

THE BEST OF THE OLL #66

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, “ON SOCIALISM” (1848)

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“(Socialism) is a profound opposition to personal liberty and scorn for individual reason, a complete contempt for the individual. They unceasingly attempt to mutilate, to curtail, to obstruct personal freedom in any and all ways.”



Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859)

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Editor's Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was an enormously influential French political philosopher, politician, and historian. After a trip to the U.S. in 1831 to observe the penal system he wrote *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840). He served as a member of parliament in the July Monarchy and the 1848 Revolution, writing an important memoir about the events of that upheaval. His last major work was a unfinished history of *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* (1856).

Translator's Note by Ronald Hamowy.: In February, 1848, the July Monarchy of Louis Philippe was overthrown, and the Second French Republic established. The new republic believed that the unemployment problem which was plaguing Paris could be solved by setting up government work-projects, guaranteeing employment at a certain wage rate for all who desired it. On September 12th, the Constituent Assembly debated the continuance of this arrangement and Tocqueville rose to speak against it. In the course of his speech he entered onto the subject of socialism, which he considered the logical consequence of recognizing the "right to work," and devoted most of his time to a discussion of the socialist position.

This translation from the transcript of the proceedings, here appears for the first time in English.

“And after this great Revolution, is the result to be that society which the socialists offer us, a formal, regimented and closed society where the State has charge of all, where the individual counts for nothing, where the community masses to itself all power, all life, where the end assigned to man is solely his material welfare—this society where the very air is stifling and where light barely penetrates? Is it to be for this society of bees and beavers, for this society, more for skilled animals than for free and civilized men, that the French Revolution took place?”

“Tocqueville on Socialism” (1848)¹

NOTHING CAN be gained by not discussing issues which call into question the very roots of our society and which, sooner or later, must be faced. At the bottom of the amendment which is under consideration, perhaps unknown to its author but for me as clear as day, is the question of socialism. [*Prolonged Sensation—Murmurs from the Left.*]

Yes, gentlemen, sooner or later, the question of socialism, which everyone seems to fear and which no one, up to now, has dared treat of, must be brought into the open, and this Assembly must decide it. We are duty-bound to clear up this issue, which lies heavy upon the breast of France. I confess that it is principally because of this that I mount the podium today, that the question of socialism might finally be settled. I must know, the National Assembly must know, all of France must know—is the February Revolution a socialist revolution or is it not? [*“Excellent!”*]

It is not my intention to examine here the different systems which can all be categorized as socialist. I want only to attempt to uncover those characteristics which are common to all of them and to see if the February Revolution can be said to have exhibited those traits.

Now, the first characteristic of all socialist ideologies is, I believe, an incessant, vigorous and extreme appeal to the material passions of man. [*Signs of approval.*]

Thus, some have said: “Let us rehabilitate the body”; others, that “work, even of the hardest kind, must be not only useful, but agreeable”; still others, that “man must be paid, not according to his merit, but according to his need”; while, finally, they have told us here that the object of the February Revolution, of socialism, is to procure unlimited wealth for all.

A second trait, always present, is an attack, either direct or indirect, on the principle of private property. From the first socialist who said, fifty years ago, that “property is the origin of all the ills of the world,” to the socialist who spoke from this podium and who, less charitable than the first, passing from property to the property-holder, exclaimed that “property is theft,” all socialists, all, I insist, attack, either in a direct or indirect manner, private property. [*“True, true.”*] I do not pretend to hold that all who do so, assault it in the

frank and brutal manner which one of our colleagues has adopted. But I say that all socialists, by more or less roundabout means, if they do not destroy the principle upon which it is based, transform it, diminish it, obstruct it, limit it, and mold it into something completely foreign to what we know and have been familiar with since the beginning of time as private property. [*Excited signs of assent.*]

“all socialists, by more or less roundabout means, if they do not destroy the principle upon which (property) is based, transform it, diminish it, obstruct it, limit it, and mold it into something completely foreign to what we know and have been familiar with since the beginning of time as private property.”

