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Tocqueville's Cultural Institutionalism

*Reconciling Collective Culture and Methodological Individualism**

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ABSTRACT With a few notable exceptions, Alexis de Tocqueville's contributions to the formation of the sociological canon have been ignored. Most sociologists are likely to recognize him as a key source for current work on social capital and the civil society. But, in this paper I argue that Tocqueville's importance for sociology extends far beyond those uses. Tocqueville is the author of a sophisticated and powerful theory of culture that solves the key problem of reconciling culture with the claims of methodological individualism. He does so by shunning the disciplinary boundaries that have sprung up after him, integrating political, historical, institutional and psychological building blocks of culture in a subtle yet powerful analytical framework. He thus avoids many of the pitfalls that plague other theories of culture, which makes his contribution to the sociological canon equal to that of many other canon-forming writers.

KEYWORDS collective emotional and mental habits, culture, equilibrium analysis, institutions, methodological individualism

Despite its ubiquity, culture remains a controversial concept in sociology. While many sociologists view culture as one of a few genuinely sociological subject matters, others point out that the concept is fraught with analytical and theoretical difficulties. One of the objections is that culture is often used as an omnibus concept, a catch-all for all sorts of social traits and dispositions, from folkways to religious rituals and beliefs, from norms and values to traditions of law, from conversation habits to dress codes. As Michael Taylor has noted, the word 'culture' 'is used for a hopeless variety of things' (1993: 110). As a catch-all, culture inevitably ends up being an undiscriminating and self-undermining 'explain-all' (DiMaggio, 1995; Hamilton and Woolsey Biggart, 1992). A second problem is that those who invoke 'culture' as a cause of specific actions rarely

identify the mechanism through which culture presumably produces this or that particular human behavior. Culture is thus what Raymond Boudon (1998) has called a 'black box concept', where 'explanation' proceeds without attention to the precise mechanism linking cause and the effect it is alleged to produce (Hedström and Swedberg, 1998). Cultural explanations of social action are thus often akin to explaining a person's fall from a bicycle by gravity. Third, culture is very often treated as a 'variable', a social force presumed to be homogeneous (non-ambivalent) and static (impervious to change) (see, for example, the approach pioneered by Hofstede, 1980). Fourth, and most important for my purposes here, culture seems forever wedded to methodological collectivism, that is, the view that while individual action is controlled by 'macro' forces such as culture, individuals, in turn, have no way of influencing those forces. This view reduces social actors to cultural dopes and invites all the criticism justly leveled against the 'over-socialized' concept of humans in sociology (Wrong, 1961). As James Coleman pointed out, the sociological tradition of treating phenomena like culture and social norms as 'axiomatic' has done a great disservice to the intellectual coherence and interdisciplinary connectivity of sociology (1990: 242). This tradition is largely responsible for some of the perennial debates in sociology, like the 'micro–macro' or 'structure–agency' debate, which revolve around the fact that the effects of cultural norms on individual action are explained, but the way norms and culture emerge from the action of individual action is not. As Margret Archer put it: 'The status of culture oscilates between that of a supremely independent variable, the superordinate power in society . . . to the opposite extreme where it is reduced to mere epiphenomenona (charged only with providing an ideational representation of structure)' (1996: 1). Archer notes that, of the key concepts of sociology, culture has displayed the weakest analytical development.

Clearly, these charges add up to a formidable challenge against culture as a scientifically useful concept. George Homans certainly had a point when he cited 'culture' as an example of a 'non-operating variable', that is, a variable that doesn't 'add anything' to what we already know (1967: 10–12). These criticisms also explain why, as Paul DiMaggio (1995) has observed, culture – outside of anthropology – has until very recently remained a maverick affair in the social sciences.

In this essay I want to demonstrate that these charges are effective *only* against a methodologically collectivist notion of culture. Building on Hedström and Swedberg's (1998) recent work on 'explanation by mechanism' and new readings of Tocqueville, especially by Elster (1991, 1993), I show that they are not valid against alternative conceptions, such as Tocqueville's, which do not rely on omnibus and 'black box' notions and do not treat culture in the tradition of methodological collectivism. Reconstructing such alternative notions is important not only to understand critical junctures in the formation of the sociological

canon; it is also important for contemporary efforts to develop a more coherent and analytically productive conception of culture.

Tocqueville's Approach to Culture

French political and social thought has shown the greatest curiosity and clearest understanding of the interplay between the individual and collective beliefs and culture, beginning, roughly, with Montaigne and ending with Tocqueville. Why the French should have pursued this train of social thought so much further than their European counterparts, and why subsequent social thought has so effectively shunned this rich vein of inquiry, are intriguing questions in their own right. Perhaps Tocqueville's idea that 'mores are the only tough and durable power in a nation' (1968 [hereafter DA]: 247) appeared oddly out of sync with an age in which steam-powered engines, railways and telegraphs seemed to render all established morals and customs obsolete, turning them into 'survivals of the past', 'differences that are daily vanishing' (Marx and Engels, 1983: 225). For many, the language of the *Communist Manifesto* had a far more powerful hold on the imagination than the idea that, try as they might, humans remain in the grip of their traditional sentiments, habits and opinions, as Tocqueville (1955) demonstrated in his analysis of the attempt of his compatriots to overcome the legacy of the Ancien Régime by means of the 1789 revolution.

Among the long list of French writings on culture and institutions, I single out Tocqueville's study of *Democracy in America* because it is the work in which his analytical toolkit is most clearly observed. Other studies, such as his *Old Regime*, may be preferred if the main concern is to demonstrate the impact of culture on society in a specific empirical case. But *Democracy in America* is the work in which the role of culture in the emergence and maintenance of institutions is explored with the greatest ingenuity and skill. In essence, Tocqueville argues in *Democracy in America* that *particular* cultural habits, dispositions and beliefs are crucial in maintaining a nation's institutions, and that those institutions, once established, in turn shape the beliefs of the actors in their compass.

