

## **The Political Psychology of Alexis de Tocqueville: An Appraisal of his Account of the French Revolution**

### **Introduction**

As mentioned by Alexander Bain in 1859, one of the first “scientific” psychologists, “in every willful human action the stimulus and antecedent is an emotion.”<sup>1</sup> However, more often than not, the influence emotions have on the behavior of individuals and collectivities and their influence on human history have been disregarded in the political, economic, and sociological sciences. Structures, institutions, systems, principles and reason have been fundamental categories used to explain human power relationships, but emotions seem to have been relegated only to the realm of psychology and those hard sciences that deal directly with the study of the brain and/or the mind. But, in the face of a resurgence of behavioral analyses for the study of economics, politics and other social phenomena, it seems relevant to bring back the role emotions have in complex social relationships.

It is then, in this resurgence of behavioral social analyses that Tocqueville’s work, on what Jon Elster (1993; 101-102)

has termed “equilibrium analysis”, becomes relevant again for both political science and political philosophy. Departing from a comparative historical study of the political life of America, and of the development of the French revolutions of 1789 and 1848, among others, Tocqueville discovered how institutions influence beliefs, expectations and social positions of people, how those beliefs and expectations affect the emotional status of collectivities, and how in turn those emotions affect human social behavior. It is his understanding of the interrelationship between institutions, beliefs, emotions and actions, and his comparison between reason and instincts or passions<sup>2</sup> that complements the already existing research programs of political theory (i.e. rational choice, structuralism and culture studies). And it is because of these understandings and this complementariness that it is important to retrieve the work of Tocqueville and expand the research done on his ideas beyond *Democracy in America*, his historic-comparative method, and his description of the 19th century western world.

Hence, aiming at resurrecting some of Tocqueville’s main contributions to the social sciences and at evaluating some of

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Bain, *The Emotion and The Will* (London: John W. Park & Son, 1859), p. 36.

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur Goldhammer, “Translating Tocqueville: The Constraints of Classicism,” in Cheryl Welch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 152.

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its contemporary interpretations, especially Jon Elster's interpretation of "Tocqueville's Paradox", this paper will seek to achieve three goals: 1) first, to give an accurate description of Tocqueville's psychological analysis of revolutions, especially the French Revolution; 2) second, to evaluate some of the contemporary understandings of Tocqueville's political psychology; and 3) third, to rediscover Tocqueville's social psychology in the light of the behavioral approaches to understanding human politics.

In order to achieve these goals this paper will focus on Tocqueville's *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, arguing that, for Tocqueville, the *revolutionary behavior* of the French peasantry during the French Revolution was elicited by a new set of political beliefs against the old feudal political institutions. According to Tocqueville, this behavior was elicited by the ill emotions (i.e., hatred and envy)<sup>3</sup> that these new sets of political beliefs directed against the French feudal political order.

The objective of Section 1 is to develop a general review of contemporary authors' work on Tocqueville's political psychology, and to place this study in the modern context. And, although the focus will be on Jon Elster's work on Tocqueville's political psychology, I will also address other authors such as Arthur Goldhammer and Whitney Pope.

Section 2 will analyze how the evolution and existence of disharmonized political institutions create an *unfairness effect*

in societies. This unfairness effect, in Tocqueville's analysis of the French Revolution, is composed of those beliefs and ill emotions that the French peasantry directed against the existing political order. The effect is caused by the existence of a social and political order that imposes relatively heavy costs on the population, with respect to their perceived social utility. This effect will be analyzed in the three institutional disharmonies mentioned in Tocqueville's *Ancien Regime*: 1) the ceasing of serfdom and the consequent surging of a small landowning peasantry; 2) the nobles' loss of political functions at the hands of the kings' bureaucrats; and 3) the keeping of the nobles' fiscal privileges and exemptions in the face of an increasing number and amount of royal taxes imposed on the commoners.

Section 3 will describe and analyze how institutional circumstances influence beliefs and emotions, especially the *unfairness effect*, and how these beliefs and emotions in turn influence the political behavior of the people. This section will describe Tocqueville's account of how beliefs were influenced by the evolution of the political institutions in France up to the 18th century, and how they created an unfairness effect among the peasantry. Secondly, it will analyze how emotions, as part of the human agency process, determined the violent and revolutionary behavior of the French peasantry against the old feudal order.

