a power without limits at the centre. This had left the citizens isolated from one another. “Il n’y a plus de nation, quoique jamais on n’ait tant parlé de nation: il n’est resté en France que des individus isolés.”¹⁵ For this reason, the despotism of the most insignificant bureaucrat had surpassed every known tyranny during the French Revolution. This situation had been maintained under Napoleon, and it remained characteristic of Restoration France. “Personne n’y est considérable par soi-même, personne n’y a des forces individuelles; et il n’y a de réunion dans l’Etat, jusqu’à ce jour, que les deux Chambres créées par le Roi lui-même.”¹⁶

According to Fiévée, this situation in France did not just threaten liberty, it also made stability impossible. He hinted in his *Correspondance* that the Revolution itself had been caused by the excessive centralization of the monarchy of the Old Regime—and thus that the Bourbons themselves were at least partly responsible for their downfall. The Revolution had become inevitable, he wrote, from the moment that the “gens du Roi” started to centralize the administration.¹⁷ The more recent collapse of the restored monarchy in 1815, when Napoleon had reconquered his throne after his escape from Elba, should likewise be attributed

¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴ Joseph Fiévée, “Du pouvoir souverain et de l’isolement des français,” *Correspondance politique et administrative* 1 (1815), 79–97.

¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 89–90.

¹⁷ Joseph Fiévée, *Correspondance politique et administrative* 3 (1816), 76.

to the fact that Louis XVIII had failed to reform local administration upon his return to France. If this “administration monstrueuse” had been dismantled, Napoleon would not have been able to return to France so easily, Fiévée believed:

Ce n'auroit plus été ailleurs la France de Buonaparte, mais un pays où il y auroit eu de puissans moyens de résistance à la tyrannie par l'ascendant de la réunion des principaux propriétaires, et parce qu'on auroit eu à défendre des libertés nouvellement acquises, libertés si chères à tous les peuples qu'elles existent partout où l'homme n'a pas perdu le sentiment de sa dignité.¹⁸

Fiévée's plea for decentralization created quite a stir in the early Restoration period. His *Correspondance* elicited several hostile replies from pro-ministerial publicists. The anonymous author of *Considérations sur quelques doctrines politiques de M. Fiévée* (1816) was highly critical of Fiévée's doctrine. He argued that a state should be characterized by unity if it wanted to endure. Fiévée's proposals for decentralization were therefore highly dangerous, as they threatened the very survival of the French monarchy. Moreover, the development of French history was towards more and not less centralization. The terrible condition of the French people under feudalism illustrated how dangerous it would be to reverse that trend.¹⁹ Another anonymous pamphleteer argued that municipal independence was necessary because local communities had a right to manage their own property, not because they should act as a check on central power. The financial system should give more independence to the communes again so that they could save for future necessities, but they should not be able to subvert the king's authority.²⁰

Fiévée's decentralist ideas were shared, however, by his fellow royalists. In a widely publicized speech of 1818, Joseph de Villèle all but adopted Fiévée's argument that the centralization of the administration—which he described as a system invented for despotism—prevented the establishment of a stable monarchical regime in France. Only in France, Villèle argued, could revolutionaries have overthrown a government simply by taking control of the capital:

Ce beau royaume sans institution, ne ressemble pas mal à une table rase, sur laquelle les novateurs peuvent continuer sans obstacles cette longue série d'expériences politiques, dont les essais déjà faits à nos dépens devraient, ce me semble, avoir pour toujours dégoûté tous les Français sincèrement attachés à leur pays.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Anon., *Considérations sur quelques doctrines politiques de M. Fiévée* (Paris, 1816).

²⁰ Anon., *De l'Administration financière des communes de France, avec quelques applications à la ville de Bordeaux* (Paris, 1816).

²¹ Joseph de Villèle, *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860. Recueil complet des débats législatifs des Chambres françaises. Deuxième série (1800 à 1860)*, ed. J. Mavidal and E. Laurent, 68 vols. (Paris, 1862–1912), 21: 618.

In order to preserve France from new convulsions, and to give the restored monarchy more durability than the governments which had succeeded each other with such speed since 1789, local administrations should be given more independence. If, however, the government failed to decentralize the administration, Villèle concluded, the French state could only be sustained by military power, which reopened the perspective of despotism on the one hand or democratic anarchy on the other.

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During the early Restoration period, in short, royalist publicists and politicians repeatedly expressed their concern about centralization, and urged the need for reform of local administration. However, the July Revolution of 1830, which excluded the royalists (or legitimists, as they now came to be known), permanently from government, made the decentralist cause seem even more attractive. Decentralization became one of the primary political goals of the legitimist party, almost as important to many legitimists as the restoration of the monarchy itself. Proposals for reform varied widely. Some legitimist publicists and politicians pleaded for a restoration of the old provinces. Others took the American federation as their example. Most legitimists emphasized, however, that their enthusiasm for decentralization implied no criticism of France's political unity, or even of the existing organization of the administrative system into municipalities and departments. Rather, they proposed reforms such as giving local bodies a greater say over the choice of their administrators, or enhancing their control over local financial matters.²²

This enthusiasm for decentralization was partly inspired by tactical considerations. Legitimists had a relatively strong electoral base in a number of regions and they undoubtedly hoped to capitalize on that strength to win power in local elections.²³ But more importantly, the legitimist commitment to administrative reform was inspired by the conviction, first propagated by Fiévée in the early Restoration period, that centralization was at the root of the repeated failures to introduce a stable monarchical regime in France. While liberals believed that the July Revolution was, like the English Glorious Revolution, the culmination of a progressive development towards liberty and stability, legitimists saw it rather as a repetition of the Revolution of 1789, a failure of their attempt to normalize French politics after the violence of the recent past. They therefore turned towards the centralist legacy to explain the continued

²² On the debate about decentralization in the July Monarchy see Burdeau, *Liberté!*, 118–26.