There are several peculiarities to Tocqueville's approach to culture, which differ from standard theories and which it is well to point out at the outset. First, most of Tocqueville's theorizing about culture is implicit. Apart from a few short explicit statements, Tocqueville does not explicate his 'theory' of what he calls *moeurs*, apart from saying that they should be understood as *habitudes du coeur* and *habitudes de l'esprit*. He distrusted abstract theories: 'An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom; you may put in it what ideas you please and take them out again unobserved' (DA 482). What 'theory' there is is for the most part left implicit, subordinate to the goal of understanding modern democratic society in America. For Tocqueville, ideas had to prove their mettle in how well they performed 'on the job'.

Second, in his notion of culture Tocqueville brings cognitive and psychological elements together. In this he clearly follows authors like Montaigne, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld and Montesquieu who made the autonomy of the passions as well as their local variation a key subject of intellectual inquiry. By referring to both emotional and cognitive aspects of collective habits, Tocqueville avoids difficulties that an approach focusing exclusively on the cognitive dimension cannot shake. Because beliefs are anchored in emotions, humans are far less free to 'revise and change' their ideas in light of evidence than the intellectuals of the Enlightenment liked to assume.

Third, by assessing culture at the level of collective *habits*, Tocqueville pitches the analysis at a level where stability as well as change are possible empirical events. By conceiving of culture as an aggregate of collective habits – hard but not impossible to change – Tocqueville avoids the extremes of 'supreme superordinate power', on the one hand, and 'epiphenomenon', on the other. This is all the more remarkable because the only other theories of culture that Tocqueville could build on were Montesquieu's (1989) climate theory and Herder's idea of 'national spirit' (*Volksgeist*). The latter's 'group mind' conception defined culture as an organic outgrowth of 'nature', similar to the family and strongly shaped by language. Famously, Herder (1968) wants us to see cultural homogeneity as 'natural', and cultural heterogeneity as 'unnatural', a view that many of his German heirs hold to this day.

Fourth, Tocqueville does not assume that the role of culture weakens in modern society. He does not share his contemporaries' belief in the inevitable unfolding of social 'modernization'. In his discussion of the causes that will likely maintain democracy in America, he attributes the crucial role to culture: 'The laws contribute more to the maintenance of the democratic republic in the United States than do the physical circumstances of the country, and mores do more than the laws' (DA 305). Twenty years after writing *Democracy in America* he still was convinced that

> . . . political societies are not what their laws make them, but what sentiments, beliefs, ideas, habits of the heart, and the spirit of the men who form them, prepare them in advance to be, as well as what nature and education have made them.
>
> (1985: 294)

Last not least, it is noteworthy that Tocqueville's interest in culture is always closely tied to its role in the life of institutions. Thus, he says repeatedly that it is not his 'aim to describe American mores; just now I am only looking for the elements in them which help to support political institutions' (DA 287).

Here is one of a handful of passages where Tocqueville makes his view of the role of culture explicit:

> I have said earlier that I considered mores to be one of the great general causes responsible for the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States. I here mean the term 'mores' (*moeurs*) to have its original Latin meaning; I mean it to apply not only to '*moeurs*' in the strict sense, which might be called habits of the heart, but also to the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits. So I use the word to cover the whole moral and intellectual state of a people.
>
> (DA 287)[1]

Tocqueville's Analytical Framework

The key to Tocqueville's approach to culture is not to decipher a grand theoretical superstructure, but to understand an ingenious combination of a few key assumptions that make up his analytical framework. Tocqueville is able to come to terms with the role of mores/culture in society without evoking ideas like 'group mind' and without overstating cultural persistence or understating the role of the individual, because he employs an analytical framework made up of three simple, but effective conceptual distinctions: (1) between stable-state (equilibrium) conditions and unstable transition conditions (disequilibrium); (2) between institutions and culture; and (3) between endogenous and exogenous or, as he calls it, 'general and accidental' causes. Relying on these conceptual tools and using them 'relentlessly and unflinchingly', Tocqueville is able to provide a theoretically consistent and empirically plausible account of the role of culture in society.

EQUILIBRIUM ANALYSIS

In his distinction between equilibrium and disequilibrium conditions, Tocqueville followed an established tradition in social thought. Simply put, not all conceivable social orders are also durable. Some theoretically very attractive social orders are inherently unstable. In *The Republic* Plato founded a tradition of social thought that distinguished a variety of conceivable social regimes (such as aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny), investigating each for its inherent 'breakdown-points', that is, the sort of endogenous factors that might cause a given type of order to collapse or degenerate. Marx's distinction between emergent capitalism and established capitalism is of great importance throughout *Capital*. Explaining stable-state capitalism and explaining the emergence of capitalism ('primitive accumulation') were treated as two different problems in *Capital*, Volume 1 (1967: Ch. 24).

Likewise, for many of Tocqueville's intellectual contemporaries, the distinction between equilibrium and disequilibrium conditions was a standard part of their intellectual toolkit. Jon Elster has conducted a searching analysis of the role of 'equilibrium' in Tocqueville's thought (1991: 277–97). He has also provided a brilliant exegesis of Tocqueville's analytical approach more generally (1993: 102).

From these it is clear that Tocqueville relies heavily on the distinction between equilibrium and disequilibrium conditions, between ascending democracy and stable-state democracy, democracy under conditions 'when equality is complete and old-established' (DA 607) and under conditions when it is new and not yet fully stabilized. Many arguments of critics of democracy, according to Tocqueville, apply only to its early, not-yet-mature state.

