

HOMO HIERARCHICUS
The Caste System and Its Implications

Complete Revised English Edition

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INTRODUCTION

... *Democracy breaks the chain and severs every link of it.*

Alexis de Tocqueville

I *Castes and ourselves*

The caste system is so different from our own social system in its central ideology that the modern reader is doubtless rarely inclined to study it fully. If he is very ignorant of sociology, or of a very militant turn of mind, his interest may be confined to wanting the destruction or the disappearance of an institution which is a denial of the rights of man, and appears as an obstacle to the economic progress of five hundred million people. It is a remarkable fact that, quite apart from the Indians, no Westerner who has lived in India, whether the most fervent reformer or the most zealous missionary has ever, so far as is known, attempted or recommended the abolition pure and simple of the cast system, either because of an acute consciousness of the positive functions fulfilled by the system, as in the case of the Abbé Dubois, or simply because such a thing appeared too impracticable.

The reader, even on the assumption that he is more moderate in his opinions, cannot be expected to consider caste other than an aberration, and the very authors who have devoted books to it have more often tried to explain the system as an anomaly than understand it as an institution. This will be seen in the following chapter.

If it was only a question of satisfying our curiosity and forming some idea of a social system which is as stable and powerful as it is opposed to our ethics and unamenable to our intellect, we would certainly not devote to it the effort of attention which the preparation of this book has required, and which I fear the reading of it may also require to some extent. More is necessary: the conviction that caste has something to teach us about ourselves. Indeed, this is the *long term* ambition of works of the type to which this book belongs, and it is necessary to stress this point in order to indicate

the nature and context of this endeavour. Ethnology, or more precisely social anthropology, would have only specialist interest if the subject of its study – 'primitive' or 'archaic' societies and the great civilizations of other countries – revealed a human kind quite different from ourselves. Anthropology, by the understanding it *gradually* affords of the most widely differing societies and cultures, gives proof of the unity of mankind. In doing so, it obviously reflects at least some light on our own sort of society. But this is not quite enough, and anthropology has the inherent and occasionally avowed aim of achieving this in a more systematic and radical way, that is, of putting modern society in perspective in relation to the societies which have preceded it or which co-exist with it, and of making in this way a direct and central contribution to our general education. No doubt we have not yet reached this point, but in this respect the study of a complex society, which has sustained a great civilization, is more advantageous than the study of simpler societies, socially and culturally less differentiated. Indian society in particular may be the more fruitful in that it is so different from our own: with this clear-cut case, one can hope to begin a comparison which in other cases will be more fine-drawn.

To anticipate in a few words: the castes teach us a fundamental social principle, hierarchy. We, in our modern society, have adopted the principle contrary to it, but it is not without value for understanding the nature, limits and conditions of realization of the moral and political egalitarianism to which we are attached. There is no question of reaching this point in the present work, which will stop in substance at the discovery of hierarchy, but this is the prospect to which the study is directed. There is one point to be made clear. The reader may, of course, refuse to leave the shelter of his own values; he may lay it down that for him man begins with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and condemn outright anything which departs from it. In doing so he certainly limits himself, and we can question not only whether he is in fact 'modern', as he claims, but also whether he has the right to be so-called. In actual fact, there is nothing here like an attack, whether direct or oblique, on modern values, which seem in any case secure enough to have nothing to fear from our investigation. It is only a question of attempting to grasp other values *intellectually*. If one refused to do this, it would be useless to try to understand the caste

system, and it would be impossible, in the end, to take an *anthropological* view of our own values.

It will be readily understood that the inquiry, defined in this way, forbids us to adopt certain facile approaches. If, like many contemporary sociologists, we were content with a label borrowed from our own societies, if we confined ourselves to considering the caste system as an extreme form of '*social stratification*', we could indeed record some interesting observations, but we would by definition have excluded all possibility of enriching our fundamental conceptions: the circuit which we have to travel, from ourselves to caste, and back again from caste to ourselves, would be closed immediately because we would never have left the starting-point. Another way of remaining shut in upon ourselves consists in assuming from the outset that ideas, beliefs and values – in a word; ideology – have a secondary place in social life, and can be explained by, or reduced to, other aspects of society. The principle of equality and the principle of hierarchy are facts, indeed they are among the most constraining facts, of political and social life. There is no space here to dwell upon the question of the place of ideology in social life: as far as methodology is concerned, all that follows, both in outline and in detail, aims to answer this question.^{1a} The clear recognition of the importance of ideology has an apparently paradoxical consequence: in the case of India it leads us to make much of the literary heritage and the 'superior' civilization as well as of 'popular' culture. The adherents of a less radical sociology then accuse us of falling into 'culturology' or 'indology', and of losing sight of comparison, which, in their eyes, is sufficiently guaranteed by concepts like 'social stratification' and by the mere consideration of the *similarities* which allow phenomena taken from different types of society to be grouped together under a common label. But such an approach can only ever achieve the general, as opposed to the universal, and with respect to our goal of comparison it represents another short circuit. In sociological studies the universal can only be attained through the particular characteristics, different in each case, of each type of society. Why should we travel to India if not to try to discover how and in what respects Indian society or civilization, by its very particularity, represents a form of the universal? In the last analysis, it is by humbly inspecting the most minute particulars that the route to the universal is kept open. If one is prepared to devote all the time necessary to studying all

