

Chapter two

Tocqueville and Mill

Democracy versus capitalism

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and Mill's essay 'On Liberty' are standard references. They are convenient citations for people asserting the excellence of democracy or the importance of the individual. However, Tocqueville's study of America must be seen in the context of his views on England and France. Mill's 'On Liberty' should be set alongside his writing on representative democracy and political economy. It is also revealing to compare the two men with each other.

The work of both men is a response to a feeling of political and social danger. However, they perceived different threats. Tocqueville judged that the democratic revolution was an irresistible tide, and saw the need for democracy to become civilised. He could not envisage such a prospect occurring unless industrial capitalism was held in check. By contrast, Mill accepted with relative equanimity that industrial capitalism was here to stay. However, he wanted to prevent the bourgeois world of commerce from monopolising public opinion and investing the working class with its values. His plan was to civilise capitalism. This strategy entailed placing very strict limits upon urban democracy. To oversimplify, Tocqueville thought that democracy could be civilised only if industrial capitalism did not become a major force within society. Mill believed that industrial capitalism could be civilised only if democracy was restricted.

A brief friendship

Alexis de Tocqueville was an offspring of the Norman aristocracy, John Stuart Mill the grandson of a Scottish shoemaker. For a short while they became friends. It was an unlikely relationship, cutting across boundaries of class and nationality. In the opinion of Harriet Taylor, Mill's companion and (eventually) wife, Tocqueville was 'a notable specimen of the . . . gentility class – weak in moral, narrow in intellect, timid,

infinitely conceited, and gossiping' (quoted in Packe 1954: 93). Mill rose above this middle-class prejudice. On 11 May 1840 he wrote to Tocqueville:

you have changed the face of political philosophy, you have carried on the discussions respecting the tendencies of modern society, the causes of those tendencies, and the influences of particular forms of polity and social order, into a region both of height and of depth, which no one before you had entered, and all previous argumentation and speculation in such matters appears but child's play now. (Mayer 1954: 328-9)

Harriet's dislike of Tocqueville was probably one of the reasons why, following a regular exchange of letters during the late 1830s and early 1840s, the two scholars stopped corresponding. Only in the late 1850s was the correspondence, briefly, resumed (see Pappe 1964: 221-2).

In fact, Tocqueville and Mill had quite a lot in common, not least an admiration for France and an active interest in politics. Tocqueville served in the Chamber of Deputies at the time of Louis Philippe. Under the Second Republic he was minister of foreign affairs for a short while. Mill became a Liberal Member of Parliament in 1865, and during his brief period of service spoke on matters such as Ireland, land reform and colonial affairs.

The two men belonged to the same generation: Tocqueville was born in 1805, Mill the following year. Most important of all, both were deeply concerned with the role of the individual within democracy and the potential of democracy for sustaining civilised life. Their analyses were original, crucially dissimilar, and deeply influential.

Mill and Tocqueville were odd men out. Neither was representative of his class – each broke away from the social group which nurtured him. Tocqueville's family had been strongly royalist during the French Revolution. His grandfather and aunt both went to the guillotine, and his parents only just escaped with their lives. However, at the age of twenty-five and having a public career in mind, Alexis confronted a personal crisis. Following the 'July days' of 1830 he turned his back on the Bourbon cause and, in his capacity as a magistrate, swore allegiance to the new bourgeois monarchy of Louis Philippe. For Tocqueville, this difficult decision was a victory of reason over emotion. His judgement was that the new regime might establish an acceptable constitution. This fact overcame the pull of family loyalty. Tocqueville also set aside the antipathy he felt, as an aristocrat, for the commercialism and mediocrity of Louis Philippe's followers.

By contrast, Mill's father James felt contempt for the aristocratic ruling order. He forced his way into public life through journalism, authorship and, eventually, a post at the East India Company in London.

James Mill personally provided his son with an intensive intellectual training: Greek at three years old, Latin at eight, logic soon after. He gave him the chance of a job in India House; John subsequently worked there as a bureaucrat for thirty-five years. Through his father, John gained access to the radical wing of the metropolitan intelligentsia, including David Ricardo and Jeremy Bentham. As a young man, he was an active spokesman for the utilitarian cause.

Like Tocqueville, John experienced a crisis in his twenties. Tocqueville had used reason to subvert the claims of emotion. By contrast, Mill experienced a deep emotional reaction against the intellectual regime he had been subjected to since the cradle. During the winter of 1826-7 he felt very dejected and miserable. What else could be expected from a work regime which at about that time included the year-long task of editing five volumes of Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*? When a passage in a book of memoirs he was reading moved him to tears, he began to recover his spirits. He was delighted to find that he still had emotions. After this experience, Mill became dissatisfied with Bentham's crude pleasure/pain calculus which regarded poetry as a useless amusement. He began to read Wordsworth. In 1829 he resigned from his debating society, publicly renouncing Benthamite utilitarianism.

In these different ways, two men with highly cultivated minds were able to cut themselves free from some of the mental confines imposed by their upbringing. Each produced a new paradigm which helped to define for future generations 'the problem of democracy' within the western liberal tradition. As will be seen, capitalism was part of this problem.

