

## THE TOCQUEVILLIAN HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY AS A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nicolas Arens, Université Saint-Louis - Bruxelles

*Abstract:* This contribution aims to analyse how at the beginning of the historical sociology lies, already for precursors from the XIX century, a critical perspective. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) is one of the founders of this approach. His uses of the long-term perspective as well as of the European scope enable him to qualify critically the French Revolution. This paper argues that the *Old Regime and the Revolution* (Tocqueville 1856) presents the French revolution neither as a real Revolution, since it is an on-going process of the *longue durée*, nor as a French event, since it is a European one. This significance allows then to relate Tocqueville's thought with "critical cosmopolitanism" (Delanty 2006) since the nineteenth-century author was trying to associate both the universal movement of equalization and the definition of an open political community.

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*Contact:* nicolas.arens@usaintlouis.be

Is historical sociology, from the beginning, a critical and Eurocentric approach? Such a question supposes that there would be a normative bias at the foreground of the sociological insight or that sociology focuses on the transformation and the conditions to transform the social reality. If this first idea should be demonstrated, what about the second, the European bias? Nowadays, no proper sociological approach that studies social transformations in Western countries could ignore the European reality. It is in this sense that Ulrich Beck called once the social sciences to adopt a «cosmopolitan methodology» in order to overcome «the nation-state as a self-evident point of departure» (Beck 2004: 33). But, one can wonder, is this intention already present in the first step of sociology? To solve this question, it is necessary to come back to the nineteenth century, when social sciences were for the first time used and defined.

In that context, nineteenth century French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1869) is an interesting case to study since he is one of the founders of historical sociology and since his use of such perspective is straightaway critical. Indeed, Tocqueville goes back to the long-term dynamic of an upcoming equality in Europe in order to show how much the past is acting on his present as much as to qualify the revolutionary events of 1789. However, does he already have a European or a cosmopolitan perspective? The “equality of condition” that he describes refers certainly to a universalistic principle, progressing in the whole (Western) world. But Tocqueville is also sensible to the weight of the culture and the specific national inclinations. Nations have to internalise or to make the democratic principles their own. In that sense, equality between social classes and individuals has greatly homogenized the French society during the Old Regime, especially in terms of wealth and knowledge, but it has not brought them closer. As usual in Tocqueville’s thought, equality entails individualism rather than solidarity (see e.g. DA, II, A, 1, B, 2, C, 1). It remains a challenge to overcome ancient order divisions and to take advantage of the feeling of similarity as a basis of a potential opening between individuals. Or, to say it differently, the pervasiveness of “equality of condition” involves a generality of the political responsiveness that should be ceased otherwise individualism will undermine citizenship. For Tocqueville, there is no recipe or an every-time winning strategy to build up a democracy in every single nation or culture, there are only general principles that should be specified accordingly. Therefore, one of his challenges is to conflate universal liberal democracy with patriotism, while avoiding the closing strategy of nationalism. And when it comes to the French Revolution, the issue for Tocqueville is to explain why is such a general Revolution, with universal claims and based on in-depth human conception, occurring in the specific French national context.

In this contribution, I will intend to present the cosmopolitan and critical aspects of the historical sociology of Tocqueville. The first part will come back to the definition of his historical sociology. I will try to define it from the point of view of the method, the historical necessity and the content of the author’s approach. The second part will then focus more on the European and cosmopolitan aspects of his perspective. It should already be mentioned that, although there is no real European reflection in Tocqueville’s work, one could however assess European consequences. It goes the same way for cosmopolitan components of his thought: there is no real cosmopolitanism, so to speak, in his writings, if one understands cosmopolitanism as a wide and borderless movement or as a worldwide democracy (see e.g. Archibugi, Held 1995). But there are pervasive elements and consequences to analyse and conclusions to draw since his work can be read as a description that one can relate to a «critical cosmopolitanism» (Delanty 2006, 2009), i.e. a «transformation of subjectivity in terms of relations of self, other and world» (Delanty 2009: 6) occurring in the encounter of the global and the local contexts. Tocqueville, and others, were facing what Beck has called an «internal cosmopolitanization of national society» (Beck 2004: 9), hence it is interesting to see how the historical sociology that he firstly developed could be a response to make sense of the opening of a “new society”.

