Le gouvernement le plus rationnel n'est pas celui auquel *tous* les intéressés prennent part, mais celui que dirigent les classes les plus éclairées et les plus morales de la société.

Alexis de Tocqueville

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1 • Introduction

China's rise in recent decades seems to have posed sizeable questions to the world, politically and intellectually. Will it be a peaceful rise or will it lead to war? Is the 'Thucydides trap' real in terms of a China-west relationship? How is the world – especially the west – reacting to this change? China's political system is hugely different from western liberal democracies. How do we understand and deal with this difference? At the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama published his famous book *The End of History*, which expressed much of the zeitgeist at that time. The stand-off between the two sides – the United States and the Soviet Union – had finally ended, and one of them had won. Like intellectuals in ancient Rome who tried to find reasons for why Rome was able to stand as the greatest empire, post-1989 intellectuals also tried to understand why the west took this victory. Fukuyama's idea was that the United States won due to it representing the end of history. In this idea, the United States is far from perfect, but its political system is absolutely more advanced than the Soviet Union and many others.[1] But where does this leave China?

When the Cold War ended, China was a minor country in the world; poor, largely unindustrialised, and not yet closely connected with the rest of the world. But since then, China has rapidly advanced, mainly in terms of economic development, but also in other fields such as technology, embeddedness in the world, and so on. It has become one of the two largest economies in the world and carries much weight in world affairs. But, at the same time, it has not fulfilled Fukuyama's promise and become a liberal democracy. In the 1980s, it implemented a policy of 'Open and Reform' and introduced a market economy, which directly led to economic development, therefore marking a huge difference between today's China and pre-1980 China. But it has not changed its basic political system, in which the Communist Party of China sits at the very top. Questions have been asked as to whether the economy has grown so fast *in spite of* the political system or to a great

extent *because* of it.[2] After all, Russia, following 'Shock Therapy' did not manage to demonstrate a similar track record of economic advancement; nor did many other third world countries that introduced various versions of liberal or neo-liberal reforms after the Cold War.[3] Will China finally collapse? If not, what does it mean if we say that there is an alternative model to western liberal democracy? How do we theoretically understand this 'alternative' if it exists at all?

A prominent effort to theoretically imagine this 'alternative' has been undertaken along the lines of modern Confucianism. In seeking to revive the political relevance of Confucianism in modern times, the supporters of this effort argue that western liberal democracy, with 'one man, one vote' as its crucial feature, is only one of many ways to achieve modern development; indeed, there are other possibilities for different cultures and societies. The Chinese political system today represents this modernisation of ancient political culture, which has its own distinctive set of values.[4] The 'China model' may not be applicable to other countries, but it could be, or at least has the potential to be, the best model for the Chinese people. In consequence, it is both morally wrong and practically impossible to impose the western style of liberal democracy onto China. Or, to put it another way, there is no 'end of history', and paths to modernity are multiple.

As *Tocqueville Between East and West* demonstrates, the central issue with this 'alternative' theory is a Tocquevillian one. That is to say, although Confucianism does have contemporary relevance, there is a recognisable gap between modern China and ancient China. In ancient China, legitimacy of political power has to do with a general notion of 'the people', but its ultimate source is something else; namely, the 'Mandate of the Heavens'. In today's China, however, there is no other way to legitimise political power than by basing it on the sovereignty of the people. This applies to the government of the People's Republic of China as well. The people obviously could not govern directly themselves, and there is necessarily a system of representation. Thus, in this book we will devote a chapter to discussing the linguistic use of 'representation' in contemporary Chinese political discourses and its meaning. Indeed, representation is an overlooked concept in understanding contemporary Chinese politics, as it has been largely reserved for liberal democracies. It turns out, however, that a study of the

'representation' discourse in contemporary China could tell us much that the usual dichotomy of democracy versus authoritarianism cannot, with 'representation' providing a 'middle concept' between democracy and authoritarianism.