Tocqueville in America and England

In his late teens, Tocqueville wrote to a friend about 'a plan of the utmost extravagance' to visit England with a borrowed passport: 'We might well get ourselves arrested, and that is where the extravagance lies. But one must surely risk something' (Tocqueville to Louis de Kergorlay, 1824; Tocqueville 1985: 31). The same spirit took him, seven years later, across the Atlantic with his companion, Gustave de Beaumont. After a short stay in New York, he plunged straight into the frontier wilderness 'full of memories of M. de Chateaubriand and of Cooper' (Tocqueville 1959: 329). The trip to the American Republic was undertaken with the official purpose of studying penal institutions in the United States. In this case there was no need for fraudulent documents: Tocqueville and Beaumont went as government commissioners on behalf of the new regime in France. As Tocqueville later wrote: 'The penitentiary system was a pretext: I used it as a passport . . .' (Tocqueville to Kergorlay, 1835; Furet 1984: 227).

According to Sainte-Beuve, Tocqueville 'started to think before having learned anything' (quoted in Lerner 1968: *xliii*). However, America – as an idea or a country – had apparently not been very much on Tocqueville's mind before 1831. The subject of the American trip only surfaced in his correspondence with Beaumont two weeks before they departed. Serious reading on the subject of America did not begin until the trip was over (Furet 1984).

The intellectual object which preoccupied Tocqueville in 1831, as it had done for some years, was not America as such but the nature of democracy as a social order. Not democracy merely as a set of slogans or principles with which to oppose an absolutist regime, but democracy as a functioning society.

Europe provided no examples. Contemporary liberals perceived that France in 1789 and England in 1688 had overturned existing or would-be absolutist regimes. However, neither society offered an example of 'pure' democracy. In the former case, the institutional expressions of democratic principle were closely intertwined with the consequences of revolutionary violence upon the social order. In the latter case, democratic and aristocratic tendencies were mixed together, as Montesquieu had pointed out.

America entered Tocqueville's frame of reference as a case study which might help to solve a problem facing European liberalism. The United States represented democracy without aristocracy, democracy unmarked by the depths of violence experienced in France. It provided a way of thinking about possible futures – not necessarily pleasant – for European societies. As Tocqueville wrote to Mill in 1836, 'America was only my framework, Democracy the subject' (Tocqueville to Mill, 1836; Tocqueville 1954: 315).

Tocqueville arrived at New York in May 1831 during the presidency of Andrew Jackson. The war for independence was still in living memory. A populist spirit had developed which was opposed by some of the older well-off families, as Tocqueville found when he dined with men and women from the leading circles of Boston and Baltimore. His primary concern was to discover the character of this new movement.

During a period of nine months he first made his way into the North West frontier and over the border into Canada. Then he journeyed back down to New England, travelled as far south as New Orleans, and trekked westwards into Ohio. He made notes on interviews with a small army of lawyers, diplomats, clergy and politicians as well as a scattering of people drawn from the worlds of banking, education, literature, the plantation, prison administration and the frontier wilderness.

Tocqueville returned to Europe in February 1832. He had much of the raw material for *Democracy in America* (1968), the first volume of which appeared in 1835, the second in 1840. Before the first volume

was completed he paid a short visit to England. He was very friendly with an Englishwoman, who was later to become his wife. However, Tocqueville also had intellectual motives for his trip.

As he had noted towards the end of his journey to the United States,

America gives the most perfect picture, for good and for ill, of the special character of the English race. The American is the Englishman left to himself . . . Spirit coldly burning, serious, tenacious, selfish, cold, frozen imagination, having respect for money, industrious, proud and rationalist.

(Tocqueville 1959: 177)

By 'left to himself', Tocqueville meant not subject to aristocratic influence. There were indeed aspects that were 'brilliant, generous, splendid, and magnificent in the British character'. However, he commented: 'all that is aristocratic and not English' (*ibid.*). It is relevant that Tocqueville's ancestral home was very close to the harbour from which William set out in 1066 with a Norman army to conquer England and impose a feudal ruling class. The aristocratic virtues were, originally, French.

During a five-week stay in mid 1833, Tocqueville observed English politics in the wake of the Reform Bill of the previous year. He heard the Duke of Wellington speak poorly in the House of Lords, saw a working man brilliantly address a meeting in support of Polish freedom, observed a parliamentary election in the City of London, visited Oxford University, sat in on a magistrate's court in Salisbury, and met a number of activists for reform.

Two years later, Tocqueville made a longer visit (May to September 1835). This time industrial towns such as Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool were on his itinerary. His notes of this second English journey include a conversation with John Stuart Mill on the nature and extent of political centralisation. Tocqueville, now well known, moved widely in London political circles. He even gave evidence to a House of Commons select-committee on bribery at elections.

Tocqueville's observations in America and England contributed to his views on two issues: the global shift from aristocracy to democracy, and possible paths along which democratic societies might travel in the future.

Aristocracy versus democracy

According to Tocqueville, in an aristocratic society, the hereditary ruling class conceived 'a high idea of itself and man'. The aristocracy imagined 'glorious delights', set 'ambitious targets' and generally raised the tone. Scientists in such societies acquired a 'sublime, almost a divine love of

truth' (Tocqueville 1968: 592-3). An aristocracy in government was 'master of itself . . . [and] not subject to transitory impulses; it has far-sighted plans and knows how to let them mature until the favourable opportunity offers'. In fact, almost all the nations which have powerfully influenced the destiny of the world from the Romans down to the English were controlled by an aristocracy – and Tocqueville added, with just a hint of self-congratulation, 'how can one be surprised by that?' In his view, an aristocracy was like 'a firm and enlightened man who never dies' (283-4).