*Tocquevillian historical sociology*

The first step here is to define Tocqueville's historical sociology and to highlight how much it is immediately critical. The author uses a long-term perspective especially in his last book: *The Old Regime and The Revolution* (1856), even though he already addressed it in his introduction to *Democracy in America* (1835-1840)<sup>1</sup>. As usual in his works, there is no formalized or codified scientific approach. He does not intend to deliver a firm and clear definition of sociology or political science. Like any reader of his work, the best way is thus to follow his intentions and to rebuild the coherence of his ideas; without undermining the informality of his thought since it is his most peculiar value. Let us see first and quickly how a long-term historical approach is already mentioned in the *Democracy*, and then how the *Old Regime* completes deeply the perspective.

1. The first steps of the *longue durée*: the *Democracy's* introduction

It is mainly when it comes to the subject of the French Revolution that Tocqueville is making use of the historical perspective. One of the central ideas of the *Old Regime* is that the Revolution that is occurring in France has been in fact prepared well in advance. There is no such thing as a "revolutionary moment"; more accurately there has primarily been a long-lasting development of equality in Europe. In a sense, it is striking to see that the same idea of Tocqueville is already presented 20 years before, in the introduction of the *Democracy*: «when you skim the pages of our history you do not find so to speak any great events that for seven hundred years have not turned to the profit of equality» (DA, Introduction: 82), it is for all the men «at once the past and the future of their history» (*Ibid.*: 83). Such «irresistible revolution» decided by the «will of God» (*Ibid.*) and which is being progressively implemented for such a long period informs us on the present and the future according to him: «would it be wise to believe that a social movement that comes from so far could be suspended by the efforts of a generation?» (*Ibid.*).

Clearly, Tocqueville makes these remarks against catholic reactionaries. His target is French philosopher J. de Maistre (1753-1821) - very popular with his contemporaries - who believed that men are acting according to providential wishes (see e.g. Benoît 2005: 42). Tocqueville wants to respond to the counter-revolutionary perspective and he wants to solve this religious dimension by turning the argument against itself: historical sociology can enlighten God's wishes, so much that who «want[s] to stop democracy would then seem[s] to be struggling against God himself» (DA, Introduction: 83). But there is more. Such a God-backed argument allows him mostly to advocate in favour of his central point: the «great democratic revolution» is «irresistible, because it seems ... the most continuous, oldest and most permanent fact known in history» (*Ibid.*: 80). The wide historical approach, an idea coming from Guizot, enables Tocqueville to

<sup>1</sup> The edition of *Democracy in America* used here is the Nolla's edition translated by James T. Schleifer (2010), quoted henceforth DA, volume number, part letter, chapter number, page number. For the *The Old Regime and The Revolution*, I use the translation of Alan S. Kahan (1998) based on the Furet and Mélonio's edition: quoted henceforth ORR, book number, chapter number and page number. Tocqueville's recollection (1893) will be quoted from the old 1896 english edition, and noted henceforth Recollections, page number.

think “inside the box”. It sustains the relevance of his study - i.e. not, “is democracy coming?” but, “how is working - or should be working - the upcoming democracy?”. Moreover, he is able with this approach to reflect on the long-term trends (see e.g. Aron 1965) - and not, as so many commentators have claimed, to predict the future (e.g. Mayer 1939) or to state sociological laws (Boudon 2004). It is therefore a normative perspective that opens the analysis of the transitional time: when it becomes clear that society will turn democratic in the future, one has to study this tendency as an open-ended project, albeit the uncertainty of the new society remains unveiled since democracy could end up liberal or despotic.

For Tocqueville, using a long period of time to explain the coming of equality is thus an argument to qualify the counter-revolution, but also to reduce the strength of the French Revolution as a dramatic turning point: after all, if the development has been lasting for already a long time, the turmoil of 1789 is not that subversive. It is where Tocqueville’s historical argument becomes essentially critical, and it was taken as such by his contemporaries (Mélonio 1993: 60 or 2016: 342): in his introduction to the *Democracy* he is speaking about the «great social [or democratic] revolution» rather than the «French Revolution» itself. And he notes in his manuscript: «if France hastened the democratic revolution of which I am speaking, France did not give it birth» (see, DA, Introduction: 82). I will come back to the subject of France later. What we can underline for now is that Tocqueville does not really develop these points in the course of his first book, although he discusses them in the introduction. In both volumes of the *Democracy*, he is mainly focusing on the opposition between democracy and aristocracy, whereas the *Old Regime and the Revolution* focuses on the crisis of the ancient French society and the period of transition (Lamberti 1983: 43). Thus, the *Democracy* mentions slightly the historical approach, and one should move to the *Old Regime* so as to specify the author’s approach.