The equilibrium/disequilibrium distinction and the distinction between equilibrium effects and transitional effects has several important implications. The first is the need to distinguish between two sorts of social change: transitional or 'out-of-equilibrium change', on the one hand, and 'within-equilibrium change', on the other. Both types of change are important. First, owing to the inertia associated with a stable state, a change from one stable state to another is likely to occur only as result of a set of *extraordinary* circumstances, which cause the breakdown of the established stable state. No explanation of such a transition is complete that cannot adduce some such extraordinary circumstances. Within-equilibrium change, by contrast, explains how a stable state is maintained and reproduced *in the face of* inevitable slippage and drift.

The advantage of this distinction is that it forces the analyst to take neither change nor stability for granted. Observing stability (or *longue durée*), we cannot be content to interpret it as mere 'inertia', the simple persistence of the self-same. Instead we must explain *how* stability can be maintained despite the inevitable slippage and drift in systems of social interaction. On the other hand, observing transitional or out-of-equilibrium, change we must ask which *extraordinary* set of circumstances caused the erosion of a given stable state. The causes explaining the former will typically differ from those that explain the latter. As Raymond Aron emphasized, there is 'a difference between explaining the formation of a regime and the functioning of the regime' (1967: II, 260). In parentheses we can notice that there is a related difference between explaining the emergence of a historically new social order and explaining under which conditions this new type of order might diffuse beyond its point of origin. The conditions favorable or even necessary for the *emergence* of a novel stable state can differ dramatically from the conditions favorable for its *diffusion*. In the case of capitalism, for example, the factors that explain its emergence as a novel social order are entirely different from the factors that facilitate its global diffusion, once capitalism has stabilized. One implication is that there is no need to uncover an East Asian 'equivalent' of the Protestant Ethic to explain the diffusion of market economies in East Asia.

INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

Tocqueville's second key distinction is that between culture (mores) and institutions. Combined with the distinction between equilibrium and disequilibrium, the analytical leverage he gains is impressive. Tocqueville assumes that the causal influence between institutions and culture flows both ways, but not always in the same direction. Under conditions of disequilibrium – that is, in the formative or

ascending period of a new stable state – *culture is the dynamic factor that takes precedence over institutions.* By contrast, under stable, settled conditions, *institutions tend to take precedence over cultural beliefs.* Under these conditions the routines and habits prescribed by institutions are a major determinant of behavior. The reason why the direction of causality reverses under the two conditions is that during periods of transition, when the certainties of institutional routines are gone, humans have only their beliefs to fall back on. Whichever social group has the shared beliefs that are best adapted to the historical situation is likely to shape the newly emerging institutions. Conversely, with institutions firmly established, institutions take precedence over beliefs. The distinction between 'normal' and 'unsettled' periods is, of course, the point of the counterintuitive *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*: the more change → the more clinging to old beliefs → the less change.

The importance in Tocqueville's thinking of the distinction between culture and institutions and the reversal of the flow of causation is also reflected in the role this distinction plays in the architecture of *Democracy in America*. In Volume I, Tocqueville deals with American mores as they have shaped American institutions in their unsettled phase: 'It is not my aim to describe American mores; just now I am only looking for the elements in them which help to support political institutions' (DA 287). By contrast, the subject matter of Volume II is cultural beliefs as they have been *reshaped* and altered by democratic institutions, that is, the 'many feelings and points of view . . . that have come into their [the Americans'] world as the offspring of this [democratic] social order' (DA 417). Tocqueville's concern was not 'to account for all our inclinations and all our ideas, but only . . . to demonstrate *how equality has modified both*' (DA 417). Earlier he described the purpose of Volume II as the study of 'the influence in America of equality of conditions and government by democracy upon civil society, customs, ideas, and mores' (DA 19).

Roughly (and with some important exceptions), we can say that Tocqueville's focus in Volume I is on the ascending phase of American democratic institutions in which mores hold the explanatory key to the way the institutions develop. By contrast, in Volume II he concentrates on the effects that democratic institutions in their settled state exert on mores (among which he now differentiates beliefs, sentiments and manners, in that order).[2] Finally, having studied how institutions of equality affect beliefs, feelings and manners, Tocqueville is in a position to reverse the direction of causal analysis one more time, returning in the last book of Volume II (Book IV) to the effect of feelings and beliefs (as they are shaped by stable-state democracy) on institutions: 'the influence of democratic ideas and feelings on political society'.

Tocqueville provides a textbook case of stable-state analysis, which moves in a spiral. During the ascending phase of American institutions mores (and, as we shall see, the very particular mores of the English colonists) shape the new institutions. Once settled, democratic institutions shape and reshape beliefs and

sentiments in certain directions. But the analysis is complete only once we know if the new, stable-state-generated beliefs and sentiments are likely to erode or maintain that state.

ACCIDENTAL VS GENERAL CAUSES

A strong emphasis on concreteness is also implied in the third part of the analytical framework. I have said that Tocqueville treats socio-political regimes such as aristocracy and democracy as stable states that are subject to their own inherent, endogenously generated tendencies. This does not mean that these institutional regimes, once matured and fully developed, will everywhere be alike. If this were so, we inevitably would observe convergences between societies that belong to the same type. Other practitioners of equilibrium analysis, such as Marx, made this assumption. Tocqueville never did. The difference between the two approaches revolves around the role of exogenous factors influencing the formation of a particular social order. For Tocqueville, the particular events and configurations that gave birth to a socio-political regime leave their indelible mark on its form and character. A democratic regime born in the storm of violent revolutions will always differ in some important respects from one that resulted from a relatively peaceful transition. For another example, centralization of political government is an inherent tendency of democracy because it is propelled by the love of equality. But a variety of accidental causes determine the higher or lower degree of political centralization. Violent revolutions and war hasten centralization, while strong liberal traditions, aristocratic origins of the rulers and the spread of education will check it (DA 674–9).