aspects of Indian culture, one has a chance, under certain conditions, of in the end transcending it, and of one day finding in it some truth for one's own use.

For the moment, our first aim is to come to understand the ideology of the caste system. This ideology is directly contradicted by the egalitarian theory which we hold. And it is impossible to understand the one whilst the other – modern ideology – is considered a universal truth, not simply *qua* a political and moral ideal – which is a declaration of faith beyond dispute – but *qua* an adequate expression of social life – which is a naïve judgment. This is why, to smooth the reader's path, I shall begin with the end, and use from the outset the results of the study in order to provoke a preliminary reflection on modern values. This is equivalent to a brief general introduction to sociology, which may be considered very elementary but which is nevertheless needed. The first issue is the relation between modern values and sociology, followed by the consideration of egalitarianism from a sociological point of view.

2 *The individual and sociology*

On the one hand, sociology is the product of modern society, or rather an integral part of it. It can escape this limitation only partially and by a deliberate effort. On the other hand, it is easy to find the key to our values. Our two cardinal ideals are called equality and liberty. They assume as their common principle, and as a valorized representation, the idea of the human *individual*: humanity is made up of men, and each man is conceived as presenting, in spite of and over and above his particularity, the essence of humanity. We shall return to this fundamental idea later. For the moment let us mention some of its obvious features. This individual is quasi-sacred, absolute; there is nothing over and above his legitimate demands; his rights are limited only by the identical rights of other individuals. He is a monad, in short, and every human group is made up of monads of this kind. Common sense finds no problem about the harmony between these monads. Thus is conceived the social class, or what is called at this level 'society', that is an association, and in some respects even a mere collection, of such monads. There is often claimed to be an antagonism between 'the individual' and 'the society', in which

the 'society' tends to appear as a non human residuum: the tyranny of numbers, an inevitable material evil running counter to the sole psychological and moral reality which is contained in the individual.

This sort of view, while forming an integral part of the current ideology of equality and liberty, is obviously very unsatisfactory for the observer of society. Yet it infiltrates even into the social sciences. Now the true function of sociology is quite other: it is precisely to make good the lacuna introduced by the individualistic mentality when it confuses the ideal with the actual. In fact, and this is our third point, while sociology as such is found in egalitarian society, while it is immersed in it, while it even expresses it – in a sense to be seen – it has its roots in something quite different: the apperception of the social nature of man. To the self-sufficient individual it opposes man as a social being; it considers each man no longer as a particular incarnation of abstract humanity, but as a more or less autonomous point of emergence of a particular collective humanity, of a *society*. To be real, this way of seeing things must, in the individualistic universe, take the form of an experience, almost a personal revelation, and this is why I speak of '*sociological apperception*'. Thus the young Marx wrote, with the exaggeration of a neophyte: 'It is society which thinks in me.'

It is not easy to communicate this sociological apperception to a free citizen of the modern State, who would be unfamiliar with it. But we may try to clarify it a little. Our idea of society remains superficial so long as we take it, as the word suggests, as a sort of association which the fully formed individual enters voluntarily and with a definite aim, as if by a contract. Think rather of the child, slowly brought to humanity by his upbringing in the family, by the apprenticeship of language and moral judgment, by the education which makes him share in the common patrimony – including, in our society, elements which were unknown to the whole of mankind less than a century ago. Where would be the humanity of this man, where his understanding, without this training or taming, properly speaking a creation, which every society imparts to its members, by whatever actual agency? This truth is so lost from sight that perhaps it is necessary to refer our contemporaries, even if well-read, to the stories of wolf-children, so that they may reflect that individual consciousness has its source in social training.^{2a}

