In The Old Regime and the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville examines the demise of the French monarchy and the ensuing aftermath.1 Numerous crucial changes swept through France’s social order prior to the Revolution. Tocqueville argues: “For doctrines of this kind to lead to revolutions, certain changes must already have taken place in the . . . customs and mores of a nation” (13). By dissecting the long-term, underlying bases as well as the short term stimuli, Tocqueville provides a meticulous analysis of the revolutionary process in France. Even so, he remains steadfast with regard to its results.

The primary aim of the French Revolution was, according to Tocqueville, “not merely to change an old form of government but to abolish the entire social structure of pre-revolutionary France” (8). The French monarchy and the feudalistic structure of French society had previously been a stable and long-lasting organization. The nobleman held a contract over his peasants based on mutual obligation, and the function of the peasantry was dictated by the authority of the nobility. As the Revolution approached, French society fell deeper into a state of disarray. A peasant was now free to “move about, buy and sell, work, and enter into contracts… he had not merely ceased to be a serf, he had also become a landowner… this change had far-reaching consequences” (23). In addition, the gradual divestment of the power of the aristocracy and the introduction of the Intendants by the monarch decreased the nobility’s previous influence over the peasantry. In addition, the rising power and wealth of the peasantry increased their dominance, in both political and economic arenas.

The “bitter hatred” of feudalism arose from this leveling of power among

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the strata of French society, for “… the more these functions passed out of the hands of the nobility, the more uncalled-for did their privileges appear, until at last their mere existence seemed a meaningless anachronism” (30). The “gradual impoverishment of the nobility” in part influenced such disdain; with the loss of authority in the aristocracy, the nobles became closer to the bourgeois—“all who ranked above the common herd were of a muchness”—and a “leveling-up process” occurred throughout societal classes (80-81). With the loss of the former, feudal class stratifications, small groups began to develop among the French people, increasing feelings of civic community, or “group individualism” (96). This sense of group individualism fostered a sense of loyalty and further contributed to the fall of the old regime of feudalism and monarchy. In the short-term, Tocqueville attributes the changing opinion of the role of government among the people to the intellectuals and their “abstract, literary politics.” He describes the common belief that the complex of tradition should be replaced by “simple, elementary rules deriving from the exercise of the human reason and natural law” (139). Tocqueville argues that the ideals of the intellectuals “[found] a welcome among the masses and [acquired] the driving force of political passion” and began to serve as the authority on which the masses could stand in their pursuit of reform.

However, this platform of literary ideology exhibited several negative effects: “every Frenchman felt he was being victimized . . . it seemed as if the choice lay between meekly accepting everything or destroying the whole system” (141). The masses, their minds overcome by the political ideals of the intellectuals, felt that the current structure of France could only be ushered into a new age by a sudden, sweeping revolution, as opposed to a series of reforms, thus catering to all groups in society, rather than to the common people alone.

Despite this partially detrimental effect of the works of the intellectuals, the “imagination of the masses” was swept up in reform. Tocqueville describes how another short-term catalyst was the education of the people, which was influenced by these “men of letters.” He writes, “The only safeguard against State oppression they could think of was universal education” (160). The post-French Enlightenment belief that human beings were endowed with reason and rationality fueled the masses: “the best way of ensuring the political wel-
fare of the nation was for the State to provide education for all” (160). This “new’ power” of education would help to stimulate the ideals of the people and feed their desire for revolution.

State paternalism also contributed to a desire for revolution among the French people. Described by Tocqueville as “democratic despotism,” the over-reaching power of the state was “for abolishing all hierarchies, all class distinctions . . . and the nation was to be composed of individuals almost exactly alike . . . In this indiscriminate mass was to reside, theoretically, the sovereign power; yet it was to be carefully deprived of any means of controlling . . . the activities of its own government” (163). The former social classes had already begun to equalize with the decreasing power of the nobility, but the masses still lacked the power of public opinion, and the ability to moderate the government—without which, “the State was a law unto itself and nothing short of a revolution could break its tyranny” (163).

Tocqueville ends his volume at “the threshold of this memorable revolution.” He does not provide an examination of any supposed new social order. His methodical parsing of the long- and short-term causes of the French Revolution, described by Irving Zeitlin as “a classic study of the old order and the social origins of the revolution,” is exactly that: an assessment of L’Ancien Régime. 2 Would such a study have provided