There is no assumption in Tocqueville that exogenous factors are mere residuals whose force will fade as a particular regime matures. Because he appreciates the lasting importance of 'accidental causes', path-differences, once established, remain important for Tocqueville, which makes him one of a few modern writers to attribute such weight to the accidents of history. After him, the decisive causal role shifted to system-generated forces, and comparisons plotted different societies along a single continuum as 'pioneers' or 'latecomers'.

In sum: Tocqueville's analytical tools to discern the role of what he calls collective habits of heart and mind in society include the distinctions between stable and transitional social states, between culture/mores and institutions, and between general (systemic) and accidental (exogenous) causes. None of these distinctions originate with Tocqueville, but he is easily their most virtuoso practitioner. As we will see below, this analytical framework allows Tocqueville to explain the persistence of particular cultural habits without ignoring change, and to account for the authority and autonomy of culture without denying the power of individuals to shape it.

But it is time to go beyond contemplation of Tocqueville's framework and look at the theory in action. In the next section I illustrate how Tocqueville saw culture shaping American institutions, and vice versa.

Culture in Action: Shared Beliefs Shape Institutions at Critical Junctures

Culture is an effective cause of human behavior because it shapes institutions during periods of transition from one stable state to another. In the story of the settling of the North American continent, which issued in a new type of political institution, we have one of the clearest cases where cultural habits and beliefs determine institution formation. Tocqueville shows that it is the particular mores of the English, namely Puritan settlers, in particular their political and religious ideas and habits, that shape the emerging institutions in North America. To the extent that that was the case, culture can be said to have acted as a switchman, an agent that determined which of several possible alternative paths available at this critical juncture the institutional development in North America was taking.

When describing the emergence of American social institutions, Tocqueville lists a number of dispositions and beliefs that were essential for the successful transition to democracy. The English settlers brought these habits and beliefs with them, ready-made, so to speak, and fell back on them under the uncertain conditions of the New World.

> The English who emigrated three centuries ago to found a democratic society in the wilds of the New World were already accustomed in their motherland to take part in public affairs; they knew trial by jury; they had liberty of speech and freedom of the press, personal freedom, and the conception of rights and the practice of asserting them. They carried these free institutions and virile mores with them to America, and these characteristics sustained them against the encroachments of the state.
>
> (DA: 674–5)

The role of the cultural dispositions of the English settlers emerges most clearly from comparative analysis, especially in contrast to the French, the other nation which partook in the colonization of the new continent. At one point the French settlers closely rivaled the English in number and territorial possessions:

> There was a time when we [the French] too might have created a great French nation in the wilds of America and might have shared the destinies of the New World with the English. There was a time when France possessed in North America a territory almost as vast as the whole of Europe. Then the three greatest rivers of the continent all flowed for their whole course within our dominions. The Indian nations dwelling between the mouth of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi delta heard no language spoken but ours; all the European settlements scattered over that immense area echoed memories of our motherland: Louisbourg, Montmorency, Duquesne, Saint-Louis, Vincennes, and Nouvelle-Orléans, all names dear to France and familiar in our ears. But a combination of circumstances too

> long to enumerate deprived us of the magnificent heritage. In all places where the French were few and weakly established, they disappeared. The rest crowded into a narrow area and passed under other laws. The four hundred thousand inhabitants of lower Canada now constitute the remnants of an ancient people lost in the flood of a new nation.
>
> (DA 408–9)

At 'too long to enumerate' Tocqueville adds in a footnote:

> The most important reason was this: free peoples accustomed to municipal government find it much easier than do others to establish flourishing colonies. The habit of thinking for oneself and governing oneself is indispensable in a new country, where success is bound to depend in great measure on the individual efforts of the colonists.
>
> (DA 408)

As a group, the French were less successful in the New World than the English, not because they were less civilized. On the contrary, they brought from France an admirable appreciation for 'simple tastes, quiet mores, family feeling, and love of one's birthplace', compared to 'a restless spirit, immoderate desire for wealth, and an extreme love for independence' characteristic of the English (DA 284). But under New World conditions the habits of the latter proved better adapted to the circumstances. Especially the French disposition to live in settled communities with their fellow nationals and their disinclination to strike out on their own marked a sharp contrast to the independent-minded English settlers who went out and began anew in almost total wilderness.

> These Frenchmen were worthy people, but neither educated nor industrious, and they had contracted some of the habits of savages. The Americans, who were perhaps morally inferior to them, had an immense intellectual authority. They were industrious, educated, rich and accustomed to govern themselves.
>
> (DA 333)

As a result, the 'French of Canada, who loyally preserve the tradition of their ancient mores, are already finding it difficult to live on their land' (DA 284). In addition, the English were able to maintain their distinct habits because they shunned any intermingling with the native Indians, while the French tended to intermarry:

> Two great European nations peopled . . . [the southern] part of the American continent: the French and the English. The former were not slow in forming connections with the daughters of the natives, but

> unfortunately there was some secret affinity between the Indian character and their own. Instead of giving the barbarians the tastes and habits of civilized life, they themselves often became passionately attached to the savage life. . . . The Englishman, on the other hand, being obstinately attached to the opinions, habits, and slightest customs of his fathers, has remained amid the solitude of America just the same as he was in the towns of Europe; he therefore has not wished for any contact with the savages he scorns and has been careful not to mix his blood with that of the barbarians.
>
> (DA 330)

How could such 'comparatively imperceptible differences in European civilization' as those between the French and the Anglo-Americans produce such momentous differences in result?