²³ On this subject see Stéphane Rials, *Le Légitimisme* (Paris, 1983).

failure of the Bourbon dynasty to maintain itself. In this way, it became possible for royalists to see the July Revolution as a result of a structural problem in French society, a problem to which the Bourbon kings—as many legitimist thinkers were willing to admit explicitly—had paradoxically contributed in an important way.

The decentralist cause was first taken up in 1830–31 in the important liberal-Catholic journal *L'Avenir*, which despite its support for the July Monarchy remained quite close to the legitimist mindset. Félicité de Lamennais and Tocqueville's acquaintance Charles de Montalembert,²⁴ the editors of *L'Avenir*, were strongly committed to decentralization. In the programmatic article “Des Doctrines de l'*Avenir*,” written by Lamennais, the abolition of the “système funeste de la centralisation” was one of the demands listed. *L'Avenir*'s proposals for reform were relatively radical. Lamennais started from the principle that each local community had a natural right to govern itself: “L'Etat ne sauroit plus légitimement s'immiscer dans les affaires propres de la commune, de l'arrondissement, de la province, que dans celles du père de famille,” he wrote. Even more radically, he argued that the system of administration should not be imposed from above, but that the local communities and provinces should be allowed to determine the system of administration themselves. This was necessary, in his view, to revitalize the body politic, and to ensure “la véritable unité vitale, qui résulte de la vie propre, intime, énergique, de chaque partie du corps social.”²⁵

The enthusiasm for decentralization expressed by the editors of *L'Avenir* was based on the conviction that centralization was at the root of all problems confronting post-Revolutionary French society. The centralized government,

une vaste corporation qui administre le pays suivant la volonté de ses chefs et non d'après la vœux du peuple, une société qui a sa hiérarchie, dont chaque membre, arrêté par la crainte, contenu par l'espérance, subordonne sa volonté en tout et partout à celle d'un conseil suprême appelé le conseil des ministres

as *L'Avenir* described it, had extinguished public life in France since it led to “l'isolement absolu des citoyens.” Liberty had become impossible, because centralization held the population “en tutelle.” It had handed over the government of France to “coteries” that formed themselves in the capital. Paris ruled the rest of France as if it were a conquered nation. But the stability of the French state was undermined as well, as *L'Avenir* explained to its readers.

²⁴ Charles de Montalembert frequented the same salons as Tocqueville in the 1830s, and in 1833 Beaumont and Tocqueville even considered starting a review with Montalembert. See André Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville 1805–1859* (Paris: Hachette, 1984), 185–6 and 362.

²⁵ Félicité de Lamennais, “Des Doctrines de l'*Avenir*,” *L'Avenir*, no. 53, 7 Dec. 1830.

Centralization had dangerously diminished the “*énergie vitale*” of the French people.²⁶

Like Fiévée, the editors of *L’Avenir* believed that centralization was dangerous in particular because it atomized society and left individual citizens without protection against the central government. In the levelled society of nineteenth-century France, the natural unit of the family and the local community was the only “*élément de sociabilité*” left. However, the administrative centralization of the French state—which *L’Avenir* carefully distinguished, like Fiévée, from its political unity—was threatening the survival of these units. If the state remained centralized, only individuals would be left in France. This threatened in turn to undermine France’s liberty: “Pour contenir tous ces individus sous une même loi, sous un même régime, en dépit des différences qu’il y a entr’eux, il ne vous restera d’autre moyen que le bras fer du despotisme.” This would result in a terrible tyranny:

Une société qui se réduit à une collection d’individualités n’est que l’égoïsme humain s’exprimant sous des formes infiniment multipliées, et il n’y a que le gouvernement du sabre, que le despotisme le plus abrutissant, que le joug du grand Turc qui puisse y faire régner une apparence de paix. Voilà donc l’état humiliant où vous nous conduirez en voulant tout centraliser, en refusant à la commune, à la province, le droit de s’organiser à sa manière et selon que l’exigent ses besoins particulières.²⁷

Again like Fiévée, the editors of *L’Avenir* pointed out that this problem had its origins in the Old Regime, rather than in the Revolution or in the Napoleonic era, so that the Bourbon dynasty had contributed much to its own demise. “La révolution de 1789, la grande, la première révolution, a plutôt constaté la ruine de nos anciennes institutions qu’elle ne les a détruites,” *L’Avenir* emphasized in an article published in 1831:

Toutes les barrières établies par la sagesse de nos ancêtres entre le peuple et le monarque, barrières qui assuroient des garanties à l’un et un inébranlable appui à l’autre, avoient été successivement abbatues par l’imprévoyante ambition du pouvoir, et la centralisation existoit déjà dans les usages comme aujourd’hui elle existe dans les lois.

The Revolution had failed to provide a solution to this problem, and a political instability had resulted that would last until administrative despotism was abolished. The only remedy was therefore decentralization, *L’Avenir* concluded. Local communities should be granted control over local interests and provinces

²⁶ Anon., “De l’Organisation communale et départementale,” *L’Avenir*, no. 349, 30 Sept. 1831.