Now, a third and final trait, one which, in my eyes, best describes socialists of all schools and shades, is a profound opposition to personal liberty and scorn for individual reason, a complete contempt for the individual. They unceasingly attempt to mutilate, to curtail, to obstruct personal freedom in any and all ways. They hold that the State must not only act as the director of society, but must further be master of each man, and not only master, but keeper and trainer. [*“Excellent.”*] For fear of allowing him to err, the State must place itself forever by his side, above him, around him, better to guide him, to maintain him, in a word, to confine him. They call, in fact, for the forfeiture, to a greater or less degree, of human liberty, [*Further signs of assent.*] to the point where, were I to attempt to sum up what socialism is, I would say that it was simply a new system of serfdom. [*Lively assent.*]

I have not entered into a discussion of the details of these systems. I have indicated what socialism is by pointing out its universal characteristics. They suffice to allow an understanding of it. Everywhere you might find them, you will be sure to find socialism, and wherever socialism is, these characteristics are met.

¹ *New Individualist Review*, editor-in-chief Ralph Raico, introduction by Milton Friedman (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981). “Tocqueville on Socialism” vol. 1, no. 2, Summer 1961 <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2136#NIR_1360-002_head_027>.

IS SOCIALISM, gentlemen, as so many have told us, the continuation, the legitimate completion, the perfecting of the French Revolution? Is it, as it has been pretended to be, the natural development of democracy? No, neither one or the other. Remember the Revolution! Re-examine the awesome and glorious origin of our modern history. Was it by appealing to the material needs of man, as a speaker of yesterday insisted, that the French Revolution accomplished those great deeds that the whole world marvelled at? Do you believe that it spoke of wages, of well-being, of unlimited wealth, of the satisfaction of physical needs?

Citizen Mathieu: I said nothing of the kind.

Citizen de Tocqueville: Do you believe that by speaking of such things it could have aroused a whole generation of men to fight for it at its borders, to risk the hazards of war, to face death? No, gentlemen, it was by speaking of greater things, of love of country, of the honor of France, of virtue, generosity, selflessness, glory, that it accomplished what it did. Be certain, gentlemen, that it is only by appealing to man's noblest sentiments that one can move them to attain such heights. [*“Excellent, excellent.”*]

And as for property, gentlemen: it is true that the French Revolution resulted in a hard and cruel war against certain property-holders. But, concerning the very principle of private property, the Revolution always respected it. It placed it in its constitutions at the top of the list. No people treated this principle with greater respect. It was engraved on the very frontispiece of its laws.

The French Revolution did more. Not only did it consecrate private property, it universalized it. It saw that still a greater number of citizens participated in it. [*Varied exclamations. “Exactly what we want!”*]

It is thanks to this, gentlemen, that today we need not fear the deadly consequences of socialist ideas which are spread throughout the land. It is because the French Revolution peopled the land of France with ten million property-owners that we can, without danger, allow these doctrines to appear before us. They can, without doubt, destroy society, but thanks to the French Revolution, they will not prevail against it and will not harm us. [*“Excellent.”*]

And finally, gentlemen, liberty. There is one thing which strikes me above all. It is that the Old Regime, which doubtless differed in many respects from that system of government which the socialists call for (and we must realize this) was, in its political philosophy, far

less distant from socialism than we had believed. It is far closer to that system than we. The Old Regime, in fact, held that wisdom lay only in the State and that the citizens were weak and feeble beings who must forever be guided by the hand, for fear they harm themselves. It held that it was necessary to obstruct, thwart, restrain individual freedom, that to secure an abundance of material goods it was imperative to regiment industry and impede free competition. The Old Regime believed, on this point, exactly as the socialists of today do. It was the French Revolution which denied this.