AN EXAMPLE: CULTURAL HABITS AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF COOPERATION

Without central government, without accepted common laws, or powers to enforce the ones that were accepted, and with a wide-open frontier ready to swallow crook and crackpot alike, the early colonial period was in many respects a paradise for 'free riders'. The ease of free-riding created a situation unfavorable to the emergence of stable patterns of cooperation (in political, economic and social institutions). In this situation, slight variations in habits and mores, which seemed minor in the context of European civilization, could make a big difference for the emerging forms of social organization. The English habit of local self-government and the habit of using religion, language and race as criteria for social inclusion/exclusion led them to form tight-knit clusters of cooperation that were relatively difficult to invade for potential defectors (see, e.g., Axelrod, 1984). A self-governed local community will, of necessity, insist that any newcomer assume his or her share of the common burden from the start. This normative pressure to cooperate discourages opportunism and exposes free-riders. Moreover, the English habit of independence, which led single farming families to venture into new territory on their own, incessantly extended the boundaries of the American frontier. Thus, they assured a steady stream of new settlements following and replicating the same cultural blueprint. In the language of cooperation theory, the habits of the English facilitated the spread of clusters of cooperation under conditions that were very vulnerable to exploitation from defectors. The key mechanism was the creation of small clusters of cooperation as a result of Puritanical beliefs and habits. By contrast, the French preference for an 'Old World' life-style in settled cities made them more dependent on settled cities and less able to control the entry of new members, and thus limited the diffusion of their cultural blueprint.

The comparison of the English and French cultural habits and their impact on the formation of institutions in North America is a good example of 'culture in action.' Culture in action means that people are propelled by their beliefs and feelings to act in ways that are consistent with these beliefs. Importantly, it also shows how in these unsettled and transitional periods *individual men and women* can shape the ideas and beliefs that become obligatory for an entire nation.

Institutions in Action: Institutions Shape Beliefs during Stable States

So far, we have treated beliefs as given and focused on their power to shape institutions. But beliefs do not remain unchanged, and institutions, as much as they are shaped by beliefs during periods of disequilibrium, do shape beliefs in turn. In stable-state conditions, once a country's institutions are settled, the direction of the causal link reverses. Here is an example of the influence of an institution, in this case a legal one, on what we may call the mind-set of a nation:

> Apart from the political consequences which the preservation of the Common Law has had in England, I believe that its existence has, besides, helped to give a certain turn to the English spirit. It has created in that nation what one might call the spirit of precedents, that is to say a certain turn of mind that leads men to look not for what is reasonable in itself but what is done, not for what is right but what is ancient, not for general theories but for particular facts.
>
> (Tocqueville, 1965: 320)

Here Tocqueville implicitly compares the institution of common law to continental code law, arguing that the former shapes 'the turn of mind' of the people to look to the past rather than the future, and to look for particular facts rather than general theories. Similarly, in *Democracy in America* he argued that the institution of the English jury was a safeguard for liberty: 'If juries could have been wiped out from English mores as easily as from English laws, they would have succumbed entirely under the Tudors. Therefore it is the civil jury which really saved the liberties of England' (DA 274).

Throughout *Democracy in America* Tocqueville tries to detail the effects of the new American institution of equality on the formation of beliefs and feelings. Often, his analysis proceeds in a three-step sequence (see Table 1 below). In these cases the causal analysis begins with the pervasive institution of democratic equality, identifies a first set of consequences through an implied comparison of the new condition with aristocratic conditions (reduced social distance;

TABLE 1.

CAUSE	LEADS TO	EFFECT
Equality	loss of love for master	spread of envy (DA 673)
	promise of perfectibility	increased ambition/frustration (DA 627–32)
	cuts ties of tradition	illusion of independence = individualism (DA 508)
	reduced social distance	reciprocity/gentle manners (DA 561)

less love for master, etc.), and ends by identifying the associated beliefs and sentiments.

In some cases, the analysis contrasts the resulting belief/sentiment with the prevailing reality. Thus, in the second example below, equality and the erosion of class barriers lead to increased ambition because of the implied promise of perfectibility, but since not everyone can move to the top, increased ambition is associated with increased frustration (compared with aristocratic societies, where people do not aspire to move beyond the social station they are born into). Here is a particular trenchant example of this kind of analysis. Under conditions of equality men don't trust intellectual authority as much as under aristocratic conditions. Unwilling to accept any person's ideas as superior to their own, people believe in relying on their own powers in all matters of intellect.

> To escape from imposed systems, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices, and to a certain extent national prejudices as well; to treat tradition as valuable for information only and to accept existing facts as no more than a useful sketch to show how things could be done differently and better; to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason of things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them and looking through forms to the basis of things – such are the principal characteristics of what I would call the American philosophical method.
>
> (DA 429)

Yet the desire to rely on one's own judgment clashes with the fact that not everyone has the time and/or intellectual means to probe every idea they hold. Since he cannot probe all ideas himself, yet does not want to accept them from other individuals on the authority of their superior knowledge, democratic man comes to rely on the *authority of numbers*. He trusts public opinion – the sum of opinions that are just as hastily conceived as his own – more than he trusts superior knowledge (DA 430). The net result of this intellectual self-reliance is a

spread of intellectual conformism, as brilliantly documented by Richard Hofstadter (1965) in his study of 'anti-intellectualism in American life'.

At this point, we can spell out a more basic assumption governing Tocqueville's view on belief formation, which we can call *the inescapability of dogmatic belief*, a point where he most clearly parts company with the Enlightenment *Zeitgeist*. Tocqueville holds that the thought of humans is inescapably governed by unexamined or, as he calls it, *dogmatic belief*. Dogmatic beliefs are all those ideas that people accept second-hand, without probing to their core. Tocqueville believes that for most individuals these kinds of beliefs will always be in ascendancy over rational ones, because they face fundamental questions with very limited resources (of time and intellect).

An essential predicament of humans is that we cannot live without confronting existential questions, yet the mundane pressures of existence at the same time prevent us from doing them justice. Torn between big questions and a lack of time and ability to penetrate them, individuals in democratic society, find ourselves perpetually receptive to the beliefs of others. Because we are condemned, as it were, to ask *basic* questions, but to be satisfied with *second-hand* answers, because we are philosophers in our questions, but dilettantes in our answers, we are forever looking to other individuals for guidance. We are, in the most basic sense of the word, *culture-dependent*. (Of course, men and women are also culture-producing, but here we encounter a sizable gap between the many who lack time and ability to penetrate the big questions and the few exceptional individuals who don't: religious virtuosos, charismatics, philosopher-kings. This is the reason why the ideas of a few individuals – Moses, Socrates, Jesus, Buddha – can assume a role vastly out of proportion to their number. Original answers to the basic questions are the scarce social resource *par excellence*. There just are not very many of them to go around, so that the few that have been given enjoy such great diffusion and persistence.)