Unfortunately, the legal and economic privileges which sustained these qualities could not survive the 'great democratic revolution . . . taking place in our midst' (5). If the keynotes of aristocracy had been inequality, stability and high ideals, those of democracy were to be equality, individualism, restlessness and mediocrity.

The principle of equality had implications in almost every sphere: in relations between social classes, men and women, parents and children, masters and servants, and so on. Democracy meant that every person was as good as another. An individualistic spirit developed, carrying with it the possibility of psychological isolation. The self-centred, self-reliant individual faced the danger of being 'shut up in the solitude of his own heart' (654). He regarded everyone else as his equal but would only accept a few people as his friends and guests.

Restlessness was another product of equality. People no longer had or knew their 'proper place'. Desires had no limit. The individual engaged in a 'futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes him' (693). Happiness in a democracy consisted in satisfying a multitude of 'little wants', leading to 'a kind of decent materialism . . . which will not corrupt souls but soften and imperceptibly loosen the springs of action' (688). Instead of 'great and public emotions' (836), inhabitants of democratic societies experienced the nagging excitement of private frustration.

The general level of education among ordinary people was higher in a democracy than in an aristocratic society, but thought was less lofty. Alertness and practicality were much admired. Useful innovations were frequent but fundamental intellectual revolutions rare. Formulae were valued, while underlying theory was neglected. Instead of great art, there was inventive craftsmanship. The English language was used with less precision and less style: 'vacillating thoughts' needed 'language loose enough to leave them play' (619).

Political affairs within a democracy were plagued by inexperience, faulty judgement and limited foresight. Fortunately, American democracy could afford to make mistakes and learn from them. Especially since, in Tocqueville's view, the particular interests of politicians were not, in the end, fundamentally hostile to the general interest.

In Tocqueville's eyes, England was a mixture of aristocratic and democratic principles. He wrote:

The English have left the poor but two rights: that of obeying the same laws as the rich, and that of standing on an equality with them if they can obtain real wealth. But those two rights are more apparent than real, since it is the rich who make the laws and who create for their own or their children's profit, the chief means of getting wealth. (Tocqueville 1958: 911)

Tocqueville was amazed and impressed by English social arrangements, comparing them to a trembling rope bridge 'suspended more than a hundred feet above the ocean' (74).

Experience, skill and luck were needed to make this system viable. The English aristocracy was – unlike its French equivalent before 1789 – politically active and relatively open, being based upon wealth, not birth. It lacked clear boundaries and thus did not provide a clear target. Although privilege was under legislative attack, the aristocracy was protected by the profound effect it exercised upon social attitudes and behaviour at all levels.

The nearest equivalent to an equal and democratic social order was found in Birmingham, a city of many small industrialists and few large industries. As in the United States, local patriotism and restless mobility were in tension. The visitor was told that in Birmingham, 'Everybody works to make a fortune. The fortune made, everybody goes somewhere else to enjoy it'. Tocqueville noted in his diary: 'The folk never have a minute to themselves. They work as if they must get rich by evening and die the next day. They are generally very intelligent people, but intelligent in the American way' (Tocqueville 1958: 94). His travelling companion, Gustave de Beaumont, commented: '*It's absolutely America*' (Drescher 1964a: 64; italics in original). Birmingham must have been reminiscent of Ohio, on the frontier of America. Four years earlier, Tocqueville had written: 'In Ohio everyone has come to make money. No one has been born there; no one wants to stay there The whole society is an industry' (Tocqueville 1959: 262).

Despotism or liberty?

In contrast to England, democracy had triumphed in a very big way in the United States. This latter case allowed Tocqueville to explore possible futures for democratic society. One possibility was a kind of schoolmasterly or benevolent despotism, which would relieve citizens of 'the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living' (Tocqueville 1968: 898). Men and women would be equal but unfree.

The other possibility led not to despotism but to liberty. This was a

necessary adjunct to equality if the worst propensities of democracy were to be avoided. The European manner of establishing liberty was to attack the monarchy, nobility and other privileged vested interests. This carried the danger of anarchy and, eventually, despotism. However, there was another way of 'diminishing the influence of authority'.

By 'dividing the use of its powers among several hands' (Tocqueville 1968: 86), the repressive capacity of the central state and ruling class could be undermined without endangering the socially useful functions of public authority. That was the American approach. Indeed, the President of Harvard University told Tocqueville in 1831: 'The state of Massachusetts is a union of little republics. . . . We have put the people's name in place of that of the king. For the rest one finds nothing changed among us' (Tocqueville 1959: 51).

The New England township was a good example of the way 'The Americans have used liberty to combat the individualism born of equality' (Tocqueville 1968: 658). The affairs of the local community were administered by public officials elected from among the citizenry. County and state government followed similar principles. This system worked because everyone had a stake in society as an actual, or potential, property owner: 'there are no proletarians in America' (294). Public business was a pleasant extension of an American's private affairs. In fact, 'He always speaks to you as if addressing a meeting' (300).