## 2. Historical sociology as a critical approach: The Old Regime and the Revolution

In order to understand the historical sociology dimension of Tocqueville’s second main book, I suggest three questions, each of which relates to different reading levels or presences of the *longue durée* in the *Old Regime*. The three questions go as follow: a) which (disciplinary) methods is Tocqueville using? b) Was the Revolution (in France) necessary? And, c) how is the content of the Revolution integrating a long-term dynamic? All these three questions intend to show that Tocqueville uses his historical sociology as a critical mean.

### a) *The methodological approach*

Firstly, by which disciplinary methods does Tocqueville intend to grasp the *longue durée*? Why does he choose the historical approach? As the Pléiade’s editors of the *Old Regime* notes, «for Tocqueville, history was the continuation of politics by other means» (Furet, Mélonio 1998: 1), chiefly because he was forced by the Second Empire to resign from his political mandate. During the mid-nineteenth century in France, any writing

about the Revolution of 1789 would have in fact the intention to discuss the present time - especially the 1848 Revolution and the accession of Louis-Napoleon (1850) - and to take a political stance (Mélonio 2016). Nevertheless, by doing so the author sticks to his “new political science”, and goes beyond the daily facts. Doing politics equates for him to stepping back and adopting a larger view: by studying the political institutions and how centres of power are developing in history. The historical view was therefore a way to complete his political science.

If the historical path that he follows has a political intention from the beginning, it has also the purpose to moderate the importance of the Revolution and to temper the usual passionate recourse to historical discourse. In the *Old Regime*, Tocqueville wants to investigate history rather than to tell it: «this book is not a history of the French Revolution ... It is a study of that Revolution» (ORR, preface: 83) or «I am speaking about history, not retelling it» (ORR, vol. 2: 35). For historian François Furet, it is less a «narrative history» than a «problem-oriented history» (Furet 1978), i.e. Tocqueville does not look at the revolutionary events, but he asks questions about them (Furet 1982): why did the Revolution happen in France? To what is it related in the long-term history?

More than these political and scientifically historical perspectives, Tocqueville deals also with sociological material. Close to the *Consideration* of Montesquieu (1734), his work is «an attempt at a sociological explanation of historical events» (Aron 1965: 206). It is on the social ground that occurs the «great democratic revolution»: equality of conditions homogenizes individuals and gives rise to the feeling of similarity. Throughout a long time, equality has indeed levelled the different social classes and undermined the role of the ancient aristocracy in favour not only of the bourgeoisie, but also of the people in general. It has in addition founded, especially in France, a wide and progressively powerful central administration, the only power able to ensure such equality.

So as to answer the first question, one can say that Tocqueville is using a mix-method of history, political science and sociology. An approach still inspiring today: «the greatness of Tocqueville does not lie in any single doctrine that he espoused but rather in the ambivalent and often critical lenses through which he analyzed the multiple facets of democracy» (Craiu, Gellar 2009: 23). It goes the same for the scientific object “French Revolution”: Tocqueville focuses on the social transformation, that have already been occurring for a long period, in order to back his political stand that the Revolution is neither new in 1789, nor is it finished in 1856.

*b) The necessity and the freedom to revolt*

In line with this interdisciplinarity, typical of Tocqueville’s thinking, the second question of necessity raises naturally: since the Revolution has already been happening for a long period, did the people of France have the choice to act as they did in 1789? Or, was 1789 necessary? For Tocqueville, the classical interrogation on the necessity of the Revolution is a philosophical one and to be able to solve it means one more time to judge politically and critically his time: it is a decision between to follow the democratic claims that finish to emerge at the Revolution or to ignore them and come

back to the traditional aristocratic, monarchic or imperial power. So, historical sociology perspective is not only supporting his arguments in favour of a liberal democracy, it is also the way one reads the past, what he finds in it, which could determine how to understand the decision made and how to act in the present.

The philosophical purpose of the *Old Regime* is clear from the beginning. When he was looking for his subject he wrote these lines to his friends: «I had to have a contemporary one [subject], and which provide me the mean to combine facts with ideas, the historical philosophy with the history itself» (Tocqueville to Beaumont, 26 December 1850, I translate). Or again: «the difficulties are immense. One of them that trouble the most my mind comes from the mixture of history properly speaking with the philosophy of history» (Tocqueville to Kergolay, 15 December 1850, I translate). But Tocqueville develops a subtle position to answer the historiographical dilemma about the necessity of Revolution: «there is nothing more suited to instilling modesty in philosophers and statesmen than the history of our revolution. Never was such a great event, with such ancient causes, so well prepared and so little foreseen» (ORR, I, 1: 93). The Revolution has been at the same time hatched well in advance, but it is also and literally unexpected. The blindness of the 1789's contemporaries persists still in 1848 as for Tocqueville the same claims are coming back: «in less than two years, [his] hope for a peaceful republic had soured. In 1848-51 Tocqueville believed he was reliving the events of 1789-99» (Furet, Mélonio 1998: 5). But the repetition of the revolutions is the best proof that people ignore their history, and how the past determines them.