²⁷ H., “Des Bases naturelles d’une réorganisation politique,” *L’Avenir*, no. 79, 3 Jan. 1831.

over provincial interests, and the central state's authority should be limited to national interests.²⁸

L'Avenir's concerns were widely shared in legitimist circles during the July Monarchy. The decentralist cause was taken up by *Le Correspondant*, which, like *L'Avenir*, attributed the fall of the Restoration monarchy to the concentration of government power in Paris. *La Gazette de France* developed an ambitious decentralist programme in 1832, which called upon all those in favour of "order and liberty" to give more independence to the provinces and to local communities. At the same time, several pamphlets were published by legitimist politicians to condemn the continued centralization of the administration. Joseph Fiévée turned his attention again to the decentralist cause after many years of silence, publishing in 1831 a brochure entitled *De la Pairie, des libertés locales et de la liste civile*, in which he wrote that the revolutionary condition of France should be attributed to centralization rather than to an innate volatility of the French, and pleaded for a reform of the administrative system as the only way in which to safeguard liberty in France.²⁹

The most influential contribution to this decentralist pamphlet literature, however, was Ferdinand Béchard's two-volume *Essai sur la centralisation administrative*. A legitimist politician who served as deputy for Nîmes, Béchard wrote political pamphlets and books on such diverse issues as the problem of pauperism, liturgical questions and electoral reform. However, his central concern was with the issue of decentralization, and he devoted most of his political life to this one cause. He was an expert in administrative history, writing several books on the subject.³⁰ As a lawyer at the *Cour de cassation* in 1840 and later at the *Conseil d'Etat*, the very pinnacle of the administrative structure, he had enough practical experience of the French administrative system to become convinced that it urgently needed to be reformed. Béchard saw decentralization as the panacea for many problems, such as the issue of pauperism, as he explained in his *La Commune, l'église et l'état dans leurs rapports avec les classes laborieuses* (Paris, 1849–50). But most importantly, he believed that decentralization was a crucial prerequisite to the liberty and stability of the French state. This was

²⁸ Anon., "De l'Organisation communale et départementale [second article]," *L'Avenir*, no. 351, 2 Oct. 1831.

²⁹ Burdeau, *Liberté!*, 108–13, discusses the legitimist enthusiasm for decentralization.

³⁰ Among his publications are *Lois municipales de l'Italie dans l'antiquité, dans le moyen âge et dans les temps modernes* (Paris, 1852); *De l'Administration intérieure de la France* (Paris, 1851); *Droit municipal au moyen âge* (Paris, 1861–2); *Etudes administratives, municipalisme et unitarisme italiens* (Paris, 1862); *Autonomie et césarisme: Introduction au droit municipal moderne* (Paris, 1869).

an important theme of his very first book on decentralization, the *Essai sur la centralisation administrative*, which was first published in 1836.³¹

In this book, Béchard pleaded for a reorganization of society along the lines of “the law of association.” He argued, for instance, that voluntary associations, such as professional unions and religious societies, should be given more freedom to regulate themselves than they enjoyed under the restrictive laws of the July Monarchy. But the larger part of Béchard’s book was taken up with an exposition of his proposals for reforming local administration on its different levels. He started from the assumption, widely shared in legitimist circles, that local communities were living organisms. For this reason, they had the right to administer their own interests. Like Fiévée, Béchard was careful to emphasize that this did not imply any criticism of the political unity of the French state. He distinguished between the government, the “puissance supérieure ou souveraine, chargée de la politique générale de l’Etat,” and the administration, “la direction, la conduite par des mandataires des intérêts des localités,” emphasizing that his proposals for decentralization applied only to the latter.³²

Like the editors of *L’Avenir*, Béchard was convinced that centralization was responsible for the atomization of modern French society. “L’ordre administratif a été réduit à un mécanisme dont le pouvoir central est le grand, l’unique ressort,” he wrote in the introduction to his book:

le gouvernement régit tout par ses préposés; c’est le seul être collectif qui jouisse d’une existence et d’une puissance réelles. A part le lien de famille, d’ailleurs si relâché par les vices de notre législation domestique, l’organisation sociale n’offre en quelque sorte que des intérêts individuels en prises avec le pouvoir. Egoïsme d’une part, force brutale de l’autre, telles sont les deux contrepois sur lesquels repose aujourd’hui l’équilibre social.³³

This condition had caused all despotisms under which France had suffered. The Constituent Assembly had prepared the dictatorship of the Convention by centralizing and the Empire had perfected this despotism, while “ce funeste héritage” had also led to the downfall of the Restoration monarchy.³⁴

Béchard further developed this theme in the first part of his *Essai*, which was devoted to a discussion of the historical evolution of the French political and administrative system. In his view, this history was characterized by a steady decline from liberty into despotism. During the eleventh century the

³¹ Béchard’s book was reissued in 1845 under the title *De l’Administration de la France, ou Essai sur les abus de la centralisation*.

³² Béchard, *Essai sur la centralisation administrative*, 2 vols. (Paris and Marseille, 1836–7), 1: 67.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1: iii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1: v.

strength of noble local elites had guaranteed liberty and stability. This had changed dramatically, however, under Louis XI. His reign had been a transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. Chivalrous manners had been replaced by Italian machinations, corporative organization by centralization. While this development had been counteracted during the reign of Henry IV, centralization had progressed again under the despotic governments of Richelieu and Louis XIV. The feudal aristocracy had been transformed into a court nobility. Manners had changed: the nobility no longer aimed to shine amongst equals, but to please the prince. “C’est à la monarchie administrative de Louis XIV que nous devons la bureaucratie et la passion des places, ces deux grands fléaux de notre âge,” Béchard commented.³⁵

At the end of the eighteenth century, Louis XVI had attempted to reform the monarchy, but by this time the French had come to dream not of orderly liberty, but of equality. The Revolution had therefore been directed against the “esprit d’association.” A “dissolution sociale” had been the result—a condition for which Béchard coined the term “individualism,” which was to play such an important role in Tocqueville’s work:³⁶ “L’ancien ordre social n’est plus qu’un monceau de ruines; sur ses débris fumants une seule chose reste debout: c’est l’individualisme.”³⁷ The imperial despotism that had followed Revolutionary disorder was the natural result of this development. Béchard then continued to describe how this centralist legacy had thwarted every attempt to establish a stable, free government in France in the first decades of the nineteenth century. “D’un côté la démocratie, de l’autre la royauté en état permanent d’antagonisme, point de corps intermédiaire pour modérer le choc et tempérer l’ardeur de la lutte; telle est, en deux mots, l’histoire de nos vingt dernières années,” he wrote;

Un état si anormal devait nécessairement aboutir ou à l’anarchie ou au despotisme. Qu’est-ce, en effet, qu’une nation individualisée? Un troupeau d’esclaves que s’approprie le premier venu, monarque ou tribun. Quand il n’existe plus ni distinctions de rangs, ni lieu de corps, quand l’individualisme est devenu l’unique principe des institutions et des mœurs, le flambeau de l’honneur s’éteint, et l’égoïsme dévorant s’attache comme une lèpre aux membres du corps social.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., 1: 48.