Two main institutions moulded and expressed the people's will. One was the press. It made political life circulate in every corner of that vast land. 'Its eyes are never shut'. Public figures were forced to appear before 'the tribunal of opinion'. This opinion could be shaped by the press in some cases. When several newspapers took the same line, 'public opinion, continually struck in the same spot, ends by giving way under the blows' (229). The other institution was the political association. In Europe, such associations tended to be conspiratorial armies. In America they were, in general, peaceful organisations interested in winning support by petition and argument.

Local patriotism meant that 'Political passions, instead of spreading like a sheet of fire instantaneously over the whole land, break up in conflict with individual passions of each state' (200). This effect was strengthened by the federal constitution. Elections were frequent and politicians often second rate. Public administration was unmethodical, expensive and liable to corruption. Government provided no opportunity for corporate learning, due to the high rate of turnover in personnel. In spite of all this, the political advantages brought by popular involvement compensated for its costs in terms of efficiency and enlightenment.

Politics reflected the typical American mix of agitation and orderliness. Americans were constantly moving: changing their occupations, their residence, their opinions, their tastes. At the same time, a strong spirit

of religion upheld a remarkably strict moral code enjoining trustworthiness, self-reliance, neighbourliness. Enlightened self-interest preached the same message.

The American balance of equality and liberty was rooted in colonial history. The early settlers brought to the wilderness not only their religion, but also 'a middle-class and democratic freedom' (Tocqueville 1968: 37). The pioneer was not a peasant but 'a civilised man . . . plunging into the wildernesses of the New World with his Bible, axe and newspapers' (375). The local political order was established before the national framework developed. The land was, in general, not sufficiently fertile to support idle landlords. A society of smallholders developed in many areas. Although a class of rich landowners existed for a while, providing 'the best leaders of the American Revolution' (59), the aftermath of revolution undermined it. The inheritance laws were altered and the vast domains broken up.

Threats to liberty

Apart from the specific threat of racial violence, the United States illustrated a further danger likely to occur in all modern democracies. Americans assumed that the majority was always right: 'It is the theory of equality applied to brains' (305). The results were disastrous for the imagination: 'the majority has enclosed thought within a formidable fence' (315). The people had to be flattered like any European monarch. At worst, the omnipotence of the majority might lead to tyranny and injustice.

Fortunately, argued Tocqueville, a counterbalancing force existed in the pervasive influence of the legal profession within American life. The lawyers were conservative, formalistic, secretly hostile to democracy: 'It is at the bar or the bench that the American aristocracy is found' (331). The judiciary's influence was exercised most notably through the institution of the jury, which was effective both in establishing the people's rule and teaching them how to exercise this function.

Tocqueville became more sensitive to the danger inherent in democracy during the five years between the appearance of the first and second volumes of *Democracy in America*. There are at least three differences in tone and content between the two volumes (see Drescher 1964b).

First, in the initial volume the people were characterised as restless, sociable and dynamic. In the sequel, following Tocqueville's experience of French politics during the late 1830s, they appeared as atomised, apathetic and inward-looking. Second, the benign pattern of decentralised and amateurish government in American democracy, as depicted in the first volume, was supplanted in the second by a picture of remorseless

centralising power, inspired once again by the French case. This latter theme was to emerge very strongly in his later work, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1955). Third, it became evident to Tocqueville that, in some respects, and in some places, social change was producing not less but more inequality. The culprit was industrialisation.

American democracy as described by Tocqueville could not survive if the sights he saw in the shock city of Manchester in England ever became normal:

Thirty or forty factories rise on top of the hills. . . . Their six stories tower up; their huge enclosures give notice from afar of the centralisation of industry. The wretched dwellings of the poor are scattered haphazard around them. Round them stretches land uncultivated but without the charm of rustic nature, and still without the amenities of a town . . . the land is given over to industry's use. . . . The roads . . . show, like the rest, every sign of hurried and unfinished work; the incidental activity of a population bent on gain, which seeks to amass gold so as to have everything else at once, and, in the interval, mistrusts the niceties of life.

(Tocqueville 1958: 106)

In Manchester, Tocqueville heard 'the noise of furnaces, [and] the whistle of steam' from 'vast structures' which dominated the surrounding dwellings of the poor: 'here is the slave, there the master' (107).

Huge industrial concerns and large towns were major threats to both equality and liberty. The factory master was becoming like 'the administrator of a large empire' and the worker 'like a brute' (Tocqueville 1968: 719). If ever permanent inequality and aristocracy came to America, it would be 'by that door that they entered' (721).

Tocqueville also regarded large cities as a real danger to democratic republics. He predicted that 'through them they will perish' unless their governments created an armed force which 'while subject to the wishes of the national majority, is independent of the peoples of the towns and capable of suppressing their excesses' (343-4).

Tocqueville's 'solution' to the problem of coping with a large urban industrial population within a democracy was no solution at all, as he must have known. In 1831, a New Englander had told Tocqueville that industrial manufacture would be 'fatal' to 'a country as completely democratic as ours'. England and France had effective police able to maintain order 'But with us where is there a force outside the people?' Tocqueville had answered: 'But take care. . . . For if you admit that the majority can sometimes desire disorder and injustice, what becomes of the basis of your government?' (Tocqueville 1959: 68). Ironically, Tocqueville's preferred pattern of democracy - mixing peace,

equality, liberty and local government - was incompatible with the most characteristic phenomenon of the world coming into being: the large industrial city.