However, the idea is also to avoid any evolutionism or determinism: «I detest these absolute systems, which represent all the events of history as depending upon great first causes linked by the chain of fatality, and which, as it were, suppress men from the history of the human race» (Recollections, II, 1: 80). What kind of historical necessity is he developing instead? A necessity of the sociological causes and of the historical material, while the composition and the assembling of the causes in the present remains in the hand of chance (Boudon 2004: 20-26). It is how one can understand his famous sentence: «chance does nothing that has not been prepared beforehand» (Recollections, II, 1: 80-81). In the case of the French Revolution it means that some sociological and political elements, which has been formed in the course of a long history, could explain that the Revolution is occurring in France. But the past did not shape concretely the form of the revolutionary events. This point allows seeing the critical intention that Tocqueville develops: men remain free within certain limits that historical sociology could partially unveil. In return, the same insight can reveal some of the actions that are precisely embedded in the repetition of the past.

### *c) The long-term dynamic*

But what are these sociological and political elements? And how have they been coming from the past and shaping partially the present? This is our third and last question. Here, I will try to be concise since the idea is not to unfold the entire content of the *Old Regime*, but to underline how its main argument integrates a long-term development that enables a critical viewpoint.

Following the idea of Furet making the first part of the *Old Regime* a presentation of an indissoluble “socio-political” dynamic (Furet 1978: 140), I argue that the entire book is in fact based upon the significance that considers the Revolution as a long social and political development. The best quote from Tocqueville might be this excerpt taken from the first book, chapter 5: «the Revolution’s only effect was to abolish the political institutions ... in order to replace them with a more uniform and simple social and political order, one based on social equality» (ORR, I, 5: 106). The French Revolution adjusts the political institutions in order to catch up with the already transformed social reality. Behind this meaning, Tocqueville in fact criticises the French Revolution endeavour: it did not transform greatly social reality since this one was already democratised. The revolutionaries have just finished the job, so to speak. That is why Tocqueville considers the “Old regime” as the transitional moment: «in his mind, the phrase “old regime” related not to a social state but to the crisis of a social state... when it was already torn apart by contradictory principles» (Furet, Mélonio 1998: 22).

Therefore and concretely, there are two long-term elements that go beyond the Revolution and help to produce it: a political one, i.e. the administrative centralisation and a social one, i.e. the equalization of social conditions. Both are interplaying with each other along the history. The most striking part of Tocqueville’s argument - striking especially for his contemporaries (see e.g. Lamberti 1986: 903) - is to say that centralization usually understood as one of the greatest accomplishment of the French Revolution is in fact already set up in the Old Regime. Analysing the historical development, Tocqueville reveals that the centralisation, i.e. the modern state, settles progressively to the detriment of the local lords’ power. Why is that? Principally because the nobility has withdrawn itself from political life and could not justify its prerogative anymore:

The nobles had offensive privileges, they possessed burdensome rights, but they assured public order, dispensed justice, executed the law, came to the help of the weak, and ran public affairs. To the extent that the nobility ceased to do these things, the weight of its privileges seemed heavier, and finally their very existence seemed incomprehensible. (ORR, II, 1: 117)

With this long-term analysis, Tocqueville is able to make a strong critic against members of his “caste”, the former ones but also the ones of his time: when nobles do not interact with the rest of the society and do not exercise their prerogatives, when they become individualistic, they will lose their right to have a privileged social position and concurrently the central power will secure a strong political position. As Pléiade’s editors sum up: «In France, the lord’s power had not only been uprooted by the king’s agents but had been delegitimized in the peasant’s heart ... obedience broke down with the legitimacy of the aristocratic order» (Furet, Mélonio 1998: 22-23).