³⁶ As far as I am aware, Béchard was the first publicist to use the term “individualism” to describe the effects of centralization on French society. On the origins of this term see Koenraad Swart, “‘Individualism’ in the mid-nineteenth century (1826–1860),” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 23 (1962), 77–90; Gregory Claeys, “Individualism, Socialism and Social Science: Further Notes on a Process of Conceptual Formation, 1800–1850,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 47 (1986), 81–93.

³⁷ Béchard, *Essai*, 1: 53.

³⁸ Ibid., 1: 57.

However, the past did not just serve as a cautionary tale in Béchard's *Essai*. He culled the history of the *pays d'état*, again like Tocqueville would do, for examples of the beneficial effects of local liberties.³⁹ In the Languedoc and in Provence, Béchard pointed out, elective assemblies had been maintained throughout the centuries. As a result, the *pays d'état* had been much better ruled than in other provinces. Moreover, they had also contributed to maintaining both the stability and the liberty of the Old Regime monarchy. "Tel est l'effet des institutions vraiment libérales," Béchard emphasized, "de celles qui respectent le développement spontané de la famille, de la cité, de tous les éléments conservateurs de l'ordre social: le principe de l'honneur qu'elles développent est une meilleure sauvegarde des trônes et des états que les rigueurs du despotisme ou la licence des factions."⁴⁰ At the same time, these provinces had offered much better protection against the caprices of central power; thus the *pays d'état* had not participated in the religious fanaticism of the night of Saint Bartholomew's Day, because "l'honneur sait aussi poser les bornes de l'obéissance."⁴¹

* * *

In short, Béchard's *Essai sur la centralisation* illustrates how the July Revolution of 1830 convinced legitimists that the centralist legacy prevented both liberty and stability in France. In this respect, as in others, legitimist thought contrasted sharply with the very different and far more positive view of the centralist legacy developed by the Orleanist liberals. In 1831 Louis-Philippe's newly established government introduced a number of administrative reforms that acceded to the some of the demands of the decentralist party. Thus local and regional councils were given more power vis-à-vis the representatives of the executive and their electoral base was widened. These reforms reflected the support for decentralization that had existed within the liberal party during the Restoration period.⁴² After these reforms, however, Orleanist liberals lost their enthusiasm for decentralization. They came to argue that a centralized administration was indispensable for the proper functioning of the French state, which had to thank this system for its efficiency. Indeed, even more contrary to the legitimist discourse, the supporters of the July Monarchy developed the conviction that centralization, far from being a threat to France's liberty, was a necessary prerequisite for the freedom of its citizens.

³⁹ Ibid., 1: 277–307.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1: 295.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² These reforms are discussed in Burdeau, *Liberté!*, 96–8.

The most coherent expression of this view is undoubtedly to be found in Augustin Thierry's *Essai sur l'histoire de la formation et des progrès du Tiers Etat*, written at the end of the July Monarchy. Thierry had not always been favourable to centralization. In his historical writings of the Restoration period, he had celebrated the "communal revolution" of the twelfth century, the struggle for municipal independence vis-à-vis feudal overlords, which he depicted as the predecessor of the Revolution of 1789.⁴³ Conversely, Thierry had been highly critical of the centralist tendency in French history, which he had described as a continuation of the conquest of Gaul by the Franks by other means.⁴⁴ From this perspective, he refused to admit that the revolutionary movement of 1789 had contributed to the centralizing process. In his view, the increasing centralization of the French state effected between 1789 and 1814 was not a natural effect of the Revolution, but rather a victory for the Frankish "conquerors" who brought Napoleon to power in their struggle against the people.⁴⁵

In the *Histoire du Tiers Etat*, however, Thierry completely changed his tune. He now described the growth of absolutism as a necessary, albeit transitory, phase in the progress of French civilization, which had been completed by the Revolution. The transformation of France into something that was recognizable as the post-Revolutionary society had started in the twelfth century, with the abolition of ancient institutions such as provincial and municipal privileges, of the Estates General and of the political control of the *parlements*. But Louis XIV in particular had greatly contributed to this development. He had ushered in modernity in France, characterized by "l'action régulière de l'Etat, la sociabilité, les moeurs, la langue et le goût national."⁴⁶ This had resulted in "la grande fusion nationale," the union of all different classes in French society. All were treated according to merit, not birth. The ancient aristocracy no longer had power or political influence. The middle classes became more important. By the eighteenth century, France had achieved a unity that was both political, administrative and moral.

The French Revolution, Thierry believed, had completed this process of unification. But at the same time it had given it a new, and more democratic, character. The goal of the Revolution had been

non de rabâter des ruines, non de toucher à l'unité absolue de l'Etat, produit spontané de nos instincts sociaux, mais de lui imprimer en quelque sorte, au lieu du sceau royal, le

⁴³ Augustin Thierry, *Lettres sur l'histoire de France pour servir d'introduction à l'étude de cette histoire* (Paris, 1868; first published 1827), esp. Lettre XIV, 203–22, and Lettre XXV, 382–401.

⁴⁴ Augustin Thierry, *Dix ans d'études historiques* (Paris, n.d. (18??)), 266–74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 237–43.