The disproportionality between the range of phenomena over which beliefs need to be formed and the resources available to the individual to conceive and examine the relevant ideas first-hand is a form of 'bounded rationality', a limit of time, knowledge and reasoning power that prevents humans from arriving at rational beliefs. As humans we need to come to terms with a bewildering range of phenomena that do not speak for themselves, and that are open to multiple interpretations: birth, death, sickness, disease, love, hate, to name a few. In these most basic of questions there is no evidence to build on, only belief. Like Tocqueville, other social scientists have asserted that this sort of sense-making is fundamental, not secondary, to human existence. Unlike him, however, they have tended to assume that in modern societies belief formation will, increasingly, be rational. In contrast, Tocqueville assumes that the human choice is not between belief and certainty, but between different kinds of belief. And since science offers no answers to existential questions, our need to belief *always* exceeds our ability to know.

The Head and the Heart: Emotional Habits Support Cognitive Habits

The final component of Tocqueville's conception of culture is his notion of '*habitudes du coeur*'. This is easily the part of Tocqueville's thought that is both the least conspicuous and the farthest removed from our early 21st-century mental habits. Yet it adds descriptive realism and causal plausibility to any conception of culture as an autonomous social force. If the heart has habits of its own, and if, as I argue below, there is an elective affinity between emotional and mental habits and states, there is one more reason to believe that people of different communities or nations differ in their feelings and beliefs, that is, in the culture.

Apart from providing a definition – habits of the heart as the sum of feelings and sentiments – Tocqueville does not appear to make much of the topic. Yet to appreciate 'mores' as he understood them, we must come to terms with what the heart's habits are and how they relate to culturally shared beliefs. Roughly speaking, if beliefs represent the shared mental realm of a culture, sentiments represent the shared emotional realm, the affective dispositions shared by the people of a particular community.

Montesquieu (one of two or three influences Tocqueville explicitly acknowledges) is the first modern author who accorded culturally shaped feelings and sentiments a prominent place in his theory. He conceived of them as the *animating spirit* of a government (its '*principe*') and defined them in contrast to formal political structures:

> There is this difference between the *nature of the government* and its *principle*: its nature is that which makes it what it is, and its principle, that which makes it act. The one is its particular structure, and the other is *the human passions that set it in motion*.
>
> (1989: 21, my emphasis)[3]

Montesquieu believed that political man is first and foremost cultural man. Before men and women can be governed by laws, they are already governed by mores. From this idea follows what may be called the 'spirit of the laws' hypothesis:

> If it is true that the character of the spirit and the passions of the heart are extremely different in the various climates, laws should be relative to the differences in these passions and to the differences in these characters.
>
> (1989: 231)

Montesquieu suggested three distinct animating principles as the motivating forces for the three major types of government. In republics men are motivated by *virtue*, in monarchies by *honor* and in tyrannies by *fear*. Each of

these dispositions reflects a specific configuration of emotions that propel people into action (Montesquieu, 1989: 30).

Tocqueville extends this approach, arguing that the master sentiment on which modern democracies rest is not virtue but 'a calm and considered feeling' that he called 'individualism' (DA 506). But while amending the typology of his great forerunner on the specifics, he followed his view in general: there is a *master sentiment* unique to that new society called democracy. Like honor, individualism is a complex feeling, a particular arrangement of simpler ones: self-interest, love of independence and liberty, but potentially also callous indifference to one's fellow man and to the community at large.

THE AUTONOMY OF THE PASSIONS

Passions are the raw materials, the building blocks of the heart's habits. Organized and arranged in a particular configuration, they represent a person's affective disposition. Montesquieu's doctrine of the *necessary correspondence* between emotional dispositions and political structures applies some of the main ideas concerning the passions articulated before him. The idea that passions are the animating force of action, that they 'drive us outward', had been stated by Pascal (1995: 44), as had the idea that every passion has a distinct '*telos*'. Honor, for example, impels us to selfless deeds, but also to seek vainglory. Most importantly: the passions are ineradicable, irrepressible and autonomous: 'If we resist our passions, it's more because of their weakness than because of our strength' (La Rochefoucauld, 1959: 122).

Albert Hirschman has retraced the debate among these and other authors who faced the question of how to reconcile the autonomous and irrational passions and the demands (for predictability and rationality) made by a commercial and capitalist society. Thriving commercial republics required a calmer emotional disposition than those prevailing in monarchies, one more conducive to reason. Given the autonomy and irrepressible nature of the passions, however, how to affect the necessary 'change of heart'? Repression and ascetic self-control of the countervailing passions was the solution offered by Christian doctrine, especially in its Protestant revision. The Renaissance, with its renewed fervor to look at 'man as he really is', opened the door to a different strategy of emotion management. Not asceticism but *checking passion with passion* was the right answer:

> Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which lead all mankind astray, [society] makes national defense, commerce, and politics, and thereby causes the strength, the wealth, and the wisdom of the republics; out of these three great vices which would certainly destroy man on earth, society thus causes the civil happiness to emerge. This principle proves the existence of divine providence: through its intelligent laws the passions of men who are entirely occupied by the pursuit of their private

> utility are transformed into a civil order which permits men to live in human society.
>
> (Giambattista Vico, cited in Hirschman, 1977: 17)

The key to solving the problem was thus the idea that, when applied to political institutions, would be called 'checks-and-balances': 'Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion but a contrary impulse' (David Hume, cited in Hirschman, 1977: 24–5). In this view, the Calvinist doctrine of ascetic repression of the passions was futile and doomed, because it ignored their essentially autonomous nature. Moreover, the idea of calming the soul by checking passion with passion was fortuitously aided by the discovery of a passion that was highly conducive to reason: interest, the passion of improving one's circumstances, to better oneself. Because it was a calm and gentle passion, the solution to reconciling the passions with the demands of commercial society was an arrangement of the passions that put 'interests' in the driver's seat.

