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Rousseau's Dream, Tocqueville's Tragedy

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In the early 19th century, liberals were wary of popular sovereignty and preferred public opinion instead. A new political tradition emerged at that time.

Reviewed: Arthur Ghins, *The People's Two Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026), xv+303 p., 110 euros (ISBN : 9781009688796).

In a letter to Michel de Bourges, written in 1835, George Sand spoke of the irresistible pangs of 'savage Truth and inflexible Justice' that republicans followed. The banners may be many, she insisted, but all pursued a single aim: 'so far as man can steal from the Divine the luminous ray that lights the world from on high, you have stolen it, children of Prometheus.'[1] Politics, in the wake of the Revolution, was an almost religious affair, spurred on by a devotion to faith that needed to take hold.

Like Michel de Bourges, Sand had a clear sense of faction, but the conviction this letter expressed reached far beyond their own camp. While not all were as committed to the republicanism of the Promethean *enfants de troupe*, few in France, in the first half of the nineteenth century, could deny how interwoven the tasks of government were with the near-metaphysical accounts of what supplied it with legitimacy.

[1] Sand, George, 'À Éverard', letter to Michel de Bourges, *Lettres d'un voyageur*, VI [1835].

Without quite describing it in these terms, Arthur Ghins centres this problem in *The People's Two Powers*. The book recounts how the resistance to popular sovereignty, at least as it was understood by Jacobins and Bonapartists and their followers, led to a turn to public opinion. If popular sovereignty gives us a description of the power of decision, Ghins stresses, opinion offers something closer to an account of what allows for influence. Yet, while some scholars have tried to show how an emphasis on one automatically excludes the other, Ghins insists that early-nineteenth-century liberal thought tried to carry over the legitimacy harboured in popular sovereignty into the form provided by opinion. This, he finds, is what tells the unfortunate yet interlaced story of liberalism and democracy—and what, eventually, led to the emergence of liberal democratic thought.

A Sovereign Who Never Sleeps

It all begins with a return to Rousseau. Already in the *Social Contract*, and more clearly still in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau distinguished between sovereignty and government. To one side there is the locus of power and decision, which lies with the people. And this is not a simple source, but an act: the general will expresses itself in law, which the assembled people give themselves. To the other, there lie the apparatus and procedures that ensure its execution. Some scholars, Richard Tuck foremost among them, have insisted that there is an operational divide between each stage: the people issue forth and decide on the nature of order; they then recede when deliberation is over. Sovereignty sleeps when it is not needed. Ghins disagrees. Sovereignty never rests for Rousseau, and to admit that it does corrupts its nature as well as its function. It does exist in the assembly, but it also extends its operations beyond, remaining awake, vigilant, through petition and remonstrance, in its ability to recall and recuse; through the power of the censor and the honours graduated to civic merit through public recognition.

On Ghins's telling, the people's two powers—that of action as well as that of influence—are, for Rousseau, together constitutive of the proper ordering of political life.

Yet what for Rousseau was a balancing act, a combination of mutually necessary processes, for others became a spectrum. Robespierre is one example: his initial support for influence through opinion dwindled over time. First, in 1793, the

'moral responsibility' of rulers before opinion was to be supported, and ultimately guaranteed, by their 'physical responsibility', that is, by the effective punishment of their faults (pp. 76–77);[2] then, at the behest of the Committee of Public Safety, not only was the press censored but the Convention was given the capacity to give opinion 'the direction it must have' (p. 85).[3]

Then there was Constant, who believed popular sovereignty was best confined, after elections, to the influence of opinion. The belief that it could be embodied in government—through the representative democracy of the revolutionaries or, later, in Napoleon's plebiscite—merely handed to governors the boundless power conferred by sovereignty, yet in a manner that suspended popular involvement. But modern life prevented the people from continuously enacting their sovereignty; what was needed, instead, was a representative government that recognised its own identity as the receiver of a delegated power to decide, yet acknowledged that opinion, as the conduit of the people, bears on its operations.

The genealogy of the problem Ghins traces is appealing. Constant's position was not his alone: he looked to Madame de Staël, whose unpublished writings of the Directory he knew in manuscript, and who, as Ghins writes, 'insisted on the impossibility of combining an elected assembly (representation) with direct popular sovereignty (democracy) in large commercial nations. The exercise of sovereignty had to be reduced to the election of representatives. To avoid representative despotism, Staël relied on the power of public opinion, to the exclusion of any form of direct sovereignty' (p. 105). For Staël and Constant, then, the problem was one of contingency rather than just principle: in large commercial nations, Athenian democracy could not be recreated.

