

On what grounds can Tocqueville's account of the centralisation of government as well as the growing preponderance of Paris be challenged?

Tocqueville's account of the conduct of the *ancien régime* formed the basis of the orthodox view of this period for decades after the publication of his book on it. The concept of a reforming monarchy who passed on the torch of centralisation was a convincing one, and many historians have followed him in saying this. However, the accuracy of this idea can be challenged by deeper analysis of the institutions that held power in pre-Revolutionary France, as well as on grounds of Tocqueville's ignorance of the true diversity of a France before the advent of the railways.

The first point to be noted is that France in the time of the Old Regime was large and its internal network of communication was not quick. A messenger from the *Conseil du Roi* at Versailles could not hope to reach his destination in the south of the country in less than a week. A traveller riding by coach from the south to Paris could take up to three weeks to make the journey. In these circumstances an efficiently centralised state was a physical impossibility even if the political will had been present. A great deal of governmental business and administration depended on swift decisions, and although a governmental official in the form of the *intendant* was available in the localities it was impossible to co-ordinate policies regarding individual cases with the central government at Paris and Versailles. In these circumstances, the *intendants* had to be given extremely wide-ranging powers of initiative in determining the application of law and government on their own local areas. Certainly they will have been helped in this task by the fact that invariably they could view their *généralités* from the perspective of an outsider, and by means of extensive if not voluminous correspondence with the *contrôleurs-général*. However, this distance between the political centre and the application of that policy had always given rise to wide variations of governance and by the time of which Tocqueville was writing, the idea that France was a unitary state was entirely unthinkable. In such a climate his assertion that the Parisian influence was the dominant one is also simply not valid. Tocqueville asserts that *si les citoyens [de province] s'assemblent quelquefois, c'est pour apprendre les nouvelles qu'on attend de Paris*. This might possibly have been true in the towns of the Ile-de-France and for fifty miles further than that. However, any further than that and Paris was no longer the local metropolis. Thus, as Roger Price has shown, the great rise in Paris's population which Tocqueville recounts was due to immigrants from the surrounding area, and only exceptionally from further afield. Although Tocqueville is right in stating that Paris was growing in industrial clout, this is not to say that other towns were not doing the same, such as Bordeaux and Nantes in terms of international manufacturing trade, and Lyons in terms of textiles. A person wishing to emigrate to the town went to the town closest to him: to go to Paris was unnecessary for the great majority. Where *les nouvelles qu'on attend de Paris* were very often influential was in the field of local justice, since the *Parlement de Paris* held jurisdiction over nearly half the country. Aside from that the fashions of Paris reached the localities only very indirectly, via the major provincial towns. The poor quality of roads and the slow speed of land transport meant that very little travel occurred at all, and Paris's preponderance was very limited outside its immediate hinterland. Since Tocqueville was writing after having delved into the Parisian archives it is unsurprising that he finds more examples of her perceived superiority. He was geographically closer to the centre, and we must not assume that other parts of the country felt suitably inferior to Paris's wishes.

Apart from geographical difficulties to a centralisation of the country, the incumbent political institutions in the provinces had no intention of surrendering their powers to a central government. The most fierce of these were the provincial *parlements*, whose venal nature allowed them to resist fiercely the encroachments of royal government in their regions. In many case they