Moreover, privileges as such seem odd and unjustified as soon as equality pervades society. Which does not mean that French society was unified, on the contrary. It was

rather a very divided nation, since equality isolates more than it brings individuals closer: «if the bourgeois and the noble were more similar, they were at the same time more and more isolated from one another; two phenomena that ought not to be confused. The two situations, rather than softening each other, often aggravated the difference» (ORR, II, 9: 154). The Old Regime is in that sense a pre-democratic society: «each one of the thousand little groups of which French society was composed thought only of itself. This was ... a kind of collective individualism» (ORR, II, 9: 163).

Again here, Tocqueville criticises: the French Revolution did neither invent the principle of equality, nor has it entailed a social individualism, it was already there. At the outbreak of the Revolution, France «was no longer composed of anything but a homogeneous mass, of which, however, the parts were no longer linked» (ORR, II, 12: 191), «nowhere were the citizens less prepared to act together and lend one another mutual support in a time of crisis» (ORR, II, 8: 149). It was paradoxically the central state that assumed the social cohesion at the end of the old regime, while the civic society ends up deeply depoliticized because of its own apathy and its inability to interact.

Here, more than anywhere else maybe, Tocqueville makes himself very clear. The content of the Revolution is a long displacement of social positions that are levelled and equalized, and a general political disengagement that gives way to an unrestrained state power. While such central power will survive the French Revolution until Tocqueville's days. This could actually be the final critical word of Tocqueville to his fellows: if the coming democracy has led in the course of history to a political withdrawal, it has also generalized, or “dis-embedded”, the political responsibility. It is newly the duty to everyone to engage politically; otherwise the central state could at any moment turn into a despotic state.

As an intermediate conclusion, one can see here that Tocqueville used a long-term perspective, based upon a progressive social transformation, in order to formulate a critical insight. The French Revolution is in fact inserted in a long historical development that shapes partially - but not entirely - its claims, while democracy is a slow groundswell that has been already at work and that has developed an in-depth individualism. The political call from Tocqueville is then that democracy needs to be completed by commitment, meaning political awareness and “public virtue” as well as interactions between individuals and production of associations. In addition, by focusing on the sociological reality of the French history, Tocqueville denies in fact any French exception or any explanation based on a specific “national spirit”: it is not nationalistic motives that explain that the Revolution is occurring in France, it is rather a particular social reality of individualism and centralised power. But it remains to see the extension of Tocqueville's political call, i.e. how much he considers the Revolution as a European and a cosmopolitan event.



*Tocqueville and the European scope*

## 1. Direct and indirect topicality of Tocqueville

Before starting, let us contextualise quickly the issue of updating a “classical” author. What kind of cosmopolitanism and European reflections can one find in Tocqueville’s thought? In recent works, several authors have tried to update his ideas of democracy, Revolution and federalism, or his method of historical sociology and comparatism. To name a few, in European studies: Siedentop (2000, 2007), Swenden (2007) or the edited volume of Rau and Tracz-Tryniecki (2014), and about cosmopolitanism as such: two others edited volume, Craiutu and Gellar (2009) or Atanassow and Boyd (2013). It is not possible to review all these contributions here. However, I would like to consider roughly the debate about two types of strategy that are adopted to bring up to date the nineteenth-century philosopher’s thought: a direct strategy and an indirect one.

The three edited volumes mentioned here have in common to adopt a direct reference to Tocqueville as “our contemporary”. For instance, Craiutu and Gellar note «the Frenchman has become, so to speak, the “unsurpassable horizon” of our times, and his ideas offer an indispensable starting point for anyone interested in assessing the prospects for democracy today» (Craiutu, Gellar 2009: 21). For instance, authors elaborate on his method, what they have called the «Tocqueville’s analytics», in order to “apply” it to different contexts around the world. The intentions of Rau and Tracz-Tryniecki<sup>2</sup> or Atanassow and Boyd are similar, although the latter go one step further: they intend to go «beyond the scholar’s narrow preoccupation with what Tocqueville thought or did and apply his political reflections to dilemmas of international justice, democratization, and cross-cultural exchanges» (Atanassow, Boyd 2013: 16). The outcome could be underwhelming (see e.g. Mancini’s Review of the latter reference, 2016), since the application is sometimes freewheeled and strayed largely from Tocqueville’s initial ideas.