Gentlemen, what is it that has broken the fetters which, from all sides, had arrested the free movement of men, goods and ideas? What has restored to man his individuality, which is his real greatness? The French Revolution! [*Approval and clamor.*] It was the French Revolution which abolished all those impediments, which broke the chains which you would refashion under a different name. And it is not only the members of that immortal assembly—the Constituent Assembly, that assembly which founded liberty not only in France but throughout the world—which rejected the ideas of the Old Regime. It is the eminent men of all the assemblies which followed it!

AND AFTER this great Revolution, is the result to be that society which the socialists offer us, a formal, regimented and closed society where the State has charge of all, where the individual counts for nothing, where the community masses to itself all power, all life, where the end assigned to man is solely his material welfare—this society where the very air is stifling and where light barely penetrates? Is it to be for this society of bees and beavers, for this society, more for skilled animals than for free and civilized men, that the French Revolution took place? Is it for this that so many great men died on the field of battle and on the gallows, that so much noble blood watered the earth? Is it for this that so many passions were inflamed, that so much genius, so much virtue walked the earth?

No! I swear it by those men who died for this great cause! It is not for this that they died. It is for something far greater, far more sacred, far more deserving of them and of humanity. [*“Excellent.”*] If it had been but to create such a system, the Revolution was a horrible waste. A perfected Old Regime would have served adequately. [*Prolonged clamor.*]

I mentioned a while ago that socialism pretended to be the legitimate continuation of democracy. I myself will not search, as some of my colleagues have

done, for the real etymology of this word, democracy. I will not, as was done yesterday, rummage around in the garden of Greek roots to find from whence comes this word. [*Laughter.*] I look for democracy where I have seen it, alive, active, triumphant, in the only country on earth where it exists, where it could possibly have been established as something durable in the modern world—in America. [*Whispers.*]

There you will find a society where social conditions are even more equal than among us; where the social order, the customs, the laws are all democratic; where all varieties of people have entered, and where each individual still has complete independence, more freedom than has been known in any other time or place; a country essentially democratic, the only completely democratic republics the world has ever known. And in these republics you will search in vain for socialism. Not only have socialist theories not captured public opinion there, but they play such an insignificant role in the intellectual and political life of this great nation that they cannot even rightfully boast that people fear them.

“(In America) you will find a society where social conditions are even more equal than among us; where the social order, the customs, the laws are all democratic; where all varieties of people have entered, and where each individual still has complete independence, more freedom than has been known in any other time or place; a country essentially democratic, the only completely democratic republics the world has ever known.”

America today is the one country in the world where democracy is totally sovereign. It is, besides, a country where socialist ideas, which you presume to be in accord with democracy, have held least sway, the country where those who support the socialist cause are certainly in the worst position to advance them I

personally would not find it inconvenient if they were to go there and propagate their philosophy, but in their own interests, I would advise them not to. [*Laughter.*]

A Member: Their goods are being sold right now.

Citizen de Tocqueville: No, gentlemen. Democracy and socialism are not interdependent concepts. They are not only different, but opposing philosophies. Is it consistent with democracy to institute the most meddlesome, all-encompassing and restrictive government, provided that it be publicly chosen and that it act in the name of the people? Would the result not be tyranny, under the guise of legitimate government and, by appropriating this legitimacy assuring to itself the power and omnipotence which it would otherwise assuredly lack? Democracy extends the sphere of personal independence; socialism confines it. Democracy values each man at his highest; socialism makes of each man an agent, an instrument, a number. Democracy and socialism have but one thing in common—equality. But note well the difference. Democracy aims at equality in liberty. Socialism desires equality in constraint and in servitude. [*“Excellent, excellent.”*]

THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION, accordingly, must not be a “social” one, and if it must not be then we must have the courage to say so. If it must not be then we must have the energy to loudly proclaim that it should not be, as I am doing here. When one is opposed to the ends, he must be opposed to the means by which one arrives at those ends. When one has no desire for the goal he must not enter onto the path which necessarily leads him there. It has been proposed today that we enter down that very path.