In this sense, we oppose the currently prevalent perspective of democracy versus authoritarianism in understanding China and its relations with the west. Admittedly, it is a useful dichotomy to use on some occasions, as China and the west do have very different political systems. But it fails to capture the essential Tocquevillian basis of the modern world that both the west and east share. As Tocqueville says, 'the gradual development of equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact, and it has the principal characteristics of one: it is universal, it is enduring, each day it escapes human power; all events, like all men, serve its development'.[5] These words in the Introduction to *Democracy in America* apply to all societies, including China. People often seem to forget, as this book shows, that China also went through great revolutions, beginning in the early 1900s, which are comparable to the French Revolution. We must start from this Tocquevillian premise and think about the difference and similarities between China and the west, instead of looking at it from a teleological 'end of history'.

Tocqueville once famously predicted that eventually Russia and the United States would be the two opposing powers of the world and the most vastly different systems that modern democracy – as in 'equality of conditions' – could give rise to. Indeed, 'each of them seems called by a secret design of Providence to hold the destinies of half the world in its hands one day'.[6] This represents the Cold War. It seems that, in the twenty-first century, China replaced Russia's place in staring down the United States and the west in general. This stand-off is not exactly a new Cold War, as some might say, mostly because China and the world – including the west – is so intricately interconnected, especially in economic activities, and China has obviously not sought to export its political model to the rest of world. But it is still a remarkable stand-off that takes concrete shape day by day. The United States has called China the 'biggest' threat, while the European Union categorised the EU–China relationship as one of 'systemic rivalry', apart from competition and cooperation. This rift, a rather new phenomenon in the supposedly 'liberal' and globalised world following the end

of the Cold War, has made a tremendous impact on the world's future.

Given the 'end of history' perspective, many people seem surprised that China has not adopted a western style of liberal democracy as it became much more economically developed and open. This surprise leads to a sense of anger, as though China deliberately broke some kind of promise, which then leads to negative comments such as: 'China is the biggest threat of the world'; 'imagine a world in which China dominates the world'; 'which one would you choose: a China-dominated world or a US-led world?'; 'we have to sanction China'; and 'we need to prevent China from developing high technologies such as 5G or electronic cars'. We see all these voices cropping up in the western world almost every day. It is almost as though there must be a final war to significantly undercut China's rise, so that the world could continue to live in freedom and prosperity. From a subaltern and Chinese perspective, all this feels almost Orwellian because China has made great progress in recent decades in many areas, such as in the reduction of global poverty and inequality. In this whole process, it has not engaged in any external wars. Economic development and domestic redistribution do give people a lot of freedom in the world. Production of goods and green technology do contribute to the overall welfare of the world. China certainly has many flaws, but there is undoubtedly also a huge level of progress here, so why has that progress been categorised as the biggest threat of the world?

We need to return to Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French thinker who wrote about democracy. In comparison with Fukuyama, also a writer on democracy, Tocqueville does not have an 'end of history' teleological perspective at all. Although he says that 'a great democratic revolution is taking place among us',[7] or that 'the gradual development of equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact',[8] he does not mean 'democracy' to be an 'end', a telos. Democracy to him is mostly equality of conditions, which is the opposite of inequality of conditions in terms of the aristocracy. Indeed, it has a temporal aspect, because democracy represents the future and aristocracy is in the past. But it is distinctively a sociological observation, which does not carry normative meanings in itself. Unlike many progressives during his time, such as Karl Marx, Tocqueville refuses to imagine an 'end' of history and use this to analyse what the world is now and used to be in the

past. The future is an abyss. We do not know what it will be like. It could be a free world, or it could be a world of despotism, or somewhere in between. But the fundamental fact is that the world is shaped by an irreversible trend towards the equality of conditions, with no real aristocracy possible; here, all people are equal to each other in terms of conditions; there will be no other way to legitimise political powers other than connecting them to the will of the people.

Starting from this fundamental basis, there are a number of very diversified scenarios that different societies could adopt, although none of them would be able to claim that they are somehow closer than others to the 'end of history'. In Tocqueville's mind, we must all be constantly vigilant: if you have some freedom, be careful not to lose it; if you do not have much freedom, try hard to acquire more. Everything depends on what we do; and everything could change. A more or less free society could turn into despotism if people cease to care about their compatriots' fate. Given time, it is not impossible that a largely unfree society could become free.

Freedom is a core concept in Tocqueville's overall political thinking. Most interpretations of Tocqueville's political thought put him in the early modern European tradition of liberalism. After the Second World War, prestigious liberal thinkers such as Friedrich August Hayek and Isaiah Berlin enlisted him to support their attacks on collectivist political thought.[9] Against the backdrop of the Cold War, he is hailed as an early fighter against the modern trend of collectivism that the Soviet Union later represents. It is not wrong to say that Tocqueville is opposed to collectivisation and paternalism in general. But is he really the kind of liberal that Hayek and Belin imagine him to be? If yes, how do we get around the fact that Tocqueville is said to be the first to make a theoretical point of the term 'individualism',[10] an idea he consistently rails against in his overall thinking? Isn't he supposed to defend individualism, the rights and freedom of individuals? As a matter of fact, he deems the phenomenon of turning towards the private sphere at the expense of public spiritedness the characteristic modern malaise, to borrow Charles Taylor's words.[11] How do we reconcile these two apparently opposing standpoints?

If Tocqueville, as many people say, is a liberal, he must be a special kind of liberal. This book begins with his less well-known writings on empire and colonialism, primarily in order to explicate

his peculiar notion of freedom from a different angle. As we will demonstrate, Tocqueville was an ardent supporter of French expansion and empire building at that time, to which he devoted much of his political career. Is it anachronistic to accuse him of advocating imperialism and colonisation, in the same sense that people might blame Aristotle for his support of slavery? We think not. In Tocqueville's time, the discourse of universal natural human rights had been circling for a long time, of which Tocqueville is surely aware. He apparently ignores it in all his writings. In *Democracy in America* and other more 'informal' writings, he seldom, if ever, mentions natural human rights. It is safe to say that his entire theory of freedom, which is central to his political thinking, does not hinge on a notion of natural human rights. His liberalism – if it is a kind of liberalism – is one without human rights. But what exactly is it?

In this book we are argue that, Tocqueville's support for empire building demonstrates that he is more or less in line with what Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School would call the tradition of 'republican freedom'.[12] This freedom requires citizens' virtue and active political participation, as well as the state's independence and autonomy. The latter, in its turn, sometimes requires a more assertive kind of foreign policy. We believe that this is primarily how Tocqueville sees his support for French expansion. In the fierce competition that existed among European states in the nineteenth century, he deems it necessary that France adopt a policy of expansion in order to prevent France from becoming a secondary country in Europe. But obviously 'republicanism' cannot fully account for Tocqueville's complex theory of freedom. We then turn to his emphasis on local aristocratic bodies in feudal times. He sees that there used to be what he calls 'feudal freedom' in ancient France, but this was lost during the advancement of equality and modernisation. Feudal aristocracy provided the necessary institutional framework for the government to be moderate and the people to be largely free. This Montesquieu idea was inherited by Tocqueville and further expanded to understand freedom in modern democratic societies.

Thus, we argue that, for Tocqueville, it is largely local communities and associations that support the existence of freedom. This is exactly why he is surprised and inspired by New England townships in the United States, which he considers as a kind of substitute

for the feudal aristocratic bodies that could no longer exist. While we hope this reading may contribute to the field of Tocqueville studies, we also think that this particular notion of freedom could help us better understand China and its position globally. In return, a reappraisal of contemporary China could prove the relevance of Tocqueville in today's world. China is usually portrayed as an unfree authoritarian state that does not sufficiently protect individual human rights. Henceforth, in a binary view of democracy versus authoritarianism, the more advanced China is in terms of economic and technological development, the more it poses a threat to the world. But does this do justice to the reality? China has a history that is more than 2,000 years old, one in which the Chinese people never understood themselves as pure individuals bearing 'natural rights' for human beings. It would be extremely difficult for a natural-rights-based liberalism to take root in these people's minds. But does that mean it is impossible for freedom to exist in China? If we seriously take notice of Tocqueville's original theory of freedom, we might think again.

As this book shows, after the 1980s, there was a revival of Confucianism in Chinese society and a resurgence of local communities and associations. We argue that, instead of a universal sense of natural human rights, these are the actual bases of freedom in today's China. Confucianism as a kind of belief helps to raise citizens above the mere consideration of material well-being, set boundaries for the possible conflicts that may arise out of equal citizenship, and bond people together via local social bodies. Local communities, despite the fact that they sometimes harbour a certain kind of authority, also help to give a sense of empowerment to individuals, who may otherwise be weak and isolated in an age of equality. Meanwhile, both Confucianism and associations function to moderate governmental powers. They are social, but at the same time also political. It is within this web of traditional beliefs and associations that today's Chinese people find freedom.

This line of thinking could be applied at the global level as well. As Samuel Moyn shows in his book *Not Enough*, after the Cold War and on a global level, the ideal of equality was steadily replaced by a movement for human rights. Under the auspice of the dominant ideology of neo-liberalism, equality at the global level – including equality between those very rich and very poor countries – has been largely considered as unimportant. The ethical

discourse has instead focused on human rights, which conceptually diminish the importance of nationality, border and state sovereignty. But, as Moyn points out, 'profoundly, the age of human rights, while a good one for some of the worst off, has mainly been a golden age for the rich'.[13] China, however, might be an exception in this scenario. According to Chen and Ravallion, between 1981 and 2005, 98 per cent of the reduction in global poverty, calculated using the poverty line of US$1 per person per day, was due to China.[14] When it comes to the reduction of global inequality, China's role is then extremely impressive, even more so today, than back in 2005. Economic development against all odds is a form of empowerment through community. Does China add to the overall amount of freedom in the world? We tend to think so.

Overall, this book intends to present a relatively new interpretation of Tocqueville's political thought, and use it to offer a new comprehension of China and its position in the world. Tocqueville never went to China, although he once said, when he was writing *Democracy in America* in the French countryside, that it was a country he wanted to visit.[15] He could be termed a good traveller, for when travelling, he can be seen comparing and theorising. There is no reason that his theoretical travels between Europe and America, between Europe and Algeria, could not be extended to the east and west. By continuing his travels to China, to the east, this book intends to continue Tocqueville's theoretical journey.

We will begin, in Chapter 2, by looking at Algeria, which Tocqueville personally visited twice, highlighting the contrast between his apparent 'liberal' standpoint and his support for empire and expansion. Here, we come to the temporary conclusion that his theory of freedom is more 'aristocratic' than liberal. In Chapter 3, we continue this line of argument and deliberation on the topic of the 'aristocratic' origin of his theory of freedom, relying on his other journeys, especially to America. Then, Chapter 4, we turn to China, where we argue that there is prominent déjà vu when it comes to observing and reflecting today's China through the lens of Tocqueville. The main focus here is on religion, local communities and associations. In Chapter 5, the topic of religion – Confucianism in particular – in today's China is further elaborated on, following in Tocqueville's footsteps. But we argue that this issue should be understood in the light of 'democracy' in Tocqueville's theories. In other words, democracy in terms of the

equality of conditions is universal and irreversible. In Chapter 6, we then expand the discussion of this Tocquevillian notion of 'democracy' to the Chinese case, primarily by pondering on the underappreciated but important concept in contemporary China's political discourse – representation. In Chapter 7, we accompany Tocqueville in travelling to the past; namely to the French Revolution and the time of the old regime. Our travels here will also shed light on another revolution that greatly affected the world in the first half of the twentieth century – the Chinese Revolution. However, despite their similarities, the two revolutions were very different, in that the Chinese Revolution was simultaneously an anti-colonial struggle, while the French Revolution led to even tighter control of Algeria and many other places around the world.