Mill on Tocqueville

Tocqueville set himself the task of discovering the logic of the unfolding democratic revolution. Democracy was inevitable and potentially unpleasant. He asked: under what conditions might it be bearable, and what could be done to bring about these conditions? Despite moments of hope occasioned by his American trip and the French Revolution of 1848, Tocqueville was ultimately driven to a state of 'melancholy isolation' (Mayer 1968: xx).

In contrast, Mill brooded about how social and mental resources could best be deployed to create a civilised society. By 'civilised' Mill did not mean economically developed, but 'advanced in the road to perfection, happier, nobler, wiser' (Mill 1981: 70). Equality was one value to be built into such a society. However, it had to be balanced against other equally important values, including liberty, diversity and individuality. The balancing would be done by intelligent and cultivated men and women at all levels of society, inspired by the words and example of people like John Stuart Mill.

As far as Mill was concerned, the limits on effective action towards his ideal were not set by the democratic revolution. This was less universal and more modifiable than Tocqueville thought. The major constraints derived instead from the laws of political economy and the educational level of the population. He set to work upon them both. Mill killed two birds with one stone by having his *Principles of Political Economy* (1871) printed at his own expense in a cheap 'people's edition' - a good investment in more ways than one since, following its first appearance in 1848, five editions were sold out in his lifetime.

Mill became 'the Great Economist of his day' (Heilbroner 1983: 103). He was very popular among supporters of the working-class adult education movement. His works could be found in the libraries of the new mechanics' institutes. However, he refused to court popular opinion, an attitude which, paradoxically, added to his popularity. A week before his election to Parliament in 1865, he was challenged to confirm whether or not he had written in a pamphlet that although the English working classes were ashamed of lying they were generally liars. As he recalled in his autobiography, 'I at once answered "I did"'. Scarcely were those two words out of my mouth, when vehement applause resounded through the whole meeting' (Mill 1873: 284).

Some of the differences between Mill and Tocqueville emerge in Mill's review of *Democracy in America*. This appeared in *Edinburgh Review*

in 1840 (an earlier notice based upon the first volume only having appeared in 1835). Mill strongly approved of Tocqueville's methodology, 'a combination of deduction and induction' allied to a sophisticated use of the comparative method (Mill 1976a: 189). These techniques were discussed in Mill's own *System of Logic* (1844) which appeared four years later. Mill also shared Tocqueville's concern with local public spirit as shown in American town meetings. In fact, Mill had advocated a system of local sub-parliaments in Britain some years before (Mill 1833).

However, Mill differed from Tocqueville in three main respects. He queried the plausibility of some of his generalisations. He disputed his logic at crucial points. And he suggested that England provided conditions more favourable than American society for the development of a democracy which was, in the best sense, civilised.

The democratic trend was not as powerful as Tocqueville believed, certainly not in England. The 'passion for equality of which M. de Tocqueville speaks, almost as if it were the great moral lever of modern times, is hardly known in this country even by name' (1976a: 197). Nor were the short-sightedness and agitated character of American government peculiar to an advanced democracy. They had been just as prevalent in the highly undemocratic societies of eighteenth-century France and England. However, what distinguished the United States was that government was practically redundant there. Free from the abuses of an old regime, lacking a large pauper class, untroubled by wars, neighbours and foreign entanglements, American society needed little but 'to be left alone' (113).

Mill argued that Tocqueville had apparently confused the 'effects of Democracy' with 'the effects of Civilization' (236), using the latter term in its narrow sense of growing commerce and increased national prosperity. A tendency to equalisation was one of the important effects of commercialisation. However, the dynamism of American life which so impressed Tocqueville was, Mill insisted, a product of commercial vigour rather than equality.

Mill introduced two other cases to support his point. One, the French of Lower Canada, demonstrated that social equality could be found without a 'go-ahead spirit'. The other, Great Britain, illustrated a 'progressive commercial civilization' in a very unequal society. In fact, the American people were, in almost all respects, 'an extension of our own middle class' (237-8; original emphasis).

The middle class shaped English public opinion. In turn, public opinion ensured that individuals were very insignificant within the mass. The omnipotence of the majority was a product not of social equality, as Tocqueville would have it, but of population size. Dogmatic common sense, action without speculation, a taste for superficial learning, Non-conformist prissiness: all these marks of democratic America were actually to be found, in a very big way, in bourgeois, class-ridden England.

The bias towards mediocrity caused by middle-class influence was just one instance of the deformation imposed upon a society when *any* single class achieved preponderance. This condition led inevitably to uniformity, unoriginality and stasis. In fact, the higher forms of civilisation required social differences, not social uniformity. The commerce and industry of the middle class might indeed contribute to 'improvement and culture in the widest sense' just as long as 'other co-ordinate elements of improvement' existed (243).

In Mill's view, England – unlike America – was fortunate in having a highly differentiated social structure. For example, the existence of a leisured class and a learned class (including Mill himself, of course) was 'one of the greatest advantages of this country over America'. He thought both classes should be made better qualified for the important function of 'controlling the excess of the commercial spirit by a contrary spirit' (246).