⁴⁶ Augustin Thierry, *Essai sur l'histoire de la formation et des progrès du Tiers Etat suivi de deux fragments du recueil des monuments inédits de cette histoire* (Paris, 1860), 221.

vrai caractère national, de faire que son idée agrandie renfermât, pour les garantir, tous les droits légitimes du citoyen.⁴⁷

This goal had been completed with the abolition of the three estates and the creation of a unitary and sovereign representative assembly. By doing so, the Revolution had set an example that had become the hallmark of “la pensée libérale moderne.” Liberty was from now on to be equated with civil equality rather than with the division of power, Thierry implied. “La monarchie en France, quand elle cesserait d’être absolue, devait rester administrative; la liberté en France devait se fonder, non sur une séparation plus marquée, mais sur la fusion des ordres, non sur l’abaissement, mais sur l’élévation continue des classes roturières.”⁴⁸

Thierry’s claim that centralization was a necessary prerequisite for liberty rather than its natural enemy was supported by many adherents of the July Monarchy.⁴⁹ This becomes clear in particular from Louis de Carné’s *Etudes sur les fondateurs de l’unité nationale en France*, which was first published in 1848, just before the outbreak of the February Revolution. Although his work is almost completely forgotten today, Carné was quite well known in his own time for his prolific historical and political writings. He was even elected to the Académie française with the support of well-known contemporaries such as Charles de Montalembert and François Guizot. Although he was much more critical of the July Monarchy than Augustin Thierry—when elected as a deputy in 1839, Carné joined Lamartine’s opposition against Guizot’s government—he nevertheless shared Thierry’s positive evaluation of the centralist legacy.

Like Thierry, Carné described the growth of monarchical power in his *Etudes* as necessary for both the territorial unification of France and the introduction of civil equality. Using the biographies of the six most important “unifiers” (Abbé Suger, Saint Louis, Duguesclin, Louis XI, Henry IV and Richelieu) as his starting point, Carné explained how the French government had become centralized to the point that all other sources of authority had disappeared. This centralist movement had been necessary to withstand attacks from foreign powers such as the Habsburg monarchy. Richelieu’s reign in particular had been important from this respect. In response to the upheavals of his time, the cardinal had been forced to abolish the last remnants of feudalism and municipal liberties. As a result, the monarchy had eradicated all rival centres of power. The bourgeoisie

⁴⁷ Ibid., 219.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ The pro-centralist discourse of the July Monarchy is also discussed by Pierre Rosanvallon in *Le Modèle politique français. La Société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 2004), Part 2; and by Lucien Jaume in his *L’Individu effacé ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français* (Paris, 1997).

and the court nobility, which came into being during the sixteenth century, were not independent enough to form a threat to monarchical authority.⁵⁰

Again like Thierry, Carné emphasized that the Revolution had completed this process. The establishment of civil equality through the abolition of the estates, the creation of a unicameral legislative assembly and the imposition of equality of taxation, as well as the renunciation of aristocratic prerogatives, were all reforms in the tradition of the Old Regime monarchy. Likewise, the concentration of political power through the abolition of the nobility, the creation of departments and the homogenization of the judicial system had been in the line of the revolutionaries' royal predecessors. "Suger, Saint Louis, Duguesclin, Louis XI, Henri IV, Richelieu, avaient déblayé par l'épée et par la hache le terrain où l'Assemblée constituante s'assit en souveraine; Mirabeau fut le successeur logique de ces grands réformateurs."⁵¹ In this sense, the overthrow of the monarchy in 1793 had been an accident rather than a goal of the Revolutionary movement, as Carné emphasized in the appendix to his *Etudes*, entitled, like Tocqueville's book, "L'ancien régime et la révolution française." The revolutionary movement had been "monarchique et centralisatrice," and if it had not deviated from its original course it would have prepared the advent of democracy "par une large application de l'égalité civile, et non par la violente abolition du pouvoir royal."⁵²

It should be noted that Carné expressed some reservations about the centralizing thrust of French history as well. In the introduction to his *Etudes* he admitted that centralization, while contributing much to the glory of the French nation, might have prepared it ill for liberty. The subjects of the Old Regime monarchy had lost all sense of independence and tended to leave everything up to the royal government. Liberty had existed only in books of the *philosophes*; it had no institutional basis when the Revolution took place. This had made the establishment of freedom in 1789 exceedingly difficult. "La France n'admettait pas la légitimité d'une résistance contre sa pensée du moment; . . . et jamais son coeur ne fut plus étranger au sentiment de la liberté véritable que lorsqu'elle invoquait le nom et qu'elle allait mourir pour elle sur tous les champs de bataille."⁵³ Nevertheless, Carné seemed to consider this price worth paying for the establishment of civic equality, which still eluded, as he noted, an aristocratic nation like Britain. He therefore concluded his book with a celebration of the

⁵⁰ Louis de Carné, *Etudes sur les fondateurs de l'unité nationale en France*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1848), 1: xlix.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1: lxxv.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2: 311–49, 329.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1: lxxviii.

imperial legacy. The ideas expressed in the Code Civil, Carné wrote, had helped to substitute feudalism in Europe with a new and more just social organization.⁵⁴

In short, as the writings of Thierry and Carné illustrate, liberal historians developed a view on the centralist legacy that led them to very different conclusions to those of the legitimists. While these liberal historians agreed with legitimist publicists like Béchard that centralization had made a deep impact on French political culture, they provided a very different evaluation of the nature of that impact. In the liberal view, centralization had acted as the harbinger of freedom, understood as civil equality, rather than as a dangerous development leading to anarchy and despotism. Paradoxically, this led the adherents of the July Monarchy to a much more positive evaluation of the Old Regime than legitimists such as Fiévée or Béchard. While legitimist publicists did not hesitate to accuse the Bourbon dynasty of bringing about its own downfall and the subsequent instability of the French state, Thierry and Carné celebrated the contribution of the French monarchy to the establishment of unity and civic equality in France.