Similarly, the social is often considered exclusively as a matter

of the behaviour of individuals, individuals who are assumed to be fully formed in advance. In this regard, it is enough to observe that actual men do not *behave*: they *act* with an idea in their heads, perhaps that of conforming to custom. Man acts as a function of what he thinks, and while he has up to a certain point the ability to arrange his thoughts in his own way, to construct new categories, he does so starting from the categories which are given by society; their link with language should be sufficient reminder of this. It is an idiosyncratic psychological disposition that makes it hard for us to recognize this evidence clearly: when a hackneyed truth, hitherto foreign to me, becomes a truth of experience for me, I am apt to imagine that I have invented it. A common idea presents itself as a personal one when it becomes fully real. Novels are full of examples of this sort: we have a strange need to imagine that what happens to us is unique in order to recognize it as our own, whereas it is the bread and the tears of our particular collectivity or humanity. A strange confusion: there is indeed a person, an individual and unique experience, but it is in large part made up of common elements, and there is nothing destructive in recognizing this: tear from yourself the social material and you are left with nothing more than the potentiality for personal organization.^{2b}

It is the prime merit of French sociology to have insisted, in virtue of its intellectualism, on the presence of society in the mind of each man.^{2c} Durkheim has been reproached for having had recourse to notions of 'collective representations', and even more of 'collective consciousness' in order to express it. No doubt the second expression is misleading, even if it is ridiculous to see in it a justification for totalitarianism. But let me say outright that from the scientific point of view the drawbacks of these terms are nothing compared to the widespread view that the individual consciousness springs ready armed from the affirmation of self. This latter view is frequently found in current 'sociological' literature.

Let us note again that the sort of view I am criticizing, at least taken as the fully developed and pivotal view with which we are familiar, is really modern and of Christian ancestry. (It might even be suggested that it has appreciably increased its dominion over men's minds since, for example, the beginning of the nineteenth century.) Ancient philosophers, up to the Stoics, did not separate the collective aspects of man from the others: one was a man because one was a member of a city, as much a social as a political

organization. Admittedly Plato, in a superficial way, made the Republic the product solely of the division of labour. But Aristotle criticized him for this, and one can see in Plato himself, given the almost strictly hierarchical order which reigns in the *Republic*, that the true man there is man as a collective being, and not man as a particular being, even though the latter shares so closely in the former that his own advantage lies in seeing the exaltation of man as a collective being. Finally, one need only recall a famous example: why does Socrates, in *Crito*, refuse to flee, if not just because there is no moral life outside the city?

In modern society the apperception of man as a social being comes about spontaneously through certain experiences: of the army, a political party, any strongly united collectivity, and above all travel, which, rather like anthropological inquiry, enables one to see in others the modelling by society of features which one does not see at all, or else considers 'personal', when one is in one's own country. As far as teaching goes, this apperception should be the *a b c* of sociology, but I have already alluded to the fact that sociology, as the study of modern society alone, often dispenses with it. Here one must underline the merits of anthropology as a sociological discipline. Nowadays it is impossible to conceive of any anthropological work or teaching which does not bring about the apperception in question. The attraction, I would almost call it the fascination, which Marcel Mauss had for most of his pupils and listeners was due above all to this aspect of his teaching.

In this regard, I may perhaps be allowed to recall the following anecdote as a striking example. Towards the end of the year in which he was to take his diploma in ethnology, a fellow student, who was not going to make ethnology his career, told me that a strange thing had happened to him. He said something like this: 'The other day, while I was standing on the platform of a bus, I suddenly realized that I was not looking at my fellow passengers in the manner I used to; something had changed in my relation to them, in my position relative to them. There was no longer "myself and the others"; I was one of them. For a while I wondered what the reason was for this strange and sudden transformation. All at once I realized: it was Mauss' teaching.' The individual of yesterday had become aware of himself as a social being; he had perceived his personality as tied to the language, attitudes and gestures whose images were reflected by his

neighbours. This is the essential humanist aspect of the teaching of anthropology.

It must be added that the same goes for this apperception as for all fundamental ideas. It is not acquired completely in the first instance and once and for all: either it deepens and ramifies in us, or on the contrary it remains limited and becomes a sham. Starting from it we can understand that the perception of ourselves as individuals is not innate but learned. In the last analysis, it is laid down for us, imposed by the society in which we live. As Durkheim said, roughly, our own society obliges us to be free. As opposed to modern society, traditional societies, which know nothing of equality and liberty as values, which know nothing, in short, of the individual, have basically a collective idea of man, and our (residual) apperception of man as a social being is the sole link which unites us to them, and is the only angle from which we can come to understand them. This apperception is therefore the starting-point of any comparative sociology.