However, a truly civilised commercial society needed not just scholars and gentlemen but also an agricultural class. Mill did not mean people like the restless commercial farmers of America, but men and women who have 'attachments to places . . . attachments to persons who are associated with those places' and 'attachment to . . . occupation' (244-5). It was vital that English country folk should be a stabilising influence, counterbalancing the towns (245). This meant that political conflicts between farmers and urban businessmen (such as the dispute over the Corn Laws) should be avoided as far as possible. Above all, a national education system should be organised which would not only check the excesses of the commercial spirit in town, but also raise the intellectual level of the countryside.

To summarise: Tocqueville saw commercial capitalism, the tyranny of the majority and the isolation of the individual as expressions of democratic equality. He found that majority opinion in America was balanced by the influence of the legal profession and that individual isolation was tempered by popular participation in local government. He thought that England was bound to become more equal, democratic and 'American'.

By contrast, Mill saw the tyranny of middle-class opinion and the suppression of individuality as expressions of the commercial spirit, rather than a tendency towards equalisation. He argued that, in the English case, middle-class opinion could be held in check by the learned and leisured classes and the rural population. In other words, cultural differences within an unequal class structure could be manipulated to achieve a healthy balance. Although the English middle class was growing in size, Mill did not think that the aristocracy had so far been seriously challenged. In fact, one of Mill's ambitions was to elevate the learned class at the expense of the leisured class, especially its aristocratic component.

Life as a well-run seminar

By the time he wrote his review of Tocqueville in 1840, Mill was in the last phase of a long period of intellectual exploration. Following the 'crisis' in his 'mental history' during the mid 1820s (Mill 1873: 132-41), he had plunged headlong into the works of Thomas Carlyle, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He developed an interest in imagination, intuition, and self-cultivation, a feeling for history and a sense of the social importance of the learned class (or 'clerisy').

He soon moved on to Auguste Comte and the Saint-Simonians. After responding positively at first to their holistic approach to social change, he was subsequently repelled by their tendencies towards fanaticism. Another powerful influence, upon him in favour of radical causes such as feminism and the working-class co-operative movement, was Harriet Taylor, especially after their marriage in 1851.

By this date Mill had clarified in his mind the outlines of the civilised society to be argued for, the logical procedures through which such arguments should be conducted, and the principles of political economy to which thought and action had to be adapted.

Mill's ideal society was rather like a well-run college seminar. It envisaged responsible self-development in a context of generous co-operation under the guidance of high-minded and intelligent leadership. Paternalism was, in principle at least, abhorrent to Mill. It led to imposed conformity rather than sincere and freely-given consent to rational rules of conduct. Political and social reforms were required which would foster moral and intellectual education among the population. This meant giving the leisured class an increased sense of responsibility, while giving the working class more leisure.

Principles of political economy

Mill's analysis of contemporary capitalism was grounded in conventional political economy as shaped by Bentham, Ricardo and Malthus. From these beginnings he managed to draw some quite radical conclusions about the reforms which were needed to reduce human subjection to economic oppression and increase the rewards for individual toil. However, his radicalism was strictly limited by the Malthusian fear that society might succumb beneath a rolling tide of brute ignorant humanity.

Mill disliked the idea that 'the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind' (Mill 1871: 453). However, any attempt to improve upon the existing situation would have to come to terms with the inherent rhythms of capital and labour. Both were

caught up in cycles of perpetual consumption and perpetual reproduction.

Like Thomas Malthus, Mill assumed that unrestricted increases in population would cancel out the benefits of economic growth. However, he thought that through education and social reform the Malthusian trap might be overcome. Mill inherited from David Ricardo the idea that the rate of profit would tend to decline in the course of capital accumulation. Again, however, he modified the argument. If declining profits eventually led to 'a stationary state', that would be 'on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our present condition' (Mill 1871: 453). Economic growth was a false god in Mill's eyes.

Mill was no opponent of private ownership. He clearly saw the value of a property system based upon 'the guarantee to individuals of the fruits of their labour and abstinence' (128). However, there was a sting in the tail. People should not acquire property through the labour and abstinence of others. This meant strongly supporting co-operators and small freeholders, while vigorously opposing the present inheritance laws. Mill favoured radical reform to prevent the large-scale transmission of unearned wealth across the generations.

In fact, there was considerable scope for experimentation with social forms. Although the production of wealth was subject to rigid laws and conditions, the realm of distribution was, in Mill's view, 'a matter of human institution only. The things once there, mankind, individually or collectively, can do with them as they please' (123). This had important implications for industrial organisation.

Mill wanted to see more partnerships of labourers and capitalists, as well as associations of labourers. He approved of the efforts of utopian communities inspired by the ideas of Robert Owen and the work of the co-operative movement. Such schemes based upon the equal division of property and produce were becoming feasible as the labouring population acquired greater political sophistication.

The working class had become 'part of the public' (458). Fortunately, its members could be 'trained to feel the public interest their own' (127). The sense of justice and equality could be fostered further through 'the civilizing and improving influences of association' (461). Two important conditions of communistic experiments were that 'all shall be educated' (127) and that population size should be limited.

As has been seen, Mill was less convinced than Tocqueville about the social value of a landed aristocracy. Five chapters of the *Principles of Political Economy* were devoted to a rural class he considered to be, potentially at least, far superior: the peasant proprietors. The ideal which inspired Mill was drawn from the romantic movement. The independent and public-spirited smallholders of Cumberland and Westmorland were 'the originals of Wordsworth's peasantry' (155). They provided a model which should, as far as possible, be adopted throughout the British countryside.