Finally, the conclusions will address the main findings of the present paper, especially the results of the evaluation of the work that contemporary scholars have done on Tocqueville, Tocqueville's use of political psychology to analyze political processes, the value of a psychological research program in the political

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<sup>3</sup>Jon Elster, "Tocqueville on 1789: Preconditions, Precipitants and Triggers," in Cheryl Welch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 56.

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science field, and its implications for the relevance of other research programs.

### I. The “Rediscoverers” of Alexis de Tocqueville.

Alexis de Tocqueville may be one of the most important political thinkers of the 19th century,<sup>4</sup> however, as mentioned by Cheryl Welch (2006; 1-6), his writings were almost forgotten from the time of his passing until the 20th century. Even then, it was only in 1938 that a major work on Tocqueville’s work was done, and only in the 1950’s that his ideas started to appeal to a broader scholarly public.<sup>5</sup> Moreover it took almost half a century, with Jon Elster’s book on *Political Psychology* (1993), to produce systematic research on Tocqueville’s political and social psychology, and thirteen more years for Elster to publish the most important work ever done to date, namely, *Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist* (2009).

It is a shared assumption among Tocqueville scholars that his interest in the human soul, what we now call his social and political psychology, started with Guizot’s teachings of history and his preoccupation for the underlying causes of history.<sup>6</sup> Like Aristotle, Tocqueville

believed that political scientists must be concerned with the character of human souls in order for their theories to be legitimate.<sup>7</sup> Interest and passions,<sup>8</sup> or as Pope and Pope (1986; 43) call them, material and in-material interests, became the most important motivators in Tocqueville’s social psychology, with envy and hatred at their core.<sup>9</sup>

However, as described by Arthur Goldhammer (2006; 152-158) there were other sources, especially Pascal’s theories of the mind, which finished shaping Tocqueville’s psychological theories. For Goldhammer, the “right relation of rationality to instincts” was a matter that concerned Tocqueville deeply, following Pascal, as “the heart has reasons” of which our conscience is not aware.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, Tocqueville was interested in those motivators, those triggers that made men act, but over which he had no control or of which he was not consciously aware, as instincts or passions. Moreover, this understanding of man’s motivators and of the right relation of reason to instincts was the foundation of a new political science formulated by Tocqueville.<sup>11</sup>

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s New Political Science,” in Cheryl Welch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 83.

<sup>8</sup>Elster, *Political Psychology*, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup>Elster, “Tocqueville on 1789,” p. 56.

<sup>10</sup>Goldhammer, “Translating Tocqueville,” p. 152.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>4</sup>Jon Elster, *Political Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup>Cheryl Welch, “Introduction: Tocqueville in the Twenty-First Century,” in Cheryl Welch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-6.

<sup>6</sup>Seymour Drescher, “Tocqueville’s Comparative Perspectives,” in Cheryl Welch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*

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But what was this new political science about? According to Goldhammer (2006; 159) the new political science was about shaping man's instincts in order to direct the new political art, because "when the light of reason fails and the circumstances are unprecedented, instinct is all that man possesses to set himself on the right course."<sup>12</sup>

What Tocqueville did was to study psychological universals that could be used to delineate precise explanatory mechanisms in a variety of historical situations.<sup>13</sup> For Elster, Tocqueville's psychological universals are not a matter of immutable desires and beliefs present at all times and places. Rather they consist of permanent possibilities, of mechanisms that can be activated anytime or anywhere by triggers that are much less understood than those mechanisms themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Among these universal mechanisms, perhaps the most important one is Tocqueville's Paradox. Elster understands this paradox as a psychological condition in which subjective discontent and objective ground for discontent may be inversely related to each other.<sup>15</sup> However, there are two versions of this paradox: the diachronic and the synchronic. In the diachronic version increased welfare in a realm of life, for example increased equality, may generate two effects: 1) a perception that inequality *in that dimension* is more and more intolerable;<sup>16</sup> or 2)

a perception that inequality *in another dimension* is more and more intolerable.<sup>17</sup> The synchronic version states that the less increase in welfare a community has, and the more oppression is maintained, the less the system appears to be burdensome or unfair.