A reader with no idea of this apperception, or who, like the majority perhaps of philosophers today, does not recognize that it is founded in truth,^{2d} would probably read the present work in vain. To start with we shall make use of it for two ends: first to focus on the individual as a sociological problem, and secondly, starting from equality as a modern value, to throw into relief in our own society its counterpart, hierarchy.

3 Individualism and holism

If sociological apperception comes about as a reaction to the individualistic view of man, then it follows immediately that the idea of the individual constitutes a sociological problem. Max Weber, in whom sociological apperception expressed itself in a very indirect fashion, such a romantic or modern philosopher was he, outlined a programme of work for us when he wrote in a footnote in *The Protestant Ethic* (German edition, p. 95, note 13; English translation Talcott Parsons, p. 222):

The expression 'individualism' includes the most heterogeneous things imaginable [. . .] a thorough analysis of these concepts in historical terms would at the present time [after Burckhardt] be highly valuable to science.

To start with, much imprecision and difficulty arise from failing to distinguish in the 'individual':

(1) *The empirical agent, present in every society*, in virtue of which he is the main raw material for any sociology.

(2) The rational being and *normative subject* of institutions; this is peculiar to us, as is shown by the values of equality and liberty: it is an idea that we have, the idea of an ideal.

For sociological comparison, only the individual in the full sense of the term must be taken as such, and another word should be used to designate the empirical aspect. One will thereby avoid inadvertently attributing the presence of the individual to societies in which he is not recognized, and also avoid making him a universal unit of comparison or element of reference. (Here some will object that all societies recognize the individual in some fashion; it is more probable that relatively simple societies show a lack of differentiation in this respect, which should be described and estimated with care.) On the contrary, as with every complex and concrete category, one should endeavour to reduce this analytically to universal elements or relationships which can serve as coordinates for comparative reference. In this approach, the first fact to emerge is that the individual is a value, or rather part of a configuration of values *sui generis*.

It is immediately obvious that there are two mutually opposed configurations of this kind: one is characteristic of traditional societies and the other of modern society. In the first, as in Plato's Republic, the stress is placed on the society as a whole, as collective Man; the ideal derives from the organization of society with respect to its ends (and not with respect to individual happiness); it is above all a matter of order, of hierarchy; each particular man in his place must contribute to the global order; and justice consists in ensuring that the proportions between social functions are adapted to the whole.

In modern society, on the contrary, the Human Being is regarded as the indivisible, 'elementary' man, both a biological being and a thinking subject. Each particular man in a sense incarnates the whole of mankind. He is the measure of all things (in a full and novel sense). The kingdom of ends coincides with each man's legitimate ends, and so the values are turned upside down. What is still called 'society' is the means, the life of each man is the end. Ontologically, the society no longer exists, it is no more than an

irreducible datum, which must in no way thwart the demands of liberty and equality. Of course, the above is a description of values, a view of mind. With respect to *what happens in fact* in this society, observation often refers us to the first type of society. A society as conceived by individualism has never existed anywhere for the reason we have given, namely, that the individual lives on social ideas. An important consequence follows: the individual of the modern type is not opposed to the hierarchical type of society as part to whole (and this is true within the modern type of society where there is, properly speaking, no conceptual whole), but rather as an equal or *homologue*, for they both correspond to the essence of man. Let us apply Plato's (and Rousseau's) idea, the idea that there is a parallelism between the concept of the particular man and the concept of society: whilst Plato conceives the particular man as a society, a set of tendencies or faculties, in modern times the society or nation is conceived as a collective individual, which has its 'will' and its 'relations' like the elementary individual, but unlike him is not subject to social rules.

Any doubt that this distinction immediately clarifies the issue may be dispelled by referring to the confusion introduced by the two senses of the word 'individual' in the sociology of Durkheim and his followers, or again to the 'primitive communism' of Victorian or Marxist evolutionism, which confused absence of the individual with collective ownership.^{3a}

When looking for the origins of sociology one should, therefore, above all focus on its principle or essence, that is, trace the history of sociological apperception in the modern world. In France it became especially apparent under the Restoration, as a reaction to the disillusionment brought about by the experience of Revolutionary dogmas and as an implication of the socialist programme of substituting deliberate organization for the arbitrariness of economic laws. However, it is to be found before this,^{3b} for example in natural law, where it is a continually eroded legacy of the Middle Ages, or in Rousseau, who in these lines of the *Social Contract* indicates superbly the transition from man as a natural being to man as a social being:

He who would dare to institute a People must feel in himself the capacity to change human nature as it were, to transform each individual, by himself a complete and isolated whole, *into a piece of a greater whole*

from which that individual may [as a man] receive his life and being. (Italics and gloss mine.)