Despite his interest in small-scale socialist experiments, Mill preferred to rely as far as possible upon market mechanisms to discipline and channel behaviour within society as a whole: 'Letting alone . . . should be the general practice: every departure from it, unless required by some great good, is a certain evil' (Mill 1871: 573). Government could intervene when the market failed to deliver individual choices due to externalities or unintended effects. Poor relief came within this category. A further case where government involvement could be justified was in regulating public utilities if competition was impractical.

Above all, diffusion of knowledge by government was desirable in order to remedy ignorance among the population. This would prevent the making of ill-informed choices. The educational function of government was by far the most important to Mill. He was, for example, very keen on increasing public financial support for universities, hopefully the future cradle of a national clerisy.

As far as possible, effective control over public functions should be in local hands: 'the greatest dissemination of power consistent with efficiency; but the greatest possible centralisation of information, and diffusion of it from the centre' (1964a: 168). This quotation from Mill's essay 'On Liberty', originally published in 1859, leads us to his views on the proper balance between individuals, classes and public authority within a democratic society.

The well-tempered bureaucrat

Two dilemmas run through Mill's thoughts on democracy. They are closely related. The first derives from the fact that Mill wanted to maximise the influence of noble minds such as his own upon the population at large. The medium of central authority was the most efficient way to exercise this influence. The analogy of the school comes readily to mind. It is explicit in Mill's essay 'Considerations on Representative Government', originally published in 1861. He wrote that, in the matter of

the indirect-schooling of grown people by public business A government . . . which neither does nothing itself that can possibly be done by any one else, nor shows any one else how to do anything, is like a school in which there is no schoolmaster, but only pupil teachers who have never themselves been taught.

(Mill 1964b: 359)

The dilemma was that the prestige of central authority might be captured through democratic means by spokespersons for mediocre middle-class values. The benevolent force of an enlightened clerisy might be displaced by the 'tyranny of the majority' (1964a: 68) backed by the full power of the law. In 'On Liberty', Mill mounted a defence of

individuality – the condition of creative self-development – against individualism, the self-seeking and unreflective bourgeois mentality conducive to a repressive state of public opinion.

Mill wanted to protect the right of people to be different or eccentric. He argued that legal sanctions should only be imposed upon individuals when their conduct was prejudicial to the legitimate rights or interests of others. Where there was no such prejudicial effect, legal coercion was not permissible although other forms of influence could still be applied. Persuasion and inducements were acceptable ways of trying to influence someone to change their mind or alter their behaviour. This approach not only protected intellectual innovators from persecution. It also allowed such innovators, not least Mill, free rein to educate their neighbours through vigorous argument.

There is a great deal more in 'On Liberty' than this. However, the second of Mill's dilemmas is more relevant to the essay on representative government. On the one hand, Mill approved of the increasing involvement of working-class people in the public sphere. This was an important means of educating them in the goals and values appropriate to the individual and society. On the other hand, however, he was concerned about the consequences if they seized the reins of power before they had been properly trained.

Mill accepted that 'the ideally best form of government' was one vesting sovereignty in 'the entire aggregate of the community' and giving all citizens 'the personal discharge of some public function, local or general' (Mill 1964b: 207). However, Mill believed that the British Parliament displayed 'general ignorance and incapacity'. It was in danger of being controlled by 'interests not identical with the general welfare of the community' (243). Parliament might fall under the domination of 'a governing majority of manual labourers' (250). Within such a majority, particular influence would be wielded by 'the most timid, the most narrow-minded and prejudiced, or [those] who cling most tenaciously to the exclusive class-interest' (260).

Mill was not prepared to accept the verdict of Jeremy Bentham in favour of universal suffrage. Bentham's reasoning was that special interests such as the monarchy, the Established Church and the aristocracy would ensure that government served them at the expense of society as a whole, unless all citizens had a vote. This arrangement would ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

The prospect of universal suffrage, except as some distant future prospect, filled Mill with horror. The 'greatest number' were likely, in his view, to behave in ways which would bring misery to minorities, including the intelligentsia. In fact, 'one of the most important questions demanding consideration, in determining the best constitution of a representative government, is how to provide efficacious securities

against this evil' (Mill 1964b: 254). His solution was that the wise, educated and responsible part of the society should look after the public interest of the whole. At the same time they should work hard to increase the proportion of society who came into the category of wise, educated and responsible.

The aristocracy certainly had no automatic claim to membership of this privileged category, whatever Tocqueville's view. The most remarkable aristocratic governments in history were, in effect, 'aristocracies of public functionaries, . . . essentially bureaucracies' (245). Tocqueville's distinction between aristocracy and democracy was redundant as far as Mill was concerned. The crucial 'comparison . . . as to the intellectual attributes of government had to be made between a representative government and a bureaucracy'. Not surprisingly, bureaucracy won hands down in Mill's eyes, especially if, as in the spectacularly successful case of the Roman Empire, it was invigorated by occasional infusions of the 'popular element' (246).

Mill admitted that government by 'the most perfect imaginable bureaucracy' would be greatly inferior to 'representative government among a people in any degree ripe for it' (247). However, that certainly was not England's case, in his view. Government was skilled work. Democratic institutions had their work cut out acquiring 'mental capacity sufficient for [their] own proper work, that of superintendence and check' (248).