* * *

In December 1848, however, the optimism of Orleanist liberals about the course of French history received a serious blow. The February Revolution and the subsequent election of Louis Napoleon as president of the republic made clear how fragile liberty was in France. Especially after Louis Napoleon staged a coup and seized dictatorial powers on 2 December 1851, which resulted in the establishment of the Second Empire, many political commentators became convinced that France was suffering from structural problems which prevented the consolidation of liberty and stability.

Unsurprisingly, legitimist publicists and politicians again pointed to the centralist legacy to explain this recurrence of the revolutionary cycle in France. The legitimist journal *La Revue provinciale*, edited by Tocqueville's childhood friend and lifetime correspondent Louis de Kergorlay, and by his protégé Arthur de Gobineau,⁵⁵ was devoted entirely to the propagation of decentralization as the cure to all of France's ills. In the introduction to *La Revue provinciale* they made clear what the stakes were. If stability had escaped the French so far, this was because power was not evenly divided over the whole territory.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2: 330–49.

⁵⁵ The close connection between Kergorlay and Tocqueville is attested by the collected volumes of their correspondence, edited in the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951–), XIII. Arthur de Gobineau was Tocqueville's *chef de cabinet* when the latter was appointed minister for foreign affairs during the Second Republic. They had known each other since 1843. See Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 409.

Excessive centralization put sovereignty within the walls of Paris at the disposal of the multitude. Only a reform of the administrative system would allow the establishment of freedom and order. “La France veut, à un égal degré, l’ordre et la liberté,” they wrote; “ce qu’elle attend de l’avenir, ce qu’elle espère, ce qu’elle désire, ce sont des institutions qui lui garantissent la durée de ses deux élémens de tout bonheur public.”⁵⁶

Similar views were expressed by Claude-Marie Raudot, a legitimist politician who had been a substitute at the Versailles tribunal at the same time when Tocqueville was a magistrate there, and who became reacquainted with Tocqueville in 1849.⁵⁷ During the February Revolution Raudot campaigned actively for decentralization, and he was even prepared to cooperate with the republicans in order to achieve that goal, when heading the committee for decentralization in 1849. Louis Napoleon’s rise to power and the subsequent establishment of the Second Empire, however, thwarted all hopes for decentralization. In response Raudot published two volumes attacking the centralized condition of the French state: *De la Décadence de la France* and *De la Grandeur possible de la France* in 1850 and 1851.⁵⁸

In these books Raudot explained to his fellow legitimists that a restoration of the monarchy would not suffice to stabilize the French state. The revolution of 1848 had not been not an accident, but evidence of a much deeper problem within French society. “Les révolutions sont perpétuelles en France, non pas par la faute seule de tel ou tel homme, roi, ministre, général, ou chef d’opposition,” he wrote, “non pas par le hasard de tel ou tel accident, mais parce que il y a dans notre pays des institutions et des principes qui affaiblissent, désorganisent la nation et rendent la stabilité et la permanence des gouvernements impossibles.”⁵⁹ More particularly, Raudot believed that centralization was responsible for all evils plaguing French society. The centralized administrative system weakened public-spiritedness, because the overweening power of the French state made it the object of popular discontent whenever things were going wrong. It undermined the arts and sciences. Indeed, in Raudot’s view centralization was even responsible for the physical degradation of the French race, as the predominance of Paris and the Parisians promoted immorality and disease.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Louis de Kergorlay and Arthur de Gobineau, “Prospectus,” *Revue provinciale* 1 (1848–9), 2.

⁵⁷ André Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville 1805–1859* (Paris, 1984), 74–5.

⁵⁸ Louis de Kergorlay attracted Tocqueville’s attention to Raudot’s publications in a letter of 2 August 1852. Cf. the *Oeuvres complètes*, XIII, 2: 246.

⁵⁹ Claude-Marie Raudot, *De la Grandeur possible de la France faisant suite à la décadence de la France* (Paris, 1851), 2.

⁶⁰ Raudot developed these themes in his *De la Décadence de la France* (Paris, 1850).

In short, the February Revolution of 1848 convinced legitimists that their analysis of French exceptionalism, which they had first developed to explain the downfall of the monarchy in 1789 and 1830, was more valid than ever. But legitimist thinkers were no longer the only ones to make such claims about the pernicious impact of centralization on French history. A very similar analysis of the French predicament was now elaborated in what was arguably one of the most influential liberal political texts of the Second Empire: Alexis de Tocqueville's *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*.

Of course, Tocqueville had never shared the positive view on centralization developed by writers such as Thierry or Carné. Contrary to most Orleanist liberals, he had been a fervent defender of “local liberties” from the start of his career as a political thinker. In his *De la Démocratie en Amérique* of 1835, Tocqueville had celebrated the “communal spirit” of New England as the berth of American liberty. He had described at length how local government stimulated the right kinds of attitudes and customs for the preservation of an orderly liberty. At the same time, he had written in a highly critical vein of the administrative centralization found in European countries such as France—which Tocqueville carefully distinguished, like Fiévée, from “governmental” centralization—because it diminished “l'esprit de cité.”⁶¹

In these earlier writings, however, Tocqueville refrained from focusing on the centralist legacy as the main problem of the French polity. Rather, his chief concern was with another development of modern history: the levelling of society. The rise of social equality, Tocqueville famously claimed in 1835 and again in the second volume of the *Démocratie* published in 1840, was a development that was both beneficial and inevitable, but at the same time it posed a major threat to the preservation of liberty and stability in modern nations. By isolating citizens from one another, the rise of democracy left the nation without protection against the government's despotic tendencies. The growth of a centralized administration, which allowed the population to be held in tutelage, was the result of this blind, “providential” development, rather than a causal factor in its own right. Tocqueville believed, in other words, that the problems facing the July Monarchy were fairly typical of modern democratic nations in general, instead of being related to any specifically French legacy.⁶²

This view continued to be defended by Tocqueville throughout the 1830s and the 1840s. In his essay on the *Etat social et politique de la France avant et après 1789*, written in 1836 for the *London Review* upon the request of John Stuart

⁶¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, ed. André Jardin, Jean-Claude Lamberti and James T. Schleifer, 3 vols. (Paris, 1992), 2: 97.