Notably by addressing the psychological mechanisms of preconditions, paradoxes and triggers, Elster explained them in their particularity and only as related to particular accounts in Tocqueville's work. But he was unable to create a systematic understanding of these mechanisms, or their interaction with institutional changes or institutional stability, for example in America or France. Elster's analyses missed the "conductive wire" of Tocqueville's psychological historical description of France and America. It failed to explain Guizot's idea of "moral laws," embedded in Tocqueville's methodology, which connect the different events of history with one another, and with those at lower levels.

## II. Political Institutions and the French Revolution.

In the introduction to *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, Tocqueville justifies his book as an experiment to discover and understand the *underlying* causes of the French Revolution. To do so Tocqueville develops a multilevel explanation of the revolution: 1) an institutional level, which explains the evolution and influence of the French political and economic institutions over the beliefs and emotions of the French people; and 2) a psychological level, in which beliefs and emotions explain the revolutionary behavior of the French commoners. This sec-

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 152-58.

<sup>13</sup>Elster, *Political Psychology*, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Elster, "Tocqueville on 1789," p. 58.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

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tion will explain the three main institutional changes that Tocqueville offers as the genesis of the revolutionary ideas and emotions (*unfairness effect*) that found their final expression in the violence that destroyed the old French political order.

For Tocqueville three were the main and necessary institutional changes that influenced the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century: 1) the ceasing of serfdom and the consequent surging of a small landowning peasantry; 2) the nobles' loss of political functions at the hands of the kings' bureaucrats; and 3) the keeping of the nobles' fiscal privileges in the face of an increasing number and amount of royal taxes for the commoners. Although some of these institutions started their evolution as early as the 14th century, it was only its confluence in the 18th century that created the social disequilibrium, termed unfairness effect, which led to the French Revolution.

According to Tocqueville the first institutional change that influenced the starting of the French Revolution was the end of servitude and the increase in the number of small landowners, since the 14th century. By the end of the 18th century most of the French peasantry had ceased to be under the system of servitude, to be controlled by the lords and to work in the lands of the manors. As explained by Tocqueville, by the time of the Revolution most of the peasants were small landowners dedicated to farming the land, free from the rule of the lords. The peasants "came and went, bought and sold, negotiated and worked as [they] pleased. The last shreds of serfdom could only be seen in one or two recently conquered provinces of eastern France; everywhere else it had completely disappeared and even its abolition went back to such a distant time that its date was for-

gotten."<sup>18</sup>

Because of the increase in the number of small landowners, half of the land in France belonged to small farmers "exclusively." The possibility of buying and selling land, especially the lands of the manors, created a passion for landownership in the peasantry.<sup>19</sup> As Tocqueville mentions:

"Land is always sold above its value," said an excellent contemporary observer. "This results from the passion all inhabitants have to become landowners. All the savings of the lower classes, which elsewhere are invested in public bonds, are devoted in France to the purchase of land."<sup>20</sup>

This "revolution" in the economic order of French society generated the passion for landownership among the peasantry, but also amplified their awareness of their relative social and political status, as well as made them more dissatisfied with the prevailing tax system. The change in power relationships, especially the decreasing power of the nobility over the peasantry, changed the desires and beliefs of the French peasants. As they became freer from their landlords their desires turned into the destruction of a fiscal and political system that now seemed more burdensome for them. As argued by Tocqueville regarding the feelings and beliefs that the peasantry had of the feudal taxing system in relation to the end of servitude:

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<sup>18</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), p. 37.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

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These burdens were doubtless heavy but what made them appear unbearable was precisely the circumstances which ought to have seemingly lightened the pain for them. These same farmers had been freed, more than anywhere else in Europe, from the government of their lords —another revolution no less important than that which had made them landowners.<sup>21</sup>

The end of servitude allowed the peasantry to acquire small landholdings, but they also had to put up with the highest burdens of taxation. Year after year during the collection of taxes these new conditions made the peasants more aware of their relative social status as an unprivileged class, and of the nobility as a useless but privileged class. Year after year, with the raising of taxes imposed on the peasants and with the exemptions for the nobles, the hatred and envy of the peasant for the feudal system increased as well as their love for the new ideas of equality spread by the “men of letters” and by the monarchy. Whether there were other reasons for this change in land ownership, Tocqueville does not mention, but what is important to recognize is that this redistribution of land, whatever its reasons, was a necessary condition for the creation of an unfairness effect in which the old political institutions entered into a period of disharmony with the expectations of the new free peasantry.