The writings of Siedentop or Swenden (but others could be mentioned) are different and refer more indirectly to the author. The idea is less to update forcefully Tocqueville assuming in advance that he is relevant, but to be inspired by his method and his ideas taken in their context. Considering the current European context, Siedentop analyses it through informal conditions that Tocqueville found during his American journey in 1831: what is necessary to ensure a federation? A common language, local self-government, similar customs and mores, etc. In a second phase then, Siedentop goes one philosophical step further by saying that a federation should be rooted on a consensus over the changing-nature of laws, i.e. a «constitutional belief» (Siedentop 2000: 16). If this extrapolation could be acceptable however, it is because the application of Tocqueville is indirect. Surely Siedentop or Swenden go further than his writings, but they do not undermine his intention - e.g. familiar with constitutional thinking. In other words, they “applied” the author, while they bear the context in mind and acknowledge

<sup>2</sup> I have reviewed this volume in a contribution to the *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 67/1, 2017, p. 208-210.

a philosophical distance, i.e. an indirect link between his time and ours.

Whereas the first authors intend utterly to solve Tocqueville relevancy; and sometimes force his topicality, the second authors accept a distance and focus on the argument, the intention and the trends of his thought. The formers want to put Tocqueville into practice, while the latter, so to speak, want to put him into theory. It seems however highly contradictory to see in Tocqueville a recipe or a direct application for democracy, whereas he is expressly speaking of freedom and uncertainty deep inside the meaning of democracy. In addition, while reviewing recent American and French attempts to update Tocqueville's thought, Serge Audier has argued strongly about the importance to keep historical and philosophical contexts in mind (2004, 2007: 87). This is why the rest of this contribution will be more in line with the second approach. The objective will be here to focus on the context of Tocqueville and on his critical intention regarding the Revolution as a European event bearer of cosmopolitan effects, important beyond the French case.

## 2. The French Revolution as a European Issue

What are the European characteristics integrated in Tocqueville's view of the Revolution? And what kind of use is he making of them? Just like the author used the *longue durée* to qualify the revolutionary aspect of 1789, he will apply the same perspective to moderate the national genius. Surely the Revolution happens in France, but Tocqueville considers from the beginning that it has a European significance. The historical sociology and the European view allow him to enlarge the French case, refuting therefore its uniqueness. Nevertheless, Tocqueville does not reject the idea of nationalism as an active patriotism, neither does he neglect France's specific context. He rather has «a meditation on the French exception» (Mélonio 1993: 294, see also Furet, Julliard, Rosanvallon 1988) and embeds the French event in a wider European wave. In line with that, he wrote the following in a letter to his friend: «the French Revolution is a considerable part of the special history of each of the continental nations, and it is impossible to speak of it without obliging them to look back on themselves» (letter to Sedgwick, 14 October 1856, OC, 7: 182, quoted in Mélonio 2016: 338, note 6). What does it mean that the Revolution is in some respect a European event?

Aside from England - usual touchstone in Tocqueville's thought - Europe in general was in a comparable situation: «from the border of Poland to the Irish Sea, ... everything was similar» (ORR, I, 4: 103), every country still depends upon the «old common law of Europe». But Tocqueville notes, «by the eighteenth century it was half-ruined everywhere» (*Ibid.*). Tocqueville compares the context, in France, in Germany, in Russia - where differences are of degree, not in kind: feudal institutions and aristocracy are not backed by the people anymore, «the heart of the people deserted them and were attracted to the rulers» (*Ibid.*: 104), while the monarchy of eighteenth century «no longer had anything in common with the medieval monarchy» (*Ibid.*). Social equality and the administrative centralisation are in fact spreading across Europe, and «it was

these dying [medieval] institutions, already dead in the minds of many contemporaries, that the French Revolution sought to liquidate, to root out» (Furet, Mélonio 1998: 18).

Thanks to his comparatism, Tocqueville is able to put the French event into perspective and to better define it. It is even a methodological prerequisite, «for whoever has seen and studied only France will never understand anything about the French Revolution» (ORR, I, 4: 105). Therefore, what kind of general content or claim 1789 states? Classically, Tocqueville sees in the substance of the French Revolution a universal claim: «the French Revolution did not have a territory of its own; further, to some extent its effect has been to erase all the old frontiers from the map. ... it [has] established, above all particular nationalities, a common intellectual homeland where men of all nations could become citizens» (ORR, I, 3: 99). In that context, Tocqueville compares 1789 with a religious revolution. Just like religious revolutions intend to fix the relation between men and God, the political revolution happening in France and in Europe aims to determine the link between men and politics in general. In that sense, Tocqueville was writing in his notes that the «equal power for each citizen», granted by the belonging to the species - and not to a privileged class - this «dogma of the sovereignty of the people immediately left France and spread throughout the world» (ORR, Notes and Variants: 329).