The same apperception is present in an indirect form in Hegel's conception of the State, a conception which Marx rejected, thus returning to individualism pure and simple: a somewhat paradoxical attitude for a socialist.

A remark is required to encompass the ideology and its context: this individualistic tendency, which became established, generalized and popularized from the eighteenth century to the age of romanticism and beyond, was *in fact* accompanied by the modern development of the social division of labour, of what Durkheim has called *organic solidarity*. The ideal of the autonomy of each person became established among men who were dependent on one another for material things to a much greater extent than all their predecessors. Still more paradoxically, these men ended up by reifying their belief and imagining that the whole of *society* functioned in fact as they had thought the *political* domain they had created ought to function.^{3c} A mistake for which the modern world, and in particular France and Germany, have paid dear. Compared to simpler societies it looks as if there had been an exchange of levels: at the level of fact, simpler societies juxtapose identical particular persons ('mechanical solidarity') and at the level of thought stress the collective totality; modern society, by contrast, acts as a whole and, at the theoretical level, thinks in terms of the individual.^{3d} This accounts for the emergence of sociology as a special discipline, replacing an idea that was common to all in traditional society.

4 Rousseau on equality

Now we come to the modern feature which is most immediately opposed to the caste system: equality. The ideal of liberty and equality follows immediately from the conception of man as an individual. In effect, if the whole of humanity is deemed present in each man, then each man should be free and all men are equal. This is the foundation of the two great ideals of the modern age. By contrast, as soon as a collective end is adopted by several men, their liberty is limited and their equality brought into question.

It is striking to find out how recent and belated is the development of the idea of equality and its implications. In the eighteenth

century it played only a secondary role, except in the works of Helvetius and Morelly. Even in the nineteenth century, among the precursors or fathers of socialism in France, the relative place of equality and liberty is variable. The difficulty of separating the concept of equality from associated ideas makes it all the less easy to give its history here. However, we shall try to isolate it, while retaining a minimum of historical perspective, by comparing its place in Rousseau and in Tocqueville, at an interval of eighty years.

Rousseau is often considered a rebel against inequality, but in reality his ideas remained very moderate and were to a large extent traditional. In the *Discourse on the origin of inequality*, Rousseau's prime merit is to distinguish between natural inequality, which is but a small thing, and moral inequality, or 'inequality of combination',^{4a} which results from the exploitation of natural inequality for social ends. The man of nature, a brutish creature, endowed with a sense of pity but not knowing good from evil, and innocent of the differentiations on which reason and morality rest, is sometimes said to be free and even to be acquainted with equality (p. 199), which must no doubt be understood in the sense of absence of moral inequality (but would it not be better to say he is acquainted with neither of the two opposites?). It is explicitly stated that inequality is inevitable and that true equality consists in proportion (p. 216, note); thus one has here again something like Plato's ideal of distributive justice.

From the economic point of view, inequality is inevitable. From the political point of view, equality cannot be defined independently of liberty: equality in abjection, under the despotism which marks the extremity of the development of society, is not a virtue. In short, equality is only good when it is combined with liberty and when it consists in proportionality, that is, when it is applied reasonably (equity, perhaps, more than equality).

In the *Social Contract* (end of book I), equality is clearly defined as a political norm: 'The fundamental compact substitutes, for such physical inequality as nature may have set up between men, an equality which is moral and legitimate' (p. 19).

Whilst inequality is evil, it is nevertheless inevitable in certain domains. Whilst equality is good, it is above all an ideal which man introduces into political life, to compensate for the ineluctable fact of inequality. Rousseau would probably not have written that 'men are born free and with equal rights'. He only opened his

Social Contract with the famous phrase: 'Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains' (my italics). One can see the transition: the Revolution was to attempt to put natural law into effect as positive law. One can see with Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals how the demands of equality swept away the limitations which the Philosophes found in the nature of man. These demands not only put equality before liberty but were even ready to hold liberty cheap in order to bring about an egalitarian utopia.