Second, the hatred of the French peasantry against the nobility increased as the latter lost their political functions at the hands of the royal bureaucrats while keeping their fiscal privileges and exemptions, many of them paid by the peasants themselves. As explained by Tocqueville, little by little the hierarchical administrative institution known as the *Conceil*

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

*Royal* directed by the Controller-General supplanted all the municipal and aristocratic powers of the parishes with its own public officials: the Intendants and sub-delegates, and local syndics and collectors often appointed by the Intendants.<sup>22</sup> The “duty of these authorities [was] to assess taxes, repair churches, build schools, summon and preside over the parish meeting. They supervised the municipal lands and controlled any use of them; they instituted and defended lawsuits in the name of the community.”<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, as the lords stopped controlling and supervising the local administration of the parishes, they also stopped acting as representatives of the king in the parish or as intermediaries between the king and the peasantry.<sup>24</sup> They became just the first citizens of the parishes and the depositors of privileges. Their lack of public duties was no longer understood by peasants and commoners and started seeming more and more burdensome as time passed.<sup>25</sup> As mentioned by Tocqueville:

(...) if the French peasant had still been governed by his lord, the feudal rights would have seem to him much less intolerable because he would have seen them only as a natural consequence of the constitution of the country.<sup>26</sup>

But because the peasants were no longer under the rule of their lords, and as the lords no longer gave them justice,

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

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security or charity, their privileges became intolerable. At the end, the *unfairness effect* caused by the disharmony between the old and the new institutional arrangements influenced the desire of the peasantry to destroy the old institutional arrangement and to create a new one more akin to their new expectations.

Third, the increase in the number and amount of taxes also influenced the revolutionary behavior of the French peasantry by affecting their income and constantly signaling the inequality of the taxation system. In this sense it is interesting to notice Tocqueville's recount of the many taxes that the peasant had to put up with at the eve of the Revolution:

[The French peasant was so] passionately wedded to the land that he devote[d] all his savings to buying it and at any price. To acquire it he must first pay a fee, not to the government but to the other landowners in the vicinity who are as alien as he is to the administration of public affairs and almost as powerless. Finally he takes ownership, puts his heart into his land with the seed he sows (...). And yet, these neighbors arrive to drive him from his fields and force him to go and work elsewhere without payment. Where he tries to defend his crops against their game, these same men stop him. The same men wait at the river crossing in order to exact a toll from him. He comes across them in the market, where they sell him the right to sell his own produce. When, returning home, he wishes to use the remainder of his corn for himself (...) he cannot do so until he has sent it to the mill for grinding and to the oven for baking, both of which these men own. A share of the income from his small domain goes to pay their fees and these are permanent and irredeemable.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

If we take the most hateful of all these privileges—the exemption from tax—it is easy to see that, from the fifteenth century right up to the French Revolution, this increased progressively as the march of public spending grew more rapidly (...). When the *taille* was the only tax levied on commoners, this exemption was hardly noticeable. But when taxes of this kind had been multiplied under a thousand headings and in a thousand forms, when four other taxes had been amalgamated into the *taille* and when burdens unknown in the Middle Ages, such as forced labour applied by the crown to all public works and services, the army, etc., had been tacked on to the *taille* and its accessories, imposed in an unequal fashion to boot, the exemption of the nobles appeared immense.<sup>28</sup>

According to Tocqueville the peasants put up with many of the privileges of the nobility as long as they “safeguarded public order, dispensed justice, had the law upheld, came to help the weak and directed public business.”<sup>29</sup> But, when the nobility ceased to conduct public affairs the people no longer understood their privileges. They seemed absurd, excessive and unfair and “precipitated everyone's mind towards the idea of natural equality of conditions.”<sup>30</sup> At the end, the mismatch between the old institutional arrangement and the new expectations of the French peasants created the unfairness effect in which the beliefs and emotions of the French peasantry turned against the old institutional order. Equilibrium could only be reached again with the destruction of the old order and the creation of a new one more compatible with the prevailing beliefs and desires of the peasants.