⁶² As is also argued by François Furet and Françoise Mélonio in their introduction to the third volume of the *Oeuvres*, III, xiii.

Mill, Tocqueville claimed that the development of modern French history was exemplary for the rest of Europe. The rise of social democracy, which had resulted in the French Revolution, had merely been more rapid in France than in other European countries.⁶³ And although Tocqueville devoted much attention to the growth of a centralized administration in the *Etat social*, he again described it as a consequence of this social development.⁶⁴ He still defended this opinion in 1842, when he gave to the *Académie française* his famous speech condemning the Napoleonic regime, in which he emphasized that imperial despotism had been made possible by the levelling of modern society, by the demise of the aristocracy as a governing class.⁶⁵

After the February Revolution of 1848, Tocqueville initially remained convinced that developments in France were driven by the rise of democracy characteristic of all modern nations. As appears from the *Avertissement* for the new edition of the *Démocratie* which came out in 1848, he saw the establishment of the Second Republic as the fulfilment of his predictions of 1835.⁶⁶ Louis Napoleon's rise to power, however, caused an important shift in Tocqueville's thought.⁶⁷ Tocqueville now came to fear, like the legitimists, that structural problems were preventing the French from establishing a stable, liberal regime in their country. Writing his *Souvenirs* in 1850–51, he remarked,

La monarchie constitutionnelle avait succédé à l'Ancien Régime; la République, à la monarchie; à la République, l'Empire; à l'Empire, la Restauration. Puis était venue la monarchie de Juillet. Après chacune de ces mutations successives on avait dit que la Révolution française, ayant achevé ce qu'on appelait présomptueusement son oeuvre, était finie. Hélas! Je l'avais espéré moi-même sous la Restauration, et encore depuis que le gouvernement de la Restauration fut tombé; et voici la Révolution française qui recommence, car c'est toujours la même.⁶⁸

This confrontation with the inherent illiberalism of French political culture turned Tocqueville's attention, again like the legitimists, towards the centralist legacy. "En France, il n'y a guère qu'une seule chose qu'on ne puisse faire," he wrote in the *Souvenirs*; "c'est un gouvernement libre, et qu'une seule

⁶³ Tocqueville wrote for instance in the *Etat social et politique*: "Depuis plusieurs siècles, toutes les vieilles nations de l'Europe travaillent sourdement à détruire l'inégalité dans leur sein. La France a précipité chez elle la révolution qui marchait péniblement dans tout le reste de l'Europe." Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, III, 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 26–40.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 1199–215.

⁶⁶ Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (10th edn, Paris, 1848), i–iv.

⁶⁷ Furet and Mélonio, in Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, III, xv, xxxv, likewise point to this shift in Tocqueville's thought.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 780.

institution qu'on ne puisse détruire: la centralization."⁶⁹ This eventually led him to investigate the historical causes of administrative centralization in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution française*. Tocqueville had originally planned to concentrate on the history of the first Napoleonic empire. He soon realized however, that the centralist legacy long pre-dated the imperial regime, and after a long and tortuous process decided to concentrate on the rise of the bureaucratic state in the Old Regime.⁷⁰ Although *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution française* was not limited to this topic—Tocqueville conceived of the work as a history of the causes of the French Revolution rather than as an investigation of the centralist legacy as such—the central part of this book was devoted to the process of centralization and its impact on French society.⁷¹

One could ask why Tocqueville decided to present his criticism of the centralist state in the form of an enquiry into its origins rather than focus on its impact in his own day, as for instance Raudot had done. Different explanations can be formulated in answer to this question. It is possible that Tocqueville felt he could criticize the centralist state more freely, in the face of imperial censorship, by focusing on the past rather than the present. Another and perhaps more important motivating factor seems to have been that Tocqueville wished to dispel the revolutionary credits of the centralist state. Already in 1835 he had expressed his irritation with those who presented centralization as a conquest of the Revolution:

Lorsque vous voyez [les amis du pouvoir absolu] défendre la centralisation administrative, vous croyez qu'ils travaillent en faveur du despotisme? Nullement, ils défendent une des grandes conquêtes de la Révolution. De cette manière, on peut rester populaire et ennemi des droits du peuple; serviteur caché de la tyrannie et amant avoué de la liberté.⁷²

And in a marginal note he had added: "Appuyer ceci d'un excellent morceau d'une remontrance de M. de Malesherbes qui montre que le mouvement centralisant avait commencé bien avant la Révolution."⁷³

Despite this change of focus from present to past, however, Tocqueville's description of the centralizing process and its impact on the French society of the Old Regime remained remarkably close to that elaborated in the legitimist pamphlets and journals. Following the tradition established by Fiévée and followed by the legitimist pamphleteers of the 1830s, Tocqueville directed his critique of centralization against administrative rather than governmental

⁶⁹ Ibid., III, 873.

⁷⁰ Cf. Gannett, *Tocqueville Unveiled*, 57–98.

⁷¹ Book 2 of *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* in particular is devoted to this topic.

⁷² Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, II, 108.