saw themselves as the bulwarks of public interest against the absolute monarchy acting in tyrannical fashion. They were also profoundly decentralised in attitude, which also gives the lie to statement of the person who told Arthur Young that *Ces gens n'osent pas même avoir une opinion jusqu'à ce qu'ils sachent ce qu'on pense à Paris*. The Breton struggles against royal taxes in the 1760s, were spearheaded by their flourishing *parlement*, while that of Bordeaux produced a number of fine thinkers, including Montesquieu, who had as great an influence on the European Enlightenment as any Paris-based writer. In their struggle to preserve local customs, they were helped in many parts of the country by the provincial estates in *pays d'états*. Although Tocqueville somewhat sniffily dismisses these by saying that *les pays d'états, placés aux extrémités du royaume, ne contenaient guère que le quart de la population total de France*, they did form a substantial part of the country. In these, the estates did much to nullify the centralisation which forms such a principal theme of Tocqueville's book. Their resistance could also scupper a large amount of unpopular legislation. Laverdy's reforms of 1771, for example, were successfully seen off provided that a local body had sufficient power to delay matters until the minister responsible fell from grace at the court in Versailles. The very fact that these institutions existed in some places and not in others showed the diversity of the country, and more importantly, the fact that different parts of the country had regional privileges which had to be upheld. France was a land of privileges protecting individuals, orders, communes and regions against various measures, and erosion of existing privileges was vigorously fought. For this reason it was often entirely counter-productive for royal policy to aim for uniformity. The *intendants* in general found that much the best way to implement policy was by co-operating with the local institutions, and to obtain the best possible compromise. The *intendant* of Provence, for example, presided over the provincial estate, and by this means avoided much of the bitterness which a royal-provincial clash might bring with it.

Even at the centre, royal power was never as centralised as Tocqueville had thought. A central part of royal finances was from indirect taxes, a system which the Crown had very little command over. The system of tax-farming deliberately decentralised tax-collection, such that the Crown often received far less revenue than it could have done had it decided to do it directly. However, by farming out indirect taxes to individuals, the Crown received guaranteed cash advances which could be used to repay royal debts, and did not have to incur the expenses of collection. That this was impeded central control over finances was not a matter of concern for the king's council: would this really be the actions of a modern bureaucratic state as Tocqueville would have us believe

Yet it is also unclear how far the royal government was ever seeking to create a system where the king was in sole control over the country. The composition of the government in itself served to prevent a great deal of unpopular (amongst the nobility at least) legislation from being implemented. Factionalism was rife throughout the country in political circles. At Versailles, ministries fell with great regularity as the courtier-ministers intrigued against each others schemes. At more local levels, there was often political capital to be made out of legislation that was either threatening or could be if directed against one's enemies. Horn has studied how the centralising aspect of royal policy was supported in Troyes mostly because many nobles of the town felt that it would help them for purely local reasons. However, mostly, these royal initiatives failed to be fully implemented. As an example, Tocqueville himself quotes edicts issued in order to halt the growth of Paris, yet they had no effect. What succeeded much more often were policies not made at the centre, but rather by the men on the ground, in the shape of the king's *intendants*. Emmanuelli to this end notes that 'From 1744-90 there was not one single royal decree particular to Provence which had not been requested or even drafted by the intendant to Aix-en-Provence.' The *sub-délégué* of these *intendants* was even better placed by his background in the area to tap in to the peculiarities of local sensibilities and privileges. This explains also the considerable freedom that local officials had in administration, a sharp contrast with the *préfets*

who succeeded them in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary era. Their position in the social system of the region was of crucial importance in being able to get business done, and this explains why provincial governors often recommended their protégés - patronage could often cause more progress than edicts from Paris.

A very important area which Tocqueville does not explore properly in his book is the moves away from centralisation which were attempted in the last days of the Old Regime and in the early part of the Revolution. The provincial assemblies proposed by Brienne marked a considerable step away from central control, yet they are not mentioned by Tocqueville. Large corporations outside the king's direct management, such as provincial estates and the church, made it easier for the government to raise loans and taxes. Since by 1788 this was by far the most important royal policy, it is surprising that it was not mentioned. Napoleon's rather more drastic centralisation after 1799 was again only a reaction to further failed attempts at decentralisation of government.

In conclusion, France was a far more fragmented and isolated society on the eve of the Revolution than as seen by Tocqueville. Local privileges were all that mattered to what was mostly a static population. Local pride and the local politics required individual solutions tailored specifically to them. Paris, far from being the predominant force in determining local opinion seemed often to be a foreign country. Provincials might well regard its inhabitants *comme de régnicoles de seconde ordre*, but then again, the roads were probably paved with gold as well.