We must not follow that political philosophy which Baboeuf so ardently embraced [*cries of approval*]*—*Baboeuf, the grand-father of all modern socialists. We must not fall into the trap he himself indicated, or, better, suggested by his friend, pupil and biographer, Buonarotti. Listen to Buonarotti’s words. They merit attention, even after fifty years.

A Member: There are no Babovists here.

Citizen de Tocqueville: “The abolition of individual property and the establishment of the Great National Economy was the final goal of his (Baboeuf’s) labors. But he well realized that such an order could not be established immediately following victory. He thought it essential that [the State] conduct itself in such manner that the whole people would do away with private property through a realization of their own

needs and interests.” Here are the principal methods by which he thought to realize his dream. (Mind you, it is his own panegyrist I am quoting.) “To establish, by laws, a public order in which property-holders, provisionally allowed to keep their goods, would find that they possessed neither wealth, pleasure, or consideration, where, forced to spend the greater part of their income on investment or taxes, crushed under the weight of a progressive tax, removed from public affairs, deprived of all influence, forming, within the State, nothing but a class of suspect foreigners, they would be forced to leave the country, abandoning their goods, or reduced to accepting the establishment of the Universal Economy.”

A Representative: We’re there already!

Citizen de Tocqueville: There, gentlemen, is Baboeuf’s program. I sincerely hope that it is not that of the February republic. No, the February republic must be democratic, but it must not be socialist—

A Voice from the Left: Yes! [“No! No!” (interruption)]

Citizen de Tocqueville: And if it is not to be socialist, what then will it be?

A Member from the Left: Royalist!

Citizen de Tocqueville (turning toward the left): It might, perhaps become so, if you allow it to happen, [*much approval*] but it will not.

If the February Revolution is not socialist, what, then, is it? Is it, as many people say and believe, a mere accident? Does it not necessarily entail a complete change of government and laws? I don’t think so.

When, last January, I spoke in the Chamber of Deputies, in the presence of most of the delegates, who murmured at their desks, albeit because of different reasons, but in the same manner in which you murmured at yours a while ago—[“*Excellent, excellent.*”]

(The speaker turns towards the left)

—I told them: Take care. Revolution is in the air. Can’t you feel it? Revolution is approaching. Don’t you see it? We are sitting on a volcano. The record will bear out that I said this. And why?—[*Interruption from the left.*]

Did I have the weakness of mind to suppose that revolution was coming because this or that man was in power, or because this or that incident excited the political anger of the nation? No, gentlemen. What made me believe that revolution was approaching, what actually produced the revolution, was this: I saw a basic denial of the most sacred principles which the French Revolution had spread throughout the world. Power, influence, honors, one might say, life itself, were

being confined to the narrow limits of one class, such that no country in the world presented a like example.

That is what made me believe that revolution was at our door. I saw what would happen to this privileged class, that which always happens when there exists small, exclusive aristocracies. The role of the statesman no longer existed. Corruption increased every day. Intrigue took the place of public virtue, and all deteriorated.

Thus, the upper class.

And among the lower classes, what was happening? Increasingly detaching themselves both intellectually and emotionally from those whose function it was to lead them, the people at large found themselves naturally inclining towards those who were well-disposed towards them, among whom were dangerous demagogues and ineffectual utopians of the type we ourselves have been occupied with here.

Because I saw these two classes, one small, the other numerous, separating themselves little by little from each other, the one reckless, insensible and selfish, the other filled with jealousy, defiance and anger, because I saw these two classes isolated and proceeding in opposite directions, I said—and was justified in saying—that revolution was rearing its head and would soon be upon us. [“*Excellent.*”]

Was it to establish something similar to this that the February Revolution took place? No, gentlemen, I refuse to believe it. As much as any of you, I believe the opposite. I want the opposite, not only in the interests of liberty but also for the sake of public security.