⁷³ Ibid., II, 968.

centralization. In the first volume of the *Démocratie en Amérique*, published in 1835, he had already elaborated on this distinction, explaining how it was the former rather than the latter which posed a threat to a nation's liberty.⁷⁴ In *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, he again emphasized that it was not the political unification of France but the creation of a central administration which had caused the problems of the Old Regime. He described at length how the administration had become an instrument of oppression by the creation of a bureaucratic class separate from the rest of the nation, which prevented the population from looking after its own interests by drawing all decision-making processes to the centre.⁷⁵

More importantly, Tocqueville's description of the impact of centralization, of the ways in which this process had transformed French society, clearly echoed the legitimist discourse. In particular, his emphasis on the atomization of French society, caused by the fact that individuals had come to depend on the central state rather than upon each other, had been a recurring theme in the anti-centralist literature produced by legitimist writers. Like them, Tocqueville was convinced that the long term effect of the monarchy's policy of dividing and neutralizing potential opposition was to split society into closed groups hostile to one another, unable and unwilling to work together. Individuals in Old Regime France, he emphasized, had become more "isolated" from one another than in any other country or in any other time period.⁷⁶ As a result, French society of the Old Regime had been characterized by what Tocqueville described, in terms which echoed *L'Avenir's* and Béchar'd's, as a "collective individualism", which had eventually made both liberty and stability unattainable ideals.⁷⁷

Like the legitimists, moreover, Tocqueville explained how this policy had left the French people without intermediary powers capable of protecting them against the twin dangers of despotism and revolution. Central power had destroyed "tous les pouvoirs intermédiaires," and "entre lui et les particuliers il n'existe plus rien qu'un espace immense et vide, il apparaît déjà de loin à chacun d'eux comme le seul ressort de la machine sociale, l'agent unique et nécessaire de la vie publique."⁷⁸ Because of royal absolutism, classes and citizens had become isolated from one another, and

il se trouva que le tout ne composait plus qu'une masse homogène, mais dont les parties n'étaient plus liées. Rien n'était plus organisé pour gêner le gouvernement, rien, non plus,

⁷⁴ Ibid., II, 96–109.

⁷⁵ Ibid., III, 80–112.

⁷⁶ Ibid., III, 121.

⁷⁷ Ibid., III, 121–34.

⁷⁸ Ibid., III, 109.

pour l'aider. De telle sorte que l'édifice entier de la grandeur de ces princes put s'écrouler tout ensemble et en un moment, dès que la société qui lui servait de base s'agita.⁷⁹

With his organicist imagery, Tocqueville's analysis showed clear overtones of the legitimist language. Again like the legitimists, moreover, he showed himself highly critical of the predominance of Paris in Old Regime France, complaining that the capital had succeeded in "devouring" the provinces,⁸⁰ thus making it easy to overthrow any government by a coup in the capital. "Ainsi Paris était devenu le maître de la France," he commented, "et déjà s'assemblait l'armée qui devait se rendre maîtresse de Paris."⁸¹

Similarly to Béchard, moreover, Tocqueville contrasted the centralist system with the administrative organization of the *pays d'état*, in particular the Languedoc, as a positive example of the effect of local liberties. Béchard, as we have seen, believed that the example of the Languedoc, with its aristocratic self-government, illustrated that truly liberal institutions stimulated the growth of an honourable public-spiritedness which was a better safeguard for the throne than despotism. Tocqueville likewise stressed the fact that the municipal liberties of the Languedoc had stimulated the growth of a public spirit which had not just provided a better administration but had also better prepared the Languedoc for the spirit of the new times.⁸²

In short, a study of the legitimist discourse about the centralist legacy allows us to gain a better insight into the linguistic universe in which *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* was shaped. It has become clear that those features of Tocqueville's work which are often perceived as his most original contributions to the historiography of the French Revolution owed in fact much to the arguments of his legitimist predecessors and contemporaries. By arguing that the centralist legacy and the atomization of society which it had effected were responsible for the recurrent failure of the French to establish a free and stable regime, Tocqueville was propagating a view which had a long pedigree in nineteenth-century legitimist thought. Unsurprisingly, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* was well received in the legitimist camp upon its publication in 1856.⁸³

However, this is not to say that Tocqueville returned to the legitimist fold at the end of his life. He did add an important new twist to the story with which we have now become familiar. In marked distinction from the legitimists, he indicated

⁷⁹ Ibid., III, 167.

⁸⁰ Ibid., III, 114.

⁸¹ Ibid., III, 117.

⁸² Ibid., III, 233–42.

⁸³ On the legitimist reception of *L'Ancien Régime* see Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 144–5.

a specific moment in time during which the French had, albeit momentarily, escaped the nefarious legacy of centralization: 1789. Far from condemning the Revolution *en bloc*, as the legitimists traditionally did, Tocqueville took great pains to emphasize that the revolutionary tradition had had its anti-centralist moment, when the French had done away with the centralist legacy no less than with the absolutist government.⁸⁴ In the introduction to *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, he stressed that there were two distinct moments in the Revolution: the first in 1789, when the love of liberty had been combined with the love of equality, and a second when certain bad habits of the Old Regime were revived, when the love of equality had led the French to accept servitude.⁸⁵ At the very end of his book he came back to this theme, celebrating the generation of 1789, which had attempted to destroy not just absolutism but centralization as well.⁸⁶

Tocqueville thus remained in certain respects faithful to the liberal tradition, which depicted 1789 in a positive light, distinguishing it from later developments. More importantly, by establishing a counter-tradition to the centralist legacy, he left a window for optimism which was absent from the legitimist discourse. Tocqueville's particular reading of the French Revolution clearly did not imply that democracy was automatically incompatible with liberty. This is a point of view which his present-day followers do not always seem to agree with. To the extent that contemporary historians of the Revolution have emphasized the continuity between 1789 and 1793, they seem closer to the original position of the legitimists than they do to Tocqueville.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ For Tocqueville's positive evaluation of 1789 see in particular Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, III, 229.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 46–7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ I am thinking here in particular of François Furet and Mona Ozouf, who put great emphasis on the continuity between 1789 and 1793 in their *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1989). An excellent analysis of the views of François Furet and his followers on the Revolution is to be found in Andrew Jainchill and Sam Moyn, "French Democracy between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004), 107–54.