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TOCQUEVILLE AND PANTHEISM

The very short chapter on pantheism in *De la Démocratie en Amérique* [On democracy in America] is probably also one of the most profound, in the sense that it suggests one of the very mysterious aspects of the soul of democracies. Or maybe, in this prophetic manner which is the author's own secret, one aspect of the future democracies' soul. As we know it, Tocqueville does not content himself with a magnificent description of the spirit of democracy as he sees it with his own eyes, but he is suggesting its developments and avatars, including those, which were not yet visible in his time. In many cases, almost two centuries later, we do see that he has predicted, like a Pythia, situations that were rather unlikely in his contemporary times. We could quote two cases of such predictions, which still amaze us today: the extraordinary description of the ostracism striking those, who we refer today as to "politically incorrect" and chapter VI of the *Première Partie*,¹ entitled: "Ce qui fait pencher l'esprit des peuples démocratiques vers le panthéisme" ["What makes the spirit of democratic peoples incline towards pantheism"]. Naturally, the first symptoms of what he is announcing can already be felt in the very core of societies living before his eyes.

But these are still almost inaudible at the time, while he describes, with confidence close to bravery, situations a contemporary sociologist could relate report after simply looking around. This probably demonstrates a certain rationality of the social phenomena and credibility of the prospective, assuming it comes from

¹ A. de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* [On democracy in America] I, chapter VII of the *Deuxième Partie*: "Du pouvoir qu'exerce la majorité en Amérique sur la pensée" [On power exerted by majority in America on the thought].

a sharp and refined connoisseur of surrounding reality and an expert in humanity. In the times of Tocqueville, the term pantheism does not have a pleasant sound to it, at least coming from under a pen like his. Germany first, then France have experienced, since the Revolution, the famous dispute said to be focused on pantheism, in which philosophers were asking themselves whether rationalism of the Lumières can manage to erase transcendence, in other words can the Lumières only deploy at the cost of eradicating occidental religion. Jacobi, for the first time talks about nihilism. Often connected to Spinoza, pantheism does not have a good press. It is in such an atmosphere that *De la Démocratie en Amérique* was written. The chapter devoted to democratic societies inclined towards pantheism clearly suggests the concept of a disastrous slope... Effectively, as we are going to see it, this inclination is rather characteristic for a decadent democracy, even if Tocqueville is not using such words.

Tocqueville and Religion

The personal relationship Tocqueville maintains with religion provides understanding of the ties he is waving between a society and its religion/religions.

As we know, Tocqueville claims himself to be a non-believer. Confronted almost overnight, at the age of sixteen with the philosophers of the Lumières, he reports having then lost all religious faith, which has inhabited his childhood. For all that, his agnosticism does not make him an atheist, to the contrary. He deplors this lost faith and shall never recover from that loss. In August of 1850, a few years before passing away, he writes to Francisque de Corcelle: "If you know a recipe to believe, for God sake! give it to me. But what can the will do against the free processes of the spirit? If it was only about the will to believe, I would be a devoted believer long time ago, or rather I would always have been one, because doubt has always appeared to me as the most unbearable of pains in this world."² A mute God, we have to hope that he exists, because without him man is nothing. But a God out of our reach, one we cannot even seek.

Deprived of real faith (we could ask ourselves, but this is a completely different question, whether this hope is not faith in itself), Tocqueville claims he belongs to Catholicism, the religion of his family and childhood. Tied to it, in a cultural and sociological way, he is however not stopping himself from mocking the cult and dogmas of this religion, to the point some of his friends describe him as a protestant.

What is important from our perspective is that Tocqueville sees religion with a utilitarian eye. As a sociologist, he is treating religion as a social phenomenon. Not only man without God is existentially unhappy, but also societies without God are exposed to great risks. It is likely that only the agnosticism of the writer allowed him to keep such a distance. This manner of considering the religious fact would

² *Lettres choisies, Souvenirs* [Selected letters, memories], Quarto Gallimard, 2003, p. 687.

undoubtedly be more difficult for a believer. If one deeply adheres to the truth of a sacred story, it becomes indecent to describe its utility. Wright or wrong, we are inhabited by a sentiment that truth and utility do not match well, or if one prefers it otherwise - that truth only remains pure if protected from any temptation to make it "serve," because this would mean considering it as a mean, while it is by definition a goal. This way, such a permanent incertitude in relation to the truths of faith and, at the same time, the concern to belong to a religious tradition of one's ancestors and one's country, represent the premiss and necessary condition for Tocqueville's theories on religion in democracy.

