

In his book *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, 18th century French writer and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville suggests that the political chaos and disintegration set off by the French Revolution was the natural offspring of a deeper and more troubling atrophy which had been slow-cooking for a very long time. In that time, the monarchic regimes of the Bourbon dynasty had gone about consolidating their absolutist hold over political power by progressively and cynically expanding administrative centralisation over every aspect of life in France. What this did, de Tocqueville claims, was methodically break down the civic bonds that held intact a society constituted of groups living under dramatically varying conditions.

Central to de Tocqueville's argument is the belief that political liberty accomplishes two vital social functions. First, it maintains and regulates the social, cultural, and economic conditions that distinguish one group from another. In other words, political liberty becomes less about achieving sociocultural parity and more about safeguarding the sources of sociocultural distinction which compose the complexity of all societies. The second function of this conception of political liberty is that it becomes the foundation for a societal cohesion which expresses the fullness and diversity of a whole that is perpetually in flux. De Tocqueville sums up his position when he writes:

For political liberty, which possesses this admirable power to create vital links and common bonds of independence between all citizens, still does not make them similar for that reason. (88-89)

In the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell engages in a ruthless dissection of class distinctions in the political terrain of pre-WWII England. In particular, he interrogates the failure of modern Socialism to integrate those class distinctions into its functioning. Orwell shares with de Tocqueville a ruddy skepticism over the facile smoothing over of class distinctions promised by revolutionary movements that seek to level out society into a single shared condition. Picking out the "intellectual tract-writing Socialist, with his pullover, his fuzzy hair, and his Marxian quotation," Orwell wonders "what the devil his motive really is" (161). Orwell, himself a committed lifelong Socialist, concludes that for the doctrinaire Socialist "what they desire, basically, is to reduce the world to something resembling a chessboard." (162). In other words, doctrinaire Socialism flouts the complexity of the world and replaces it with a utopic intelligibility that makes it more palatable to those who refuse to countenance the chaos arising from the complexities of human experience.

As with de Tocqueville, Orwell believes that the function of political organization is not to cancel sociocultural distinctions but to regulate them; not to eradicate chaos – which is ineradicable – but to contain it. Orwell goes further. For instance, he exposes the complicity of "left-wing 'intellectuals'" in the anti-imperialism that they rail against as being a natural symptom of that totalizing, chessboard view of the world. Addressing this left-wing intellectual, he writes:

For, apart from any other consideration, the high standard of life we enjoy in England depends on our keeping a tight hold on the Empire, particularly the tropical portions of it such as India and Africa. Under the capitalist system, in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation—an evil state of affairs, but you acquiesce in it every time you step into a taxi or eat a plate of strawberries and cream...Yet the left-winger continues to feel that he has no moral responsibility for imperialism. He is perfectly ready to accept the products of Empire and to save his soul by sneering at the people who hold the empire together. (144)

At the bottom of this hypocrisy, which Orwell colourfully refers to as a “thoroughly flabby and boneless attitude,” is something deeper than simply a failure to hold oneself morally accountable for one’s ideological positions. Here we have a demonstration of the nasty effects that accrue from living in a state where class distinctions, instead of being able to politically intercourse with one another in an appropriate and socially cohesive form, antagonize one another. Those who engage in these antagonisms are seemingly unaware that in doing so they erode the political organization that binds them into a social whole. Severed from one another and stubbornly compartmentalized, their perspective narrows and entire swaths of reality elude their understanding. So that it becomes possible for a left-winger to be a militant anti-imperialist and also to depend on the fruits of his bogeyman imperialism, without any contradiction. It is not a moral failure in the individual that leads to this embarrassing oversight, but rather a political failure in the very way his society is constituted. de Tocqueville confirms this point in speaking of the 18th century equivalent to Orwell’s left-wing intellectuals, namely the French philosophes. Of their political failures in the wake of the revolution they helped foment, he writes:

Nothing warned them about obstacles which existing conditions could bring to even the most desirable reforms. They had no idea of the dangers which always accompany the most necessary revolutions. They did not even have the slightest inkling of them because the complete absence of all political freedom made the world of business not only unknown to them but also invisible. They had no connection with that world nor could they see what others were doing in it. They, therefore, lacked that obvious education which the sight of a free society and the news of what is happening give even to those who have the least contact with government. (142-143)

For de Tocqueville, political liberty is the glue which holds economically, socially, and culturally diverse states intact. It is political liberty that allows these different diversities to intercourse and interseminate. Without it, society becomes less even than the parts of its sum. Is it any surprise, then, that once groups and individuals are unable to freely express their traditional sociocultural

distinctions that this failure of political liberty will open up gaping spaces of contradiction, hypocrisy, and atrophy within the larger whole?

Bibliography

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Orwell, George. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. E-book, Project Gutenberg of Australia.