The danger of a majority class interest getting too much power would be dealt with by a series of measures. Proportional representation would make sure members of enlightened minorities were elected to the legislature. The vote would be denied to any who could not read, write and do sums. Non-tax payers would not be enfranchised. Nor would those receiving poor relief. Additional votes would be given to the better educated, perhaps using as a test 'The "local" or "middle class" examination . . . so laudably and public-spiritedly established by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge' (285-6). The act of voting 'like any other public duty, should be performed under the eye and criticism of the public'; the secret ballot was not envisaged. Finally, electoral pledges which restricted the representative's independent judgement would be discouraged.

By all these means the special worth in public affairs of the 'better and wiser' would be recognised (288). Such provisions would contradict the view 'imprinted strongly on the American mind that any one man (with a white skin) is as good as another'. In Mill's view, 'this false creed is nearly connected with some of the most unfavourable points in the American character' (289). In effect, Mill did his best to establish the case for inequality based upon education and the social responsibilities accompanying it.

Conclusion

In Tocqueville's view, equality was a fundamental and inescapable aspect of the democratic revolution. Linked with individualism, it seemed to presage an almost inevitable drift towards centralised despotism. However, in the vigorous local institutions of the American Republic, Tocqueville saw the prospect of an alternative future, less disagreeable though far from perfect. Although peace and public spirit were widespread, culture and manners offered little more than comfort and respectability overlaid with nagging frustration and a taste for thrills. However, democratic mediocrity was preferable to democratic despotism. As has been seen, this solution remained viable just as long as manufacturing industry and large towns stayed over the horizon.

In Mill's view, mediocrity was the probable outcome of the steady expansion of middle-class influence in the course of economic growth. However, the tyranny of the majority was a parallel danger, especially as working-class income and political power increased. Mediocrity and despotism were not alternative fates, they were likely to be combined.

In these circumstances, Mill did not turn to the aristocracy as the source of wise leadership, a strategy which might have been attractive to Tocqueville in the English case. Instead, he urged the transfer of social authority from great landowners to educated professional men and women.

Capitalism – in both its urban industrial and agrarian aspects – should be brought under human control. A stationary or no-growth state was within reach. Experiments in communal ownership of industry and an increase in peasant proprietorship would foster a sense of responsible possession. Large bequests of property should be forbidden. Population should be kept in check by self-restraint. Variety and debate should be the catchwords in the sphere of opinion.

A fundamental plank of this programme was a massive effort of national education to counteract the threat of a mediocre middle-class culture. Another was a series of measures to ensure that the democratic revolution should proceed at a slow pace. Both aspects of Mill's approach are illustrated in his enthusiasm for local representative bodies.

At first glance, Mill's support for local government appears to resemble Tocqueville's positive response to the New England town meetings. In fact, it shows how different the two views of capitalist democracy really are. Unlike American local institutions, the English parishes were to be under tutelage: 'The principal business of the central authority should be to give instruction, of the local authority to apply it' (Mill 1964b: 357). Tocqueville presents the American bodies as, in effect, shareholders' meetings. Mill treats the English equivalent as schools which provide for 'the public education of the citizens' (347).

Tocqueville died two years before Mill's 'Considerations on Representative Government' appeared. It would have been interesting to see his review. Would he, perhaps, have recalled this passage in the second volume of *Democracy in America*?

I am trying to imagine under what novel features despotism may appear in the world. In the first place, I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls Over this kind of men stands an immense protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate. That power is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident and gentle It provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, makes rules for their testaments, and divides their inheritances Centralisation is combined with the sovereignty of the people. That gives them a chance to relax. They console themselves for being under schoolmasters by thinking that they have chosen them themselves.

(Tocqueville 1968: 898-9)

Carnegie and Chamberlain

The problem or the solution?

Andrew Carnegie and Joseph Chamberlain came from social classes which caused great anxiety to Tocqueville and Mill, respectively. Carnegie was born into the artisan branch of the urban working class. Chamberlain sprang from the commercial sector of the middle class. While still young men, Carnegie and Chamberlain became successful industrialists, pursuing their careers in ways Tocqueville and Mill would certainly have found repugnant. Subsequently, Carnegie became a prominent ideologue of American democracy, Chamberlain a spectacular practitioner in British politics.

Carnegie and Chamberlain both put enormous effort into image-building. Carnegie presented himself as the noble entrepreneur, product of a near-perfect system of government and economic organisation, an efficient generator of wealth who also had a deep practical concern for the interests of common humanity. Chamberlain's most persistent message was that he knew the people and was ready to express and represent their interests, even if this meant breaking with established traditions and institutions.

According to Mill and Tocqueville, people like Carnegie and Chamberlain represented one of the most serious problems facing capitalist democracy. According to Carnegie and Chamberlain – each taking his own distinctive line – they represented not the cause of contemporary ills, but their solution.

Two businessmen

The ideas of Carnegie and Chamberlain have to be understood in their social and political context. Carnegie, born in 1835, was the son of a poor Dunfermline weaver. Although his father owned his own premises and employed three hands, the family was often near the breadline. The social atmosphere was radical. In 1842, a year of riots, one of his uncles