Tocqueville, Sociology, Politics, and Political Theology

The religious fact is therefore an integral part of the social fact. Society, politics and religion are all exposed to the "tie." Religion, and this is in fact the meaning of the word, contributes to building relationship between men, who constitute a society. But in the first place, religion brings in an ethical lifestyle, supported by confidence and belief. This is incredibly valuable. It is because every society must set restrictions to human behaviours: but it is preferable that those restrictions are integrated by comprehension and persuasion, shared by communities of common belonging, rather than imposed by some sovereign force from above. Finally, religious interrogation is part of human destiny: this is the price of having a society composed of balanced individuals. People feel the need to get hand, even a trembling one, on the primary causes and final goals of life (today, we would express this need with the phrase: give a meaning to their lives). Even those, who are not theologisers or believers gain from living in a religious atmosphere, which guarantees a vision of order and image of happiness.

Religion therefore contains some hygienic element, if we see it from perspective of social hygiene. In any case, it is an integral part of a respectable human and social life. In this respect, whether religion is true or false does not change a thing.

The function of human culture is to try to provide answers to various questions related to human existence. This way, it always shelters a religion, wisdom, morale or politic. Every cultural community forms a world: a consistent universe, where those various questions do cohabit in harmony. The governors govern there from position of a god or gods. The morale and religion are interlaced. Art reflects its cosmogony and myths. Every culture is particular, but inhabited by particularities in mutual relationships. This way, a political and social organization comes along on top of the religion that legitimizes it or it grants preference to the religion that agrees with its mentalities and its presuppositions: "side to every religion there is a political opinion, which is tied to it by affinity. Let the human spirit follow its tendency and it will regulate, in a consistent way, the political society

and city of God; it will seek, if I dare say it, to *harmonize* earth with heaven”³. The argument described here states that what is generally happening in human societies, is that politics get in tune with religion, which, even if stuttering, precedes them. But Tocqueville exposes in his work a new political organization and, breaking with all the things that have preceded it: modern democracy. Also in this case, a society, even if it has produced a political system corresponding to its religion, will have to follow an in-depth transformation, changing its shape, and get attached to new forms of religion, corresponding to its new mentalities: pantheism will come, it will be seen as a consequence of advanced democracy (it is like if earth had escaped heaven and would ten try to design a new “heaven” to its convenience), while democracy, at its origins is an image of Christianity. It is not always possible to establish the sequence of precedence of religion and politics, one generating the other depending on the case and generally, both mutually engendering each other like the egg and the hen.

Tocqueville’s sociology is also a sociology of religion, to the extent religion is integral part of any cultural and social organization, more precisely also of the one studied by the author. Since it is about democracy, the point is to describe, which religion is the most convenient for democracy.

According to Tocqueville, modern democracy needs, more than any other organization, patronage or close presence of a religion. This is because of it is developing individualism, materialism and passion for the immediate. Individualist, it generates de-coupling and religion unites. Materialist, democracy incites people to give priority to material things and money: religion lifts their sight to some vertical spheres, they cannot live without. Installing people in the present, it reduces their interest for the past and the future: religion is giving them, once again a “taste of the future” with, at the same time, a feeling of transcendence, both being coupled together.

Democracy Responds to Christianity

To start with, Christianity is exactly the religion fitting democratic times. It is not at all by pure chance that modern democracy has implanted itself in such an atmosphere. The ideal of universalism, the spirit of equality and the Christian charity have been adopted by the Lumières, which sets them in the immanent and gives them a clear expression in democracy. Belief in individual dignity is realized by the autonomy of the individual, whose individualism is nothing but a consequence. In his *Intervention dans la discussion de loi sur le regime des esclaves dans les colonies* [“Intervention in the discussion on slavery regime in the colonies”], dated 30 May 1845, Tocqueville reminds that with regards to slavery, the Lumières season not only confirms the principles of Christianity, but it finally realizes them,

³ I, Deuxième Partie, IX.

before they came to being. In *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, he makes distinction between protestant and catholic religion and notes their respective contacts with democracy. Protestantism is more favourable to democracy, since it is at the same time egalitarian and liberal. On the other hand, catholic religion is rather egalitarian but not liberal. So how can some of the Americans, and more particularly those of Irish descent reconcile their Catholicism with democracy? This is because they remain a minority as compared to the Protestants and by the way, they often are the poorest and happily adopt the democratic principles of equality.