5 *Tocqueville on equality*

Let us move on to Tocqueville and his *Democracy in America* (1835-1840).^{5a} Tocqueville contrasts the democracies of England, America and France according to the relative place which each gives to the two cardinal virtues. In England there is liberty with scarcely any equality. America has largely inherited liberty and has developed equality. The French Revolution took place entirely under the banner of equality. Tocqueville, rather like his teacher Montesquieu, has really an aristocratic conception of liberty, and perhaps he felt no freer as a citizen than he would have as a noble under the *Ancien Régime*. He defines democracy by the equality of conditions. (Note in passing that, again as in Montesquieu, we are here going beyond pure politics.) This for him is the 'germinal idea', the dominant and formative ideal and passion, whence he tries to deduce the characteristics of the society of the United States (taking into consideration geographical factors, laws and customs). Looking at France, Tocqueville sees equality developing from an early date. The remarkable pages should be read in which he shows how it was introduced in the Middle Ages by the Church (the clergy recruited from all classes), then encouraged by kings, with the result that finally, in the given conditions, all progress led to levelling.^{5b} Tocqueville finds the fact so clearly inscribed in history that he does not hesitate to characterize it as providential, and there is no doubt that his advocacy of democracy, courageous at the outset and always lucid, had its roots here: it would be impossible to oppose the overriding tendency of the history of Christian countries. Tocqueville insisted at length, here and in *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, on the considerable degree of levelling in pre-Revolutionary France, a situation which rendered intolerable the remaining distinctions of estate and privileges in

the laws, and called for their destruction. If Tocqueville is right, Revolutionary demands for liberty seem rather to have been the expression, mainly for the lower orders, of essentially egalitarian demands, the restriction of equality being felt as absence of liberty; but this is already an interpretation.

At the risk of straying a little from our main subject, a word must be said here on one of Tocqueville's very important ideas, which concerns the place of modern political ideology in relation to values as a whole. Tocqueville raised the question of the *realization* of the democratic ideal. Together with many Frenchmen of his time he wondered what the reason was for the disappointing course taken by events in France after 1789. Briefly, France was unable to achieve democracy in a satisfactory manner (and this is one of the origins of French socialism and of sociology in France). Tocqueville stated that in the United States, by contrast, democracy functioned properly. Looking for the reason for this disparity, he was not content to refer it to environment and history; he believed it was to be found in the quite different relationship in the two cases between politics and religion. From the beginning of his book he deplores the fact that in France there had been a divorce between religious men and those who loved liberty (Reeve, I, pp. 10-11), whilst he states that in the United States there was an alliance between the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty (I, pp. 40-41). Here is his conclusion (II, p. 19):

For my own part I doubt whether man can support at the same time complete religious independence and entire public freedom. And I am inclined to think, that if faith be wanting in him, he must serve, and if he be free, he must believe.

Here is a thought so opposed to the French democratic tradition that it must shock many readers. Its only relevance here is to the general configuration of values in the democratic universe and comparison with the corresponding configuration in the hierarchical universe. Tocqueville sets a limit to (political) individualism, and again makes man *dependent* in real life. In more detail, there are two aspects. In the first place the domains of religion and politics are necessarily separated in democracies, and in two ways: on the one hand, religion must be made to relinquish political power, leaving politics to go its own way; on the other, it is wrong that the political domain should set itself up as a

religion, as is often the tendency in France. (Tocqueville notes elsewhere that the French Revolution proceeded in the manner of a religious revolution, M. W. Patterson, trans., *De Tocqueville's L'Ancien Régime*, pp. 15, 158 ff.).

In America, religion is a distinct sphere, in which the priest is sovereign, but out of which he takes care never to go. Within its limits he is the master of the mind; beyond them he leaves men to themselves, and surrenders them to the independence and instability which belong to their nature and their age. (H. Reeve, trans., *Democracy in America*, II, p. 14.)

It will be noted that in the twentieth century France has succeeded somehow or other in achieving this separation. But this is not the whole of Tocqueville's idea: separation is not enough for him. In addition, he advocates that politics and religion be complementary, as he found them to be in the United States: 'If he be free, he must believe', meaning, so to speak, that the particular domain of politics, while setting itself up as the absolute within its own sphere, can be no viable substitute for the universal domain of religion – or, let us hasten to add, philosophy. To make this idea plausible, it is necessary either to consider it from the comparative angle, as might become possible after reading the present work, or else to reflect seriously upon the misfortunes of democracy in nineteenth-century France and twentieth-century Europe – which is hardly ever done.⁵⁰ At the empirical level, it must be stated that the two democracies which have proved viable within the limits of their frontiers both appeal complementarily to another principle: in America in the way Tocqueville has indicated, and in England by preserving alongside modern values as much tradition as possible.

