

Does Tocqueville's appendix on Languedoc contradict any of his earlier themes?

Tocqueville made it quite plain that in the most part of his book he would not be dealing with the *pays d'état* such as Languedoc and Brittany. As he says, 'I ask that one can permit me to set aside the places one terms the *pays d'état*, which is to say the provinces which administered themselves, or rather which gave the impression of still administering themselves.' In many respects it is a necessity on his part to ignore the troublesome facts of these semi-autonomous provinces, since their very existence calls into question the validity of many of the themes which he tracks through the archives of pre-Revolutionary France. As he freely admits, almost a quarter of the French population lived in such areas; and their absence from the main thrust of his arguments in itself weakens his case. Could his conclusions really be valid for France as a whole if such a sizeable portion of the people were not included in his survey?

Foremost among the problems which Languedoc as an example of a *Pays d'état* posed to Tocqueville's theories was that it simply could not be said that centralisation was there anything like the radical and inexorable process which Tocqueville had set out for the other parts of France. The very existence of provincial estates as a counterweight to royal power ensured that power could not flow as easily to the centre as it did in the *pays d'élection*. Admittedly most of the provincial estates of the *pays d'états* were moribund by the end of the Eighteenth Century, with the notable exception of Languedoc and Brittany. However the ones which remained in force ensured in the appropriate area a great deal of respect for local privileges. Indeed, as Tocqueville points out, the estates were 'respected by the royal power, and in which no central government functionary, or in the parlance of the time *no officer of the king* was able to take part.' By this means we can see that the *intendant*, though still existing, did not have nearly so much direct authority in these parts of the country since his decisions could be questioned by local people. In this respect Tocqueville does not merely find himself contradicting the main body of his work, but even inside the same appendix. Where at one stage he talks of the fact that 'the smallest village lost in the Cévennes gorge could not make the slightest expense without it having been authorised in Paris by a judgement of the royal council' he also talks of the 'largest number of public works were carried out using the special taxes of the province' and even of 'central government from time to time panicked at such a large expenditure [on the part of the estates]...and reproached them to moderate it.' In fact the largely autonomous fiscal position which the Languedoc estates in particular had secured for itself meant that it was perfectly in a position to resist the advances of royal centralisation.

The crucial aspect in this situation was the fact that provincial estates at least theoretically held the power to raise taxes, or as Tocqueville diplomatically puts it 'to raise a part of the royal taxes and those which it was allowed in order to pay for its own needs.' In achieving this situation it challenged the precedence of the *intendant*. In paying for its own roads and canal-network the estates of Languedoc eased the burden of the *intendant* and by doing so did not allow the government in Paris any more responsibility than was necessary. Tocqueville is forced to note the difference in quality between the Languedocian roads and those of her *pays d'élection* neighbours - centralisation could be shown to have benefits. He also shows that a great deal of local pride existed in the provincial estates when he quotes their rejoinder to Versailles in saying 'the king does not need to inaugurate taxes in Languedoc to pay for *ateliers de charité*, as he does in the rest of France.' In fact the centralisation theme which Tocqueville attempts to demonstrate in the other parts of France to a large extent gave way before the attractions of local tax-raising powers. Brienne's creation of the provincial assemblies in 1787 for instance showed that on the contrary there was a clear attempt for decentralisation in order to harness the increased income

this brought: not only were royal expenses taken on but provincial assemblies on the model of the estates could float loans on the money market. Languedoc itself as Tocqueville notes 'borrowed under its own guarantee but in favour of the king 73.2 million *livres*.' In the pressing times of the *ancien régime*'s financial collapse this proved considerably more useful than the maintenance of a central control which was still far from complete.

A second main bulwark in the *pays d'état* against the centralising power of Versailles was the fact that in sharp contrast to the *pays d'élection*, there were a great number of provincial *parlements*. Where the latter could count representation only in Paris, Rouen and Bordeaux, practically all the former possessed their own in the principal town of the province. Tocqueville's theory of the preponderance of Paris was made much more plausible by the fact that the jurisdiction of the sovereign court in Paris covered almost half the country - it did not cover any of the *pays d'état*, the citizens of which did not assemble as he said merely to hear the news from Paris. What neither Tocqueville nor subsequent historians have denied is the *parlements* great role in resisting the expansion of royal power by means of obstructing pernicious legislation. Since on the other hand the estates busied themselves with 'debating each year freely and seriously the particular interests of the province' it can be clearly seen that with not too great an amount of co-operation a substantial obstacle to royal control could be created.