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 93-94.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 43, 93-94.

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However, it can be argued that there was no necessity for these three institutional changes to exist in synchrony in order for the Revolution to arise. It might be the case that any one of these changes could have prompted the Revolution without the necessity of the other ones. But, if we agree with Tocqueville's analysis that these three institutional changes did exist at the time of the Revolution, then it cannot be proved that any of them could have prompted it on its own and without the support of the other ones.

### **III. Beliefs, Emotions and the French Revolution.**

As stated in the previous section, the evolution of the distribution of land among the French peasantry as a result of the end of servitude and the existence of a dual fiscal and administrative system divided between the king and the nobility created the conditions for the appearance of an unfairness effect among society. This effect was characterized by the existence of a set of beliefs and emotions that were incompatible with the prevailing political-institutional arrangement of the kingdom. And, its importance is based not only on its capacity to explain the revolutionary behavior of the French peasantry in the 18th century, but in its capacity to allow us to understand the processes of human agency in complex social contexts, and how institutions, beliefs and emotions are interconnected and are reinforcing traits within human societies independently of the time and place where it is applied.

In this order of ideas, we have already explained the causal relationship between the prevailing institutional arrangement of France in the 18th century, following Tocqueville's analysis of the event, and

its emotional outcomes over the French peasantry. However, we still have as a first task of this section to explain how that particular institutional arrangement influenced the revolutionary beliefs of the French in order to follow up with the conclusion of how those same beliefs transformed into the emotional distress of the peasantry that led to their revolutionary behavior.

For Tocqueville the beliefs that prompted the French Revolution were the result of both the analyses that "men of letters" did of the prevailing political institutions of France during the 18th century, as of the rhetoric that the *Parlement*, notables and King Louis XVI used in order to obtain the political support of the masses. Academic discourse as well as political discourse and their resulting impact on the emotional equilibrium of the French society were the direct causes of the Revolution.

Following Tocqueville, 18th century academic discourse can be seen as a first cause of the French Revolution because it was based on an analysis that pinpointed the flaws of the political feudal order and proposed solutions incompatible with its existence. And, moreover, it was a universal cause of the French Revolution because it was not only accessible for the educated classes of France, but also for the peasantry. As mentioned by Tocqueville:

Not a single taxpayer bruised by the uneven distribution of the *taille* was not warmed by the idea that all men should be equal: any small landowner stripped bare by an aristocratic neighbor's rabbits was pleased to hear that every kind of privilege without exemption was condemned by reason. Each public enthu-

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siasm was cloaked in philosophy (...).<sup>31</sup>

As time passed the imagination of the masses (...) lost interest in what existed, in order to dream in what might exist (...).<sup>32</sup>

What these new ideas created by philosophers, economists and other “men of letters” gave to the peasantry were new expectations for their life. These new ideas gave the peasantry a new perspective about the world in which the boundaries that impeded their progress could be removed from their existence. “The evils, patiently endured as inevitable, seem[ed] unbearable as soon as the idea of escaping them [was] conceived.”<sup>33</sup> But at the same time, the harder it seemed for the peasants to escape from the constraints imposed by the old order, the more they embraced a violent solution to destroy those same constraints and follow up the new ideas of the “men of letters” and the king.

But what was the origin and character of such compelling beliefs that even the peasantry adopted them as their own? What were they about that gave such powerful hope of change to a class of men that was forcefully bounded to a predetermined destiny as a lower class?<sup>34</sup> In this regard Tocqueville’s analysis is interesting as he argues that the origin of the beliefs developed by the “men of letters” is to be found in the same institutional evolution and practices of the French political system. For Tocqueville

the ideas of equality among men and universality of the laws are based as much on the increasing standardization of the political practices of the kingdom through the *Conceil Royal* and its vertical structure that operated over the whole of France<sup>35</sup> as on the existing disorder of the legal and administrative system of France whose solution was seen in the creation of a more coherent, simple, yet more powerful system based on the idea of social equality.<sup>36</sup> As mentioned by Tocqueville:

The sight of so many excessive or absurd privileges, the burden of which was felt increasingly and the cause of which was less and less understood, nudged or rather precipitated everyone’s mind towards the idea of a natural equality of conditions. On seeing so many bizarre and disordered institutions—the offspring of other eras—which no one had tried to harmonize or to adjust to new needs and which seemed bound to live forever even when they had lost their value, they readily conceived a distaste for ancient ways and tradition and were naturally drawn to a desire to rebuild the society of their time following an entirely new plan which each of them traced by the light of his reason alone.<sup>37</sup>

It was expected that this proposed rebuilding of the French society would be brought about by the royal administration by means of shaping the citizens’ minds according to a predetermined and particular model.<sup>38</sup> The ideal society was that of a nation without aristocracy but that of public officials, and one single and omnipotent administration directing the busi-

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 158-68.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp. 33, 158.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

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ness of the state and protecting the citizens.<sup>39</sup> But if the means to create an ideal society was through a more coherent, simple and all encompassing state, what were the model society and the ideal unit that this model state was going to rule over? In this respect the philosophers and economists envisaged a homogenous society composed of individual and equal citizens as its composite unit. As mentioned by Tocqueville:

The French Revolution evolved in reference to this world in exactly the same manner as religious revolutions acted in relation to the world beyond the grave. It viewed the citizen in an abstract fashion, unrelated to any particular society, just as religion viewed man independent of time or country. It did not simply seek to determine the individual rights of the French citizen but the general duties and rights of men in the political sphere.<sup>40</sup>

And although it can be argued that the constant increase in the amount of taxes or the public distress created by the political debates among the king and the *Parlement* were sufficient causes for the French peasantry to engage into a revolutionary behavior, it cannot be denied that, as Tocqueville himself argues, the language used by the king to outrage the peasants against the nobles and the one used by the peasants to petition to the authorities resembles the one created by the “men of letters” of the 18th century.<sup>41</sup> In this respect we can see a direct relationship between the political beliefs and expectations of the peasants, at least at some degree (see Tocqueville, 2001, pp. 63-66), and the discourse and language

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

used by the 18th century philosophers to propose the destruction of the old regime and the creation of a new one.

A second cause of the revolutionary beliefs withheld by the peasantry against the old feudal order was the appeal of King Louis XVI and the *Parlement* to the masses decrying the abuses of the old feudal order over the peasantry (see Tocqueville, 2001, pp. 36-43). In their appealing to the masses the government and the nobles recklessly introduced to the peasants’ mind the revolutionary ideas of the philosophers and made them more aware of the multiple and constant abuses that they had to put up with every day. In this sense Tocqueville mentions that:

Those people, who had most to fear the anger of the lower classes, would converse out loud in their presence about the cruel injustices of which they had always been victims. They showed each other the monstrous failings of the institutions which were the most oppressive to the people; they exploited their rhetorical skills to paint their sufferings and their badly paid work; their attempts at bringing relief to the people merely filled them with rage. I do not mean to speak of writers but of the government, its principal officials and of the privileged themselves.<sup>42</sup>

This kind of political language infiltrated with ease into the lower classes especially in times of scarcity when the aim of the authorities seemed to have been much more to inflame the passions of the people, than to meet their needs.<sup>43</sup> As mentioned by Tocqueville, the effort was to insert in people’s minds the idea that the blame for their problems always

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 149, 179.

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lied on their superiors.<sup>44</sup> And, in this way, the theories of the philosophers and men of letters to create a new social mind among the people by means of a central government succeeded, although not in the way expected either by them or by the public authorities. At the end, the unfairness effect created by the discourse held in the debate between the king and the *Parlement* became not only the basis for what the king wanted, a more equal society ruled by a more unitary and simple government, but it also became its doom. The unfairness effect, as it aimed at destroying all the institutions that were oppressive for the peasantry, was directed as much against the nobles as to the king because of their shared blame in the creation of all the evils that burdened them.