For us the most valuable thing in Tocqueville is his study of the egalitarian mentality, as contrasted with what he perceived of the hierarchical mentality in the France of the *Ancien Régime*, to which he was still closely attached despite his unreserved adherence to democracy. The first feature to emphasize is that the concept of the equality of men entails that of their similarity. This is a notion which, if not absolutely new, had become more widespread and had gained authority since the eighteenth century, as we see from Condorcet who believed strongly in equality of rights, but declared that inequality was to a certain extent useful in practice.

So long as equality is only an ideal requirement expressing the transition in values from man as a collective being to man as an individual, it does not entail the denial of innate differences. But if equality is conceived as rooted in man's very nature and denied only by an evil society, then, as there are no longer any rightful differences in condition or estate, or different sorts of men, they are all alike and even identical, as well as equal. This is what Tocqueville says: where inequality reigns, there are as many distinct humanities as there are social categories (Reeve, II, p. 12, cf. *A.R.*, Chapter 8), the reverse being true in egalitarian society (II, pp. 2, 3, 12). Tocqueville does not develop this point, he seems to take it for granted; like everybody else, he even seems to conflate the social form and the 'natural' or universal being. However, at one point he does make the distinction when he contrasts the way in which the equality of man and woman is conceived in the United States and in France: 'There are people in Europe who, confounding together the different characteristics of the sexes, would make of man and woman beings not only equal but alike' (II, p. 191). The Americans, for their part, consider both of them, 'though their lot is different . . . as beings of equal value' (II, p. 193). The distinction is even expressed between the social level, where the woman remains inferior, and the moral and intellectual level, where she is equal to the man (II, p. 194).

In general, however, we may grasp here, in Tocqueville himself, how the ideal is made immanent and reified, in the way characteristic of the modern democratic mentality. The fusion of equality and identity has become established at the level of common sense. This makes it possible to understand a serious and unexpected consequence of egalitarianism. In a universe in which men are conceived no longer as hierarchically ranked in various social or cultural species, but as essentially equal and identical, the difference of nature and status between communities is sometimes reasserted in a disastrous way: it is then conceived as proceeding from somatic characteristics - which is racism.⁵¹

The whole of the second part of *Democracy in America*, which was published in 1840, is a concrete study of the implications in all domains of the equality of conditions. Tocqueville was able to make this meticulous, remarkable, and sometimes prophetic portrait of egalitarian society thanks to the fact that he regarded it with sympathy and curiosity, while still bearing in mind the

aristocratic society in which, so to speak, he still participated. He saw the characteristics of the new society clearly, in contrast with those of the preceding one. It is thanks to this comparison, analogous to that implicit in the work of an anthropologist studying an unfamiliar society, that Tocqueville achieved a work of sociology, and one in a deeper sense than many by subsequent authors who were unable to detach themselves from egalitarian society.

This circumstance enables us to make use of Tocqueville, though as it were in the opposite direction: starting from egalitarian society and without leaving our own civilization, he can give us some insight into hierarchical society. It is enough to 'turn the picture round', as Tocqueville himself used to do. We shall be content here with quoting, almost in its entirety, a short chapter, which is one of the most telling in this connection, and has the advantage of being connected with a theme on which we have already touched.

6 *Tocqueville on individualism*

'Of individualism in democratic countries' (*Democracy in America*, II, part 2, Chapter 2, pp. 90-92):

Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with egotism. Egotism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person, and to prefer himself to everything in the world. Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. . . .

Individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as the equality of conditions.

Among aristocratic nations, as families remain for centuries in the same condition, often on the same spot, all generations become as it were contemporaneous. A man almost always knows his forefathers, and respects them: he thinks he already sees his remote descendants, and he loves them. He willingly imposes duties on himself towards the former and the latter; and he will frequently sacrifice his personal gratifications to those who went before and to those who will come after him. Aristocratic institutions have, moreover, the effect of closely

binding every man to several of his fellow-citizens. As the classes of an aristocratic people are strongly marked and permanent, each of them is regarded by its own members as a sort of lesser country, more tangible and more cherished than the country at large. As in aristocratic communities all the citizens occupy fixed positions, one above the other, the result is that each of them always sees a man above himself whose patronage is necessary to him, and below himself another man whose cooperation he may claim. Men living in aristocratic ages are therefore almost always closely attached to something placed out of their own sphere, and they are often disposed to forget themselves. It is true that in those ages the notion of human fellowship is faint, and that men seldom think of sacrificing themselves for mankind; but they often sacrifice themselves for other men. In democratic ages, on the contrary, when the duties of each individual to the race are much more clear, devoted service to any one man becomes more rare; the bond of human affection is extended, but it is relaxed.