Tocqueville's judgements on the centralised structure of the judiciary across France are also not entirely valid as the case of Languedoc demonstrates: the *pays de droit écrit* had a written code of law in contrast with the parts of northern France where Tocqueville spent most of his life. Thus where Tocqueville praises the *sénéchausées* and other more localised centres of administration with the idea that it was thanks to the provincial estates, it was actually a situation common among the provinces of the south - many of whom were not *pays d'état* at all with the Dauphiné and Gascony as notable examples of this.

As another aspect of this more decentralised structures, it should be noted that the *pays d'état* did succeed to a great extent in retaining some of their own political liberties. The very composition of the estates themselves, in which 'no officer of the king was able to take part' did provide a large amount of independence from the Versailles government even if they 'could not take a resolution of any importance without their deliberations having to be approved by the *conseil du roi*'. And the composition of the provincial estates did not protect merely the liberties of the province as a body, but also the rights of the constituent parts of the province. Tocqueville notes that 'the mayor, *consul* or *syndic* faithfully represented in the estates the wishes of the population in whose name they spoke as if they had been expressly chosen by them.'

Another notable contradiction implicit in Tocqueville's analysis of the state of Languedoc before the Revolution is the idea that Languedoc did not suffer nearly as much from the vestiges of feudalism, which everywhere were becoming more onerous. A particular example of this is the fact that 'the *taille* was levied on the value of property and not on the person of the proprietor' - a break-down in the old feudal order in itself - and although there were certain lands which had the privilege of being exempt from this tax, 'through the progress of time and industry, a good deal of these goods had fallen into the hands of the *roturiers*.' This appropriation of noble privileges by non-nobles does seem to suggest a far greater level of social mobility than Tocqueville gives credit for elsewhere. He also makes a comment in the earlier part of his book that 'the remains of the *corvée seigneurale* could be found almost everywhere' whereas in his appendix it is very clear that the public works carried out by the estates 'could only be carried out by means of ready money: the *corvée* was unknown', and not only that but Languedoc had 'good roads, made without *corvées*.' Since Tocqueville sets so much store by the fact that the *corvée* was one of the most loathed feudal duties, its absence in the quarter of the country which lay in one

of the *pays d'état* must again call the validity of his argument into doubt, and it is no wonder that this was pushed into an appendix at the back of the book.

That having been said, much of what Tocqueville writes was deliberately intended to contradict his previous themes, since he could offer Languedoc as a model of how parts of the country could and indeed should have been governed. In promoting the liberal nature of the *pays d'état* he attempted to show that had their model been followed, the tensions which led to the outbreak of Revolution could have been avoided or at least reduced. Therefore he highlights the pacific relations between the nobility and the third estate, such as the composition of the provincial estates themselves, where he says that 'the nobles figured only by their representatives: 23 of them took the place of all the others... and one must note most of all, the towns had as much of a voice as the first two orders.' Elsewhere he says that 'they co-operated on most projects, and worked together to increase the prosperity of all citizens.' Whether this co-operation was in fact genuinely present is debatable, but the contradiction is intended to propose the model of decentralisation in governmental affairs in Tocqueville's own time as well as at the end of the *ancien régime*. This deliberate contradiction is also shown through Tocqueville's portrayal of the practical effects of the taxes which the estates raised themselves on the part of the government - and the fact that 'the *taille* was levied on the value of property and not on the person of the proprietor.' By highlighting the 'fairer' nature of this system over the way that he claimed was in place for the rest of the country he was again setting the *pays d'état* up as a better model for the governance of the country, yet also stressing that this model was also possible at the time.

However, many aspects of the appendix do not fully contradict the previous thrust of his argument. Tocqueville makes very clear that 'the estates could only assemble by an express order from the king', that 'the duration of each session was fixed to forty days by an *arrêt de conseil* and that 'they could not take any resolution of any importance without it being approved by the *conseil du roi*'. 'The central power exercised in Languedoc, however, all the same political rights that were available to it elsewhere,' as Tocqueville also notes, and therefore we must not overestimate the importance of the provincial estates in provinces such as Languedoc. The *intendant* still exercised the administrative responsibilities by which Tocqueville characterises the process of centralisation in other parts of the country, and even the revenues ear-marked to the estates were merely part of the normal royal taxes. The existence of the provincial estates also did not substantially affect the social relationships of the nobility towards the newly-emergent bourgeois and rich members of the third estate - was their relative financial status converging as he suggests elsewhere? were there the same snobberies between *annoblis* and the old nobility? The likelihood is that in these terms and in all the other social relationships between *seigneurs* and their tenants, life in the *pays d'état* was not substantially different from elsewhere.