I ADMIT that I did not work for the February Revolution, but, given it, I want it to be a dedicated and earnest revolution because I want it to be the last. I know that only dedicated revolutions endure. A revolution which stands for nothing, which is stricken with sterility from its birth, which destroys without building, does nothing but give birth to subsequent revolutions. [*Approval.*]

I wish, then, that the February revolution have a meaning, clear, precise and great enough for all to see.

And what is this meaning? In brief, the February Revolution must be the real continuation, the honest and sincere execution of that which the French Revolution stood for, it must be the actualization of that which our fathers dared but dream of. [*Much assent.*]

Citizen Ledru-Rollin: I demand the floor.

Citizen de Tocqueville: That is what the February Revolution must be, neither more nor less. The French Revolution stood for the idea that, in the social order, there might be no classes. It never sanctioned the categorizing of citizens into property-holders and proletarians. You will find these words, charged with hate and war, in none of the great documents of the French Revolution. On the contrary, it was grounded in the philosophy that, politically, no classes must exist; the Restoration, the July Monarchy, stood for the opposite. We must stand with our fathers.

The French Revolution, as I have already said, did not have the absurd pretension of creating a social order which placed into the hands of the State control over the fortunes, the well-being, the affluence of each citizen, which substituted the highly questionable “wisdom” of the State for the practical and interested wisdom of the governed. It believed that its task was big enough, to grant to each citizen enlightenment and liberty. [*“Excellent.”*]

The Revolution had this firm, this noble, this proud belief which you seem to lack, that it sufficed for a courageous and honest man to have these two things, enlightenment and liberty, and to ask nothing more from those who govern him.

The Revolution was founded in this belief. It had neither the time nor the means to bring it about. It is our duty to stand with it and, this time, to see that it is accomplished.

Finally, the French Revolution wished—and it is this which made it not only beatified but sainted in the eyes of the people—to introduce charity into politics. It conceived the notion of duty towards the poor, towards the suffering, something more extended, more universal than had ever preceded it. It is this idea that must be recaptured, not, I repeat, by substituting the prudence of the State for individual wisdom, but by effectively coming to the aid of those in need, to those who, after having exhausted their resources, would be reduced to misery if not offered help, through those means which the State already has at its disposal.

That is essentially what the French Revolution aimed at, and that is what we ourselves must do.

I ask, is that socialism?

From the Left: Yes! Yes, exactly what socialism is.

Citizen de Tocqueville: Not at all!

No, that is not socialism but Christian charity applied to politics. There is nothing in it . . .

(Interruption.)

Citizen President: You cannot be heard. It is obvious that you do not hold the same opinion. You will get your chance to speak from the podium, but do not interrupt.

Citizen de Tocqueville: There is nothing there which gives to workers a claim on the State. There is nothing in the Revolution which forces the State to substitute itself in the place of the individual foresight and caution, in the place of the market, of individual integrity. There is nothing in it which authorizes the State to meddle in the affairs of industry or to impose its rules on it, to tyrannize over the individual in order to better govern him, or, as it is insolently claimed, to save him from himself. There is nothing in it but Christianity applied to politics.

Yes, the February Revolution must be Christian and democratic, but it must on no account be socialist. These words sum up all my thinking and I leave you with them.

“The French Revolution stood for the idea that, in the social order, there might be no classes. It never sanctioned the categorizing of citizens into property-holders and proletarians. You will find these words, charged with hate and war, in none of the great documents of the French Revolution. On the contrary, it was grounded in the philosophy that, politically, no classes must exist;”

Further Information

SOURCE

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FURTHER READING

Other works by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/people/alexis-de-tocqueville>>

School of Thought: 19th Century French Liberalism <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/groups/28>>

Topic: Socialism and the Classical Liberal Critique <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/groups/64>>

“The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State.”
[Ludwig von Mises, “Liberty and Property” (1958)]



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