However, this idea of universalism is not in itself specific to Tocqueville. What is more interesting, and relevant too, is that this diffusion throughout the (Western) world was possible because of the maturity of the European society; because of the social situation. Here again, the long-term history is a decisive critical leverage: «the same spark which set Europe afire in the eighteenth century was easily put out in the fifteenth» (ORR, I, 3: 101). So, what gave the French Revolution the extension that it had? Not only its content, but also the readiness of European societies. In themselves, the ideas claimed during the Revolution are not new, but «the great novelty was that so many nations had reached a point where such practices were so effectively employed, and such principles so readily accepted» (*Ibid.*).

This puts particularly the French exception into question. France of the late eighteenth century is in a specific social situation and it is disposed to undergo a Revolution, rather than it is the particular nation that bears the universal message of human rights. In other words, Tocqueville refuses to explain the Revolution by «what is called a bit pompously *the French mind*: as if this supposed attribute could have appeared all at once at the end of the last century, after having been hidden during all the rest of our history» (ORR, III, 1: 202). In addition, the last lines of the *Old Regime* should not fool the reader. Indeed, in this excerpt, Tocqueville seems to make an apologist argument for his nation, «the most brilliant and most dangerous nation of Europe» (ORR, III, 8: 246). Actually, one can notice from his notes what the author was really thinking: «the picture of a nation is always a vague and indistinct image ... There is always more pretence than truth in it» (ORR, Notes and Variants: 413). Tocqueville did eventually keep the portrait however, so as to make «a concession to the false taste of the time» (*Ibid.*). What is certain from that view is that France is neither a paradigmatic

model, nor has it an exceptional faith. But France in 1789 was the most advanced nation of Europe regarding the development of absolutism and equalization, which is in a final analysis a peculiar position.

### 3. Historical sociology and a critical cosmopolitanism

In this peculiar social position, what does it mean to adopt a cosmopolitan openness, while building a specific political community? In order to make a comparison with the contemporary cosmopolitanism, I suggest in this last point to intend to see how is it possible to relate Tocqueville's approach to the «critical cosmopolitanism» such as Delanty defines it (2006, 2012)?

To summarize the idea of Delanty in a few words without unfolding his entire conception, I want to underline three key features that seem relevant to relate to Tocqueville. The first idea is that the critical cosmopolitanism is not considering a formal worldwide movement or an uprooted normative claim, rather it focuses on specific moment of social and cultural transformation. It might be the first sense of its critical aspect: «cosmopolitanism as a normative critique refers to phenomena that are generally in tension with their social context, which they seek to transform» (Delanty 2012: 41). In other words, critical cosmopolitanism aims at taking into account «the transformative potential within the present» (*Ibid.*).

Speaking about the “present” - and this is the second idea - Delanty means that the cosmopolitan moments occur with a reference to a social reality and could happen at anytime. More internalized than internationalized (Delanty 2006, Beck, Sznaider 2006) and critical against universalism, Delanty's cosmopolitanism looks at the «interface of the local and the global» (2012: 41). However, it does integrate the “world openness” or the “world disclosure”. So for him, cosmopolitanism is not truer today than before, but it «resides in social mechanisms and dynamics that can exist in any society at any time in history where world openness has a resonance» (Delanty 2006: 43).

As a third main idea, Delanty considers that one of the key moment when this transformation happens against the background of the world is during cultural encounter, i.e. when one modifies its own culture during the interaction with an other. In that sense, cosmopolitanism is «a condition of openness to the world and entailing self and societal transformation in light of the encounter with the other» (Delanty 2012: 41). It is critical because it emphasises the transformation resulting from the integration of the Otherness within the Self. The outcome of the encounter develops what Delanty names a «cosmopolitan imagination» (2009). The cosmopolitan imagination occurs «when and wherever there are new relations between self, other and the world based on openness» (Delanty 2006: 27). In other words, critical cosmopolitanism today aims to take seriously the “unexpected consequences” that globalization has entailed in the culture across the world.