The model (or faithful mirror) of this political organization is Christianity – carrier of highly requiring moral laws, is at the same time providing democracy with the corrective it needs. A liberal society is exposed to serious risks if the religious spirit does not compensate it: “while the law allows the American people to do anything, religion precludes conception of it all and daring anything”⁴.

Religion partially avoids the constraints of the State, which would become necessary if no other things than positive laws were there to stop passions. This comes to saying that democracy is not possible without religion, in fact because of the liberty it is promoting “if he has no faith, he must sere, if he is free, he must believe”⁵.

This is valid under two key conditions, which we will just enumerate here due to the marginality of the issue, in relation to our core topic: The essential separation between the State and the Churches and tolerance of the Churches face to the freedom of democratic citizens, who are more concerned by faith and ethics than by dogmas and rituals. In that respect, says the author (rightly, in our opinion), it is so fortunate that catholic religion is a minority in America, the religion which cannot feel powerful without immediately becoming dominant... but this is just another story.

Pantheism

Why are the two little pages about pantheism so important? Tocqueville does not say that citizens of democracy are pantheist, but he claims that they tend to become pantheist. This means that germs of pantheism do exist in democracy, which is by the way so clearly carried by Christianity.

The author has very accurately observed and analyzed the differences between revolutions in France and America. Revolution in America did happen under the cover of religion and with religion, while in France it was against the religion: due to the fact that in France, State and religion were too imbricated, for the breaking with one of them not to cause, at the same time, breaking with the other. Also the French think that the Lumières cannot install themselves in an other way than

⁴ I, Deuxième Partie, IX.

⁵ II, Première Partie, VI.

replacing and forcing out religion. By the way, France is a centralized country (reality well presented in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*), to the image of the catholic religion, which has constructed the country. A troubling link arises, as we have seen it, between autocracy and atheism, since without the religious and moral strengths anchored in the society, it needs a merciless positive law fighting against individual passions. In all respects, France is ready to fall under the ferule of democratic despotism: anti-religious and traditionally autocratic.

In an atmosphere of destruction of the intermediary bodies (dissolved by the Le Chapelier law from 1791), the solitude of individuals follows and amplifies the power of the State, already established by the traditional French monarchy. In an atmosphere of death of God (as mentioned by Tocqueville, for example in his letters to Gobineau, from 1843), the utilitarianism natural to democracy, race for material goods and individual success do naturally lead to materialism. This way, the organization of society reinforces transformation of mentality, supporting the arising of spiritless despotism, while for Tocqueville, democracy is a freedom seated on the spiritual.

The Link Between Mass and Monism of Thought

The reign of the mass leads to a sort of monism of thought. In democracy, there are no heroes. Original or specific ideas are also not very popular. Anything beyond ordinary appears pretentious and vain. While in aristocratic societies, people are interested in singularities, in the democratic centuries they are essentially interested in “general ideas.” One could believe that Tocqueville means here the theories, for instance when he says that the French like general ideas more than the Americans, because for such a long time they have, so to say, governed in thought, while the Americans, who are “borne equal instead of becoming equal,”⁶ have always governed. Here, it is a good example of the French passion for political theories, a passion arising from a people, used for such a long time to be far away from political reality. But the “general ideas” he refers to, are rather translating “common rules” or “general causes,” allowing (more or less rightly, but this is another story) to understand the world fast and with one glance. This tropism comes from, without any doubt, the belief in equality of the common cause. Every citizen is provided with the same reason, making him see the same things. Moreover, he forcedly thinks that the same rules shall apply to everyone, since all people are similar. The hierarchies have been erased, everyone relies on own reason and experience only. Equality of conditions creates independence of spirit. Since reason is objective, universal and all-powerful, there is no reason to listen to any elite, or simply to ideas brought by others. Why accept a plurality of systems or a diversity of great men? Since they all have the same capacities and normally end up on the same path, the individual

⁶ II, Deuxième Partie, III.

no longer trusts anything but the common opinion, becoming his god. In America, religious belief remains a common thing however. But the erasing of religious beliefs will arise from two sources: in Europe, it represents a condition for the rise of the Lumières; even in America, it is at risk, since democracy lives on the remains of religion, without being able to develop it, and consumes, in other words, a capital it cannot exist without. There are chances, therefore, that interests being the foundation of democracy, will replace beliefs. Everything becomes imminent. Passion for material well-being, this “middle class passion” makes the democratic individual believe that “everything is matter.” He ends up forgetting or ceases to believe that he will die. This is pantheism.