Amongst democratic nations new families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away, and all that remain change their condition; the woof of time is every instant broken, and the track of generations effaced. Those who went before are soon forgotten; of those who will come after no one has any idea: the interest of man is confined to those in close propinquity to himself. As each class approximates to other classes, and intermingles with them, its members become indifferent and as strangers to one another. Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king: democracy breaks that chain and severs every link of it. . . . They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

No doubt it will be understood why I have quoted at length from this admirable text. In part, it replies in advance to the question about individualism raised by Max Weber. It clearly contrasts modern universalism with traditional particularism, and at the same time two opposite views of time. It evokes on the one hand a romanticism which still persists nowadays, even in sociological circles, and on the other, over and above Western aristocracy, it evokes the caste system and its hierarchized interdependence. I have found no better introduction for the modern reader to the

universe so different from our own into which I am going to lead him. There are many other passages which could be quoted to complement this one.

7 *Necessity of hierarchy*

There is a point however at which Tocqueville himself abandons us. It is not surprising to find that our contemporaries, who value equality, find scarcely anything to contrast it with except inequality. Even sociologists and philosophers seem to speak of 'hierarchy', reluctantly and with averted eyes, in the sense of the residual or inevitable inequalities of aptitude and function, or of the chain of command which is presupposed by any artificial organization of multiple activities, briefly 'power hierarchy'. However, that is not hierarchy proper, nor the deepest root of what is so called. Tocqueville, by contrast, certainly had the feeling of something else, but the aristocratic society whose memory he retained was not enough to enable him to make this feeling clear. Philosophers have a happier example in their own tradition, namely Plato's Republic, but they seem rather uncomfortable about it (*cf.* note 2d). On the sociological side, among so many platitudes about 'social stratification' the sociologist Talcott Parsons has the great merit of having brought fully to light the universal rationale of hierarchy:

We conceive *action* to be oriented to the attainment of goals, and hence to involve *selective* processes relative to goals. Seen in their relations to goals, then, all the components of systems of action and of the situations in which action takes place, are subject to the process of *evaluation* *Evaluation* in turn has, when it operates in the setting of *social* systems of action, two fundamental implications. First the units of systems, whether they be elementary unit acts or roles, collectivities, or personalities, must in the nature of the case be subject to *evaluation* But given the process of *evaluation*, the probability is that it will serve to differentiate entities in a *rank order* The second implication is the well-known one that it is a condition of the stability of social systems that there should be an *integration of the value-standards* of the component units to constitute a '*common value-system*'. . . . The existence of such a pattern system as a point of reference for the analysis of social phenomena is a central assumption which follows directly from the frame of reference of actions as applied to the analysis of social systems. (Talcott Parsons: 'A revised analytical approach to the theory of social stratification', first published in *Class, status and power*, edited by Reinhard

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Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset, Glencoe, 1953.) (I have italicized certain words.)

* In other words, man does not only think, he acts. He has not only ideas, but values. To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, and a certain consensus of values, a certain hierarchy of ideas, things and people, is indispensable to social life. This is quite independent of natural inequalities or the distribution of power. No doubt, in the majority of cases, hierarchy will be identified in some way with power, but there is no necessity for this, as the case of India will show. Moreover it is understandable and natural that hierarchy should encompass social agents and social categories. In relation to these more or less necessary requirements of social life, the ideal of equality, even if it is thought superior, is artificial. It expresses a human claim, which also entails the choice of certain ends. It represents a deliberate denial of a universal phenomenon in a restricted domain. We have no intention, any more than did Tocqueville, of throwing doubt on this ideal. But it is well to understand to what extent it runs contrary to the general tendencies of societies, and hence how far our society is exceptional, and how difficult it is to realize this ideal.

To return, after Tocqueville, to the question of the *realization* of democracy is certainly a much neglected and necessary task, but it is not our task here. I wanted only to mark the point after which Tocqueville fails to guide us, and the merit of the sociologist who succeeds here. Talcott Parsons does so because he combines the intellectualism of Durkheim (recognizing that action is dominated by representations or ideas) and the pragmatism of Max Weber (confronting, beyond the problem of the representation of the world, that of action in the world as represented). Returning to the more limited object of this book, we shall see that our modern denial of hierarchy is what chiefly hinders us in understanding the caste system.