ELECTIVE AFFINITY BETWEEN FEELINGS AND BELIEFS

Where today's terminology suggests a juxtaposition and, often, opposition of head and heart, the classical notion emphasizes the elective affinity between the passions and reason. The passions, rather than an enemy of reason, were its essential ally: 'One becomes stupid as soon as one ceases to be passionate,' says Helvetius (cited in Hirschman, 1977: 27). And Pascal goes even further, by attributing a quasi-cognitive faculty to the heart:

> We know truth not only through reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. . . . For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument. The heart feels that there are three spatial dimensions and that there is an infinite series of numbers, and reason goes on to demonstrate that there are no two square numbers of which one is double the other. Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty though by different means. . . . As if reason were the only way we could learn!
>
> (1995: 28–9)

Pascal argues that passions suggest ideas. The heart intuits. It 'has reasons that reason knows nothing about' (1995: 31). In his famous thought experiment Pascal asks us to imagine a philosopher on a well-anchored plank suspended over an abyss. Even though he sits as securely as he does at his kitchen table, he cannot help feeling fear and terror. His feelings stir his thoughts in a particular direction, while the meek voice of reason reminds him of the solidity of the ropes.

HUMAN NATURE AND THE LONGEVITY OF INSTITUTIONS

To conclude, I cite an example of how the passions affect the stability of mentalities and institutions. The elective affinity between habits of heart and habits of mind sheds light on the problem of 'good institutions'. Institutions may or may not be constructed in a way that renews and rekindles the affections of the people operating in their compass. If they don't, the beliefs on which they are founded will sooner or later crumble, and the institutions will follow suit. If they do, they will – by rekindling the affections of the heart – also revitalize the beliefs on which these institutions are founded. Perhaps this is, at bottom, the key difference between short-lived and long-lived institutions, between repressive and liberal institutions, which resonate with deep propensities of the human heart. The New England township, Tocqueville maintained, 'wins the affection of the inhabitants' by being a center of independence and power (DA: 68). And

> [i]t is in the township, the center of the ordinary business of life, that the desire for esteem, the pursuit of substantial interests, and the taste for power and self-advertisement are concentrated; these passions, so often troublesome elements in society, take on a different character when exercised so close to home and, in a sense, within the family circle.
>
> (DA 69)

Habits of the heart and mental habits and beliefs are the life-blood of social actors. Well-designed institutions resonate with and harness the inclinations of the heart to beneficial collective ends. Poorly designed ones counteract, frustrate and deaden them.

Tocqueville's Contribution to Sociology

In this essay I have tried to substantiate the claim that Tocqueville has made important contributions to sociology. As Raymond Aron said: 'Tocqueville is not ordinarily included among the founders of sociology; I consider this neglect of Tocqueville's sociological writings unjustified' (1967: I, 237). Tocqueville conceives of culture as an aggregation of a community's emotional and mental habits. Like individual habits, collective habits are powerful, durable and hard but not impossible to change. I agree with Charles Camic (1986) that the idea of habit is underdeveloped and underused in the social sciences. And unlike 'national-character' conceptions of culture, mental and emotional habits are open to empirical, namely historical-comparative, analysis. Most importantly, for Tocqueville humans are no *tabula rasa*. Rather, they are inescapably and actively involved in the creation of the cultural fabric because they confront the most basic questions of human existence with limited resources of intellect and time. Thus, humans inevitably look to other humans for answers. And given our natural differences in time, intellectual genius and/or economic or political resources,

some individuals will be more influential in shaping common beliefs than others. Who these individuals are for any given community and culture is a question for empirical, specifically historical, analysis.

Tocqueville is a methodological individualist, for whom cultures are shaped during a society's formative period by individuals or groups of individuals who are, in principle, and – data allowing – in fact, identifiable:

> Peoples always bear some mark of their origin. Circumstances of birth and growth affect all the rest of their careers. If we could go right back to the elements of societies and examine the very first records of their histories, I have no doubt that we should there find the first cause of their prejudices, habits, dominating passions, and all that comes to be called the national character.
>
> (DA 31–2)

I lack the space here to develop how a new reading of Tocqueville as a sociologist of culture might inform contemporary sociological theory and research, but a few of the more obvious affinities between current developments and Tocqueville's emphases should be mentioned.

THE 'COGNITIVE TURN' OF THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

The new institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) differs from older 'structuralist' and 'collective action' approaches to institutions in that it emphasizes the cognitive role of institutions (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Ziegler, 1997). This view of institutions as shaped by ideas and beliefs is very consistent with the theoretical assumptions and analytical practices of Tocqueville that I presented above. The idea that institutions do more than solve collective action problems has, in the contemporary literature, been forcefully pursued by a number of authors. In *How Institutions Think* Mary Douglas (1986) has made one of the best attempts to expand the reach of institutions from a synonym for 'structure' to a force that shapes actors' cognitions and mentalities. Douglas insists that ideas and beliefs become practical forces not only through acts of individual cognition, but also via institutional processes. She is impatient with explanations that begin with institutions ready-made, without explaining how they emerge from the actions of situated individuals endowed with particular interests and beliefs. She suggests that institutions are founded on naturally available analogies and other symbolic 'bric-a-brac' that is always lying around where humans interact. She argues that 'institutions think' because they come to embody social classifications that act as conduits and schemata of collective cognition. This kind of cognitive approach to institutions is further strengthened by developments in the philosophy of language and cognitive anthropology, like the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1983), which has demonstrated the authority that metaphors have over our daily lives.