This democratic individual therefore has a unitary and monocausal spirit. For this first reason, he is seeking a world which is the least diversified and the simplest possible. And this also extends to religion, since all domains correspond within the same culture. Belief in the unity of mankind and in equal dignity of all men fits the monotheist philosophy: one and only God loves all his children equally. But everything happens as if distinction between the creator and its creation was still too much: better to confuse them. This is pantheism.

People in democratic times want the spirit of the religion but not its forms – one can understand them as rites, formulas and manifestations. Their religion is disembodied and even the clerks adapt to that. But this disembodiment tends towards abstraction. This is pantheism.

Democracy on a Slope Towards Lack of Differentiation

Democracy deploys liberty and equality at the same time, but deep inside, people prefer equality to liberty: the evil sides of liberty arise immediately, while it takes a long time to understand the disaster of equality. People of the democracy do like equality to the extent they are ready to sacrifice their liberty for it. Their fear of seeing an arising superiority is against the spirit of liberty, which reigns in democracy. This is because liberty means the possibility to distinguish yourself. Because people in democracy are similar or consider themselves similar, they tend to lose interest in singularity of some individuals, which they perceive as a manifestation of bravado or inanity.

This way, what keeps their attention is the kind as a whole. They think of themselves in masses. This is pantheism. There is no longer a self or singularity of a person, it is nothing but an illusion, a sort of superstructure, invented by aristocracy. They are full of compassion for each other, since everyone can feel the dismay of the others. They manifest no will to quarrel, since they all share the same thoughts, as well as same interests and taste. They do not like the governors but they like the central authority to be immense and anonymous. They all share universal sympathy within a nameless whole. In pantheism, there is no named authority.

This way, Tocqueville's chapter on pantheism provides a clairvoyant expression of the contemporary situation in relation to the difference between democracies in France and in America. The French, he says, believe that the false note of the American democracy consists of this religious spirit, which is still so active, and which should end up being subverted by the Lumières. In their opinion "the only missing thing in the freedom and happiness of mankind on the other side of the ocean is the belief, following Spinoza, in the eternity of the world and support, along with Cabanis for the statement that it is the brain that secretes the thought."⁷ In other words, since you are democrats, be coherent, be pantheists like Spinoza and materialists with Cabanis (we would say nowadays with Changeux, and this whole story of the brain secreting thought has not moved an inch in its arguments). The French are wrong, says Tocqueville: by becoming pantheist and materialist, which is the perverse consequence of democracy, they will produce democratic despotism, in other words, they will ruin democracy without noticing it... From such perspective, pantheism looks like the religion of degenerated democracy, and the pathetic future of democracy. For Tocqueville, materialism represents a significant threat, to the point that in his notes about oriental religions, he affirms that only the horrible cast religion system in India would be worse. It is better, finally, to follow any religion rather than no religion. For example, the rather ridiculous belief in metempsychosis is better than no belief: citizens "risk less the deadening of their minds by thinking their soul will pass into the body of a pig, than by believing that the soul is nothing".⁸ Once again, we shall remember that the point here is not to seek truth but to sit the society and grow the man: this does not necessarily mean the materialist is wrong, but he "deadens his mind." Democracy needs a strong society (because its State is weak), it promotes the greatness of man. This is why it should push away materialism, like a plague. However, it produces it. If it starts to reject the compensating effects of Christianity, democracy will fall into pantheism. Two centuries later, we are noticing that the American democracy has managed to maintain and feed Christianity, being its very foundation. Whereas France, without prejudice for other European countries, seems irresistibly attracted by well recognizable forms of pantheism.

⁷ I, Deuxième Partie, IX.

⁸ II, Deuxième Partie, XV.