Finally, as mentioned by Tocqueville, all these beliefs shared by the peasantry and transmitted through the French public authorities of the time, such as the men of letters and the government, ended up creating an emotional distress within the French society. And this distress, this social emotional disequilibrium, could only be overcome through the cathartic violence that ignited the Revolution. As mentioned by Tocqueville, almost as a corollary to his book about the French Revolution:

[The hatred for inequality] had been for a long time propelling the French, with a persistent and irresistible force, towards the destruction, to their very foundations, of all that remained of medieval institutions and, once the ground was cleared, towards the construction of a society in which men were as alike as human beings could envisage.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

After years of acquiring new ideas about the desirability of universal laws, of equality among men, of the need to destroy the institutions of the old feudal order, the French peasantry developed a bitter feeling of the grievances that the nobility, the king and the rest of the feudal institutions imposed on them. They developed a passion for equality and a hatred for inequality fueled by the idea and expectation that they could change the old feudal system and their social condition through the destruction of everything that seemed old and that supported the old political and social privileges and injustices. Whether it was hatred for their oppressors, envy for their social superiors, or cupidity for the wealth and glamour of the old feudal nobility, the emotions that supported the unfairness effect and the new beliefs held by philosophers, the king and the *Parlement*, can be regarded as the immediate causes of the French Revolution.

Institutions alone could have not prompted the French Revolution, as they needed to be perceived and understood by the people over which they ruled in order to prompt any kind of behavior. And this perception and understanding alone could not have prompted the Revolution either, as beliefs without emotional content are merely neutral states of the mind that produce neither hatred nor love, and hence no need for satisfaction or dissatisfaction. It is only the existence of certain social emotional contents in the political beliefs of the Revolution that could have prompted its characteristic violent behavior. The satisfaction of social beliefs and desires is not a satisfaction of any kind of material goods, like food or shelter, but the satisfaction of emotional needs like greed, love or envy that substantiate our whole social existence.

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## Conclusions

For Tocqueville beliefs and emotions were important categories of analysis to explain different complex social phenomena surging from the interaction between human psychology and political institutions. In this sense, Tocqueville's account of the French Revolution is not only an attempt to explain, at an institutional level, the causes of the revolution, but it is also an attempt to create a more powerful explanation of social events relying on a theory of the relationship between institutions, beliefs and emotions. What Tocqueville demonstrated is that although there are relatively stable institutional frameworks for human agency in societies, the outcome of their influence over beliefs, emotions and actions is unpredictable. Only by looking at the past we can find causal relationships between various events, actions and ideas, but we cannot foresee what is going to happen in the future as that is veiled by our present perception and understanding of affairs.

Tocqueville also recognized the importance of disharmonies or unbalances in societies. These disharmonies, that we termed *unfairness effects*, are characterized by the mismatch or misalignment between the expectations and emotions of the people and the prevailing institutions of society. For example, the unfairness effect influenced by the disharmony between the old French feudal order and the new distribution of land was created when the public discourse turned the beliefs of the people against the feudal order and in favor of the new economic, social and political conditions. Its analytical importance lays in its capacity to explain revolutionary or seditious movements without the shortcomings of explanations that rely on economic or political institutions, structures and reason, which, by

nature, are diverse and hardly “generalizable.”

Third, institutions are important not only in influencing the expectations and emotions of the people, but also in determining the positions that each person holds within each society, and in influencing the beliefs that each person within each position develops and holds about the world. In this sense, the pre-revolutionary institutional framework of France not only allowed for the “men of letters” to acquire authoritative positions within the French society, but its evolution also influenced the way these people understood and foresaw the world.

Fourth, beliefs have an influence over human behavior as their holding as truthful or untruthful premises determines the type of actions that people think they should take in particular circumstances and about particular desires. But, if we agree that conscious and willful actions that are not habits or instinctual responses to the outer environment or inner biological needs are enacted for the fulfillment of particular desires, then we can state that those actions are ultimately determined by particular emotions. Desires that do not aim at the fulfillment of material needs aim, then, at the fulfillment of emotional needs. Envy and hatred in Tocqueville's account of the French Revolution aimed at the destruction of the envied or hated object, whether through the destruction of ranks or through its physical destruction, but it was not only in order to fulfill any material need, but the desire of retaliation held in the peasants “heart.”

Finally, perhaps the most important contribution of Tocqueville's political and social psychology is his understanding of how humans make decisions in

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society. His vision is not that of isolated rational actors who, whether under the veil of ignorance or not, decide among the available choices that maximize their welfare. Tocqueville's vision of human agency is that of human choice influenced in unpredictable ways by the existing institutions, by emotion-driven desires, by beliefs based in different value systems and arrangements, by unconscious habits, and by an incapacity to be predicted *a priori*, but only subject to be partially understood *a fortiori*.

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