How can this cosmopolitanism based on transformation, openness and encounter relate to Tocqueville's ideas? Here, one can mention quickly Tocqueville's *Democracy* and how much for him equality modifies greatly the relations between individuals. By entailing mildness and compassion, the sense of similarity allows men to «judge in a moment the sensations of all the others» and to «show a general compassion for all the members of the human species» (DA, II, C, 1: 9). Equality is then the general basis on which openness toward the world is possible and it makes the encounter with otherness possible. Ulrich Beck has called that the “cosmopolitan empathy” (2004: 5-8). The outcome of this is the emergence of a human community based on a general similarity. But Tocqueville helps us also to understand that building a political community is something else and could be either closed or opened to political participation from strangers (see Scuccimarra 2014). In that sense, integration through interactions - mainly dialogical as Delanty notes - with the others are central. This interplay can complete this first feeling of likeness with an active social links, just like Tocqueville was considering associations and relations between individuals as the cornerstone of societal democracy. In short, Tocqueville was certainly not imagining a world democracy, but he was analysing democratisation as an “open moment”, and as the beginning of a «shared normative culture» (Delanty 2012: 44) that was deeply transforming the social structures and political institutions in his time.

However, another point, more in line with the rest of this article, could be considered. Closer to the *Old Regime*, it is the connection between democratic universalism and nationalism, as a link between the global and the local. Surely, Tocqueville uses the universalism vocabulary and in that sense he strays from Delanty's post-Western cosmopolitanism (Delanty 2009). But this article has insisted on the critical aspect of Tocqueville's view regarding the French Revolution and the fundamental issue is thus to understand how political actions and decision are possible in respect to the long-term and large-scope dynamics. Concretely, in the case of the French Revolution, the point is to conflate a universal, i.e. broad movement, with a national particularity.

As we have seen here, it is the historical and social experiences that are firstly important, rather than the “national mind”. Nevertheless, these experiences are put under pressure by principles that go beyond nations, such as equalization of conditions or centralization of power. In the *Democracy*, Tocqueville was already concerned by the homogenization that nations will endure between each other because of the democratization. He wrote: «Democratic peoples who are neighbors do not become similar only on a few points, as I have just said; they end by resembling each other in nearly everything» and they will adopt «similar opinions and mores, because the spirit of democracy makes men tend to assimilate» (DA, II, 3, 26: 111).

When it comes to the French Revolution, Tocqueville tries to join the universal message of the Revolution with the nationalism. He does not neglect the voluntarism conception of patriotism (Mélonio 1997), although he is very sceptical about the national particularism. Taking into account for a short time the outcome of the long historical dynamic, i.e. the sovereignty of the people or the general political

responsibility, revolutionaries did accomplish a great democratic milestone. It was the fundamental interaction between individuals in the entire society that happens some times in Mai and August 1789. The sublime moment is thus when peoples, and the French in 89, «believe that they could be equal in freedom» (ORR, III, 8: 244). Patriotism in that sense is not closing particularism, albeit it could be in tension with it, it is an active involvement into political decisions and interplays with others. This event of 1789, a moment of openness and of interaction with otherness, is the integration or the encounter of a global and universal dynamic of equality and its interpretation in a socio-political specific understanding.

### *Conclusion*

In order to emphasise the argument of this article, one can say that Tocqueville's view on the French Revolution goes as follows. The French Revolution is neither a Revolution; because it has been progressively implemented well in advance, nor it is a French event; since it is a European one. «The Revolution was just the French form of a larger movement, by which modern equality founded its empire on the ruins of feudal society» (Furet, Mélonio 1998: 18). But «if it had not taken place, the old social structure would nevertheless have collapsed everywhere, here sooner, there later» (ORR, I, 5: 106). Tocqueville is able to formulate this critical statement with the help of a historical sociology perspective: the *longue durée* informs us about the historical dynamic at work, while the sociological insight teaches us about which social conditions are really at stake. Tocqueville might be using instrumentally the historical sociology approach and the European-wide view in order to qualify the French Revolution and to critic his contemporaries. But that does not change the interest of his method. His critical approach allows him to consider the social transformation in a larger scope. He opens the reflection toward interactions that take place newly beyond former social status. Thus, the *Old Regime* tackles the dis-embedding of a formal political responsibility and follows its openness. Such openness happens within the building of societies. But Tocqueville expresses himself with a negative view, what makes his reading peculiar. It is the lack of political freedom - i.e. the lack of political activities and the lack of interactions - that leads toward the reinforcement of the state power and brings men to defend the nation at all cost; even if it means to reject the past of their nation. Furthermore, Tocqueville adds that this tendency of political disavowal develops concurrently with the democratisation of society. Just like despotism has been the continual threat for Democracy in his first books, particularism and national apology appear in his last book as the dangerous withdrawal that jeopardises the wide openness and the free social interaction. With his long-term historical sociology, Tocqueville attempts to underline the importance of social interplays; an active integration that takes place internally, yet that refers to a cosmopolitan moment.

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