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

Tocqueville's approach makes clear that culture impacts individual behavior mediated by institutions. This mediating role of institutions is key for a proper understanding of how shared beliefs affect individuals (and vice versa). Without taking the mediating and partially autonomous role of institutions into account, we are always looking for a direct link between 'culture' and 'behavior', and our attempts are always frustrated, because no such link exists. A recent example for a study suffering from this defect is Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) otherwise very useful analysis of the collective beliefs of Germans under Hitler and their individual responsibilities for the mass murder of Jews. But because Goldhagen wants to construe a direct and unmediated connection between beliefs and behavior, his analysis falls short on several counts. One of the phenomena that Goldhagen cannot explain is why other European countries where anti-semitism was similarly strong and widespread as in Germany did not attempt atrocities comparable to the Jewish Holocaust. Second, why could Germany after 1945 return so relatively effortlessly to a democratic regime, even though the majority of the adults were individuals who had confessed to Nazism? In each case institutions – totalitarian here, democratic there – make the difference. Taking the role of institutions such as the army, the school system and the state into account allows us to understand these changes, which otherwise remain puzzling.

CULTURE AND EMOTIONS

A number of recent publications have taken up the task of understanding the emotional component of culture. Shweder and LeVine (1984) and Shweder (1991) have begun to articulate the necessary but culturally varying connection between patterns of understanding and patterns of feeling. Similar notions have also been explored in Clifford Geertz' (1973) earlier work.

Coda

At the risk of over-simplifying, it may be useful to summarize the elements of Tocqueville's methodological individualist account of culture:

- Every society, and every culture, has concrete and particular origins; it is created by particular men and women, under the constraints and influence of concrete circumstances, which – data allowing – can be identified.
- History has no *telos*; accidents can have a lasting impact on the flow of events in a given community.
- As they are confronted with fundamental questions of existence, humans inescapably construct culture.
- Owing to limitations in mental, economic and other resources, most humans are only capable of imitating the narratives and beliefs they find ready-made in tradition and in the opinions of their contemporaries.

- Some individuals of extraordinary resources will provide original answers to the fundamental questions of meaning; but even they will have a lasting impact on the collective mental and emotional habits only in times of social instability, when the institutional equilibrium is disturbed.
- Beliefs and sentiments are the durable elements of culture, partly because they are anchored in habitualized collective emotions that are hard to change.

Most of these basic assumptions are in stark contrast to methodological collectivist accounts of culture as expounded by Auguste Comte and his successors. These accounts tend to work from a teleological conception of history in which the impact of specific events and individual action tends to be marginalized by the unfolding of a pre-ordained development from ‘lower to higher’ forms of society. Individual actors are typically seen as exchangeable role players (*Charactermasken*, as Marx called them), who receive all their important impulses and motives of action from society, without being able to influence that society in their turn. Their psychological and sociological dimensions are seen as separate faculties. Last but not least, under modern conditions, the beliefs shared by the members of society are expected to become increasingly scientific and rational.

Tocqueville is not unaware of the importance of science in modern democracy, but he does not believe in a future in which culture is increasingly dominated by science. Since there are no scientific answers to the basic culture-generating questions, collective beliefs continue to be ‘dogmatic’.

Why were the collectivist accounts of culture, until now, so much more influential than accounts like Tocqueville’s? As I said above, most likely the Comtean optimism was more in tune with the *Zeitgeist* of a rapidly progressing industrial revolution than the idea that mores – the shared understandings and sentiments of historical communities – continued to be important causes of social variation even under conditions of modern commercial societies. Today, as social scientists are defecting from the Comtean faith in secularization and modernization in increasing numbers – not least as a result of the events of 1989 and their aftermath – the idea of culture is once again becoming a gravitational center of innovative thought in the social sciences. In this situation it is important that we do not proceed ignorant of the work of a key writer like Tocqueville, whose contribution to this distinctly sociological theme has largely gone unnoticed.

An encounter with his thought is humbling and inspiring for the astounding breadth of his approach (which embraced historical, political, sociological and psychological phenomena), and for the subtlety of his causal analyses. It is doubtful that, had he been forced to choose among today’s ‘disciplines’ and specialize in one or the other, the penetration and poignancy of his analysis would have survived unscathed. Whether it can be regained today seems very much an open question.

Notes

*This article is dedicated to the memory of David Riesman (1909–2002), great teacher of tocquevillian sociology.

1. The French *moeurs* is here as elsewhere translated as 'mores'. Tocqueville uses a well-worn literary expression, employed by Tacitus and other historians of antiquity: the Romans called barbarians people without mores and cultivation (*neque mos, neque cultus*). Tocqueville's usage of *moeurs* is also influenced by Montesquieu. The entry on *moeurs* in d'Alembert's Encyclopedia draws heavily on Montesquieu:

> . . . the variety [of customs/mores] of the different peoples of the world depends on climate, religion, laws, forms of government, on needs, education, norms of social intercourse, and idols. The stronger one of these causes in a nation, the less the others will make themselves felt.
>
> (d'Alembert et al., 1989: 222; cf. Montesquieu, 1968: Book XIX, Ch. 4 for a very similar definition)

2. In Volume II Tocqueville replaces '*moeurs*' as defined in Volume I by three new terms: *mouvement intellectuel*; *sentiment*; *moeurs proprement dites*. The different terminology highlights Tocqueville's changed purpose. Instead of more or less fixed habits of feeling and thought, he is now interested in how the three components of culture (mentalities, feelings, manners) are affected by equality in its settled state.

3. ' . . .sa nature est ce qui le fait etre tel – sa structure particuliere, son principe, ce qui le fait agir, les passions humaines qui le font mouvoir'.

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