Rousseau's dream is interrupted: on the liberals' account, democracy becomes practicable only if one of the two powers is given up—modernity cannot handle both.

[2] Robespierre, Maximilien, 'Sur la Constitution', speech to the National Convention, 10 May 1793.
[3] Committee of Public Safety, reply to the popular societies, January 1794, in Aulard, Alphonse (ed.), *Recueil des actes du Comité de salut public*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale.

Rousseau in America

Yet in Ghins's account, there is one exception in the story. Tocqueville, in travelling across the United States, believed he had found what those in France had long desired: a people holding both its powers at once. New England's townships, Tocqueville observed, gave life to a popular sovereignty that was neither concentrated in a single assembly, as the Jacobins had wished, nor located in moments of election and then left to guide government through opinion, as Staël and Constant insisted. The union and the states legislated through representatives, but in the corporate life of towns people still made their own laws: they ratified local measures, proposed new ones, and had their magistrates rotate through office.

Sovereignty, in North America, had a 'multitude of agents',[4] as Tocqueville put it; and among them, opinion, instead of standing in for the people's sovereignty, was formed through its exercise: a form of self-government grew into what Tocqueville called 'town spirit'[5]—judgement learnt in practice rather than accumulated and rationalised through the anonymous publicity of newspapers. Here, as Ghins puts it, was Rousseau in America (p. 195).

But Tocqueville had another predecessor. Much about early liberal attitudes to democracy turned on a distinction between its reality in society, as the fact of civil equality, and its possibility, even propensity, to issue in a regime: that of primary assemblies and representative democracy, as embodied by the Terror and, on some accounts, the Empire. The figure who gave this distinction its classic form was the first Doctrinaire leader, Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies in January 1822. As a social fact, Royer-Collard believed that democracy flowed 'abundantly' (p. 179)[6] through France; it had come to nest itself in the nation's mores and attitudes. Yet, in Guizot's hands, this distinction issued in a bulwark: a moat surrounding government, protecting it from what lay beyond the halls of decision. Royer-Collard himself, a Catholic of Augustinian inclination, nonetheless knew that the manner in which we order our love determines the cities we build.

Royer-Collard was Tocqueville's mentor for much of his political life. We see this in a speech the latter gave on 27 January 1848 to the French Chamber, in which he

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[4] Tocqueville, Alexis de, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. I [1835]; quoted in Ghins, p. 195.
[5] *Ibid.*, part 1, ch. 5; see Ghins, pp. 200–203.
[6] Royer-Collard, Pierre-Paul, speech to the Chamber of Deputies, January 1822, quoted in Barante, Prosper de, *La Vie politique de M. Royer-Collard*, Paris, Didier, 1861.

warned his peers that they were 'sleeping on a volcano':[7] the passions of the working classes had turned from the political to the social, and could not easily be contained. Tocqueville accepted the premise Royer-Collard's distinction made explicit, but declined to follow Guizot's example: equality could not remain social, as men equal in all else would not long be content to remain unequal in politics. A democratic society would have to issue in a democratic regime, at least of some sort—and this is what the United States exhibited. The social and the political could not be siloed, and the people's two powers could not be allowed to exist apart.

Yet history is often tragedy, and the story of Tocqueville's own thought is no exception. In the 1840s, he came to see that the culture of the New England townships could not take hold in France. What remained was the love of glory that Napoleon had known how to stir, and that Tocqueville himself distrusted. France had sunk into comfort; Algeria, and its conquest, might rouse the nation to forgo its status quo for a renewed politics of principle. Yet, in so doing, as Ghins observes with some irony, the one-time critic of government by opinion found it sufficient to hope for a representative government sustained by 'an ever-active and acting public opinion' (p. 208).

America had given Tocqueville the hope of a democracy able to go beyond both the concessionary appeals to opinion and the fears of popular sovereignty; that hope was, ultimately, abandoned. Ghins's sober pronouncement on Tocqueville's volte-face paints the picture of a reluctant *enfant de troupe* who, despite his faith, abandons the platoon.

What Binds a People

This account nonetheless leaves in shadow what is, as I see it, its core: sociability, understood as the passions of collective life, through which people form their judgements and attachments together. It underlies much of what Ghins describes. His book is, in many ways, a doughnut account of nineteenth-century French politics: it traces the outline of a centre it does not address head-on, and that many, at the time, refused to talk about—Rousseau's (not-so-sleepy) beast, Tocqueville's volcano. This is no fault of Ghins's, who follows his sources faithfully. But, in so doing, he also takes

[7] Tocqueville, Alexis de, speech to the Chamber of Deputies, 27 January 1848, reproduced in *Souvenirs*.

on their silence, a silence heavy with passions (fears, ambitions, dreams) to which their ideas respond. One may therefore fairly ask how the history of political thought should account for what authors do not articulate, but to which their writings bear witness—and of which, in many ways, they are the product.

Sociability is mentioned only once in Ghins's book, when he shows how Constant's notion of opinion derived from Hume. For the Scotsman, allegiance to institutions rested not on force but on opinion—opinion of interest, that is, of the advantage each expects from government, and opinion of right, to power as to property: 'When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded' (p. 141).[8] Opinion, in turn, was no private judgement: it was formed in company, through the sympathy by which, as Hume put it in the *Treatise*, 'the minds of men are mirrors to one another',[9] and settled by custom into allegiance.

In his own way, Constant recognised the broader problem this pointed to. His lifelong interest in religion bears witness to it, as Ghins knows well. Much of human history, for Constant, unfolds at the intersection between religious feeling, which must be allowed to flourish and manifest itself, and religious form, which, if improperly ordered, stunts development and, ultimately, interferes with what he called perfectibility. Opinion, as a response to commercial society, is but one manifestation of this more general problem, and in the wake of the Revolution, and throughout much of the nineteenth century, it was the primary political worry.

Still, to see in all this merely a question of institutional arrangement is to have a tin ear for the cries and jubilations that Robespierre and Staël, Tocqueville and even Constant experienced daily, and to which they at times contributed. Here, too, we return to Rousseau: to make sense of how human beings can pursue what they want when they are together is the problem of politics.

Just months after the Revolution of 1830, the historian Jules Michelet lamented the passing of the old altar: what had once held society together, trained devotion and disciplined obligation. Michelet, Sand and the figures Ghins writes about—even Guizot—shared a clear formal concern: that the unravelling of belief threatened the structures of obligation, and that something new would have to take the place of what

[8] Hume, David, 'Of the First Principles of Government' [1741], in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*.
[9] Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739–40], book II, part 2, section 5.

came before. Opinion and participation were therefore not merely two ways of distributing power. They were also two answers to the same question: what people owe one another, once they can no longer be sure what they owe God.

Conclusion

Ghins's book traces the arc that arguments about the two powers drew, and ends with how it led to the first account of 'liberal democracy'. In the early years of the Second Empire, the term emerged as a contrast to Louis-Napoleon's 'Caesarist democracy', the claim that one person could act in the name of the people. What liberal democrats defended was what Staël and Constant, as well as others, had called representative government; but what once represented an alternative to democracy became, in the wake of 1848, a domestication of it through representation.

As Ghins has shown elsewhere,[10] this change in term issued in the need to fashion a new tradition: one that looked to both Constant and Tocqueville—claiming more of the former's ideas, yet imputing them to the latter—who, in turn, both came to be seen as Rousseau's antagonists. The Genevan was left to stand as the prophet of untamed popular sovereignty—his concerns with censorship and remonstrance, petition and civic honours, quietly set aside. Here, in Ghins's estimation, lies the birth of the Rousseau who would, a century later, be read as the forefather of totalitarian democracy.

If this holds, liberal democracy rests on our having forgotten two things. The first is reconstructed, clearly and effectively, by Ghins: that of the liberal tradition, which claimed for modern politics one of the people's two powers and left the other to its adversaries—the democrats, the Caesarists, the heirs of the Jacobins. The second is less apparent, and makes up the force and urgency underpinning the claims *The People's Two Powers* recounts: the question Sand and Michelet posed, of what binds people once the old order is gone. If this question re-emerges in the face of almost all plebiscitary action, and if defences of liberal democracy that stop at the language of institutions then appear thin, that is perhaps because it was never answered, only set aside. Ghins shows, with real precision, what was done to make sense of modern

[10] Ghins, Arthur, 'What Is French Liberalism?', *Political Studies*, 2024, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 551–569.

politics. What he leaves open—and what we might now take up—is what Prometheus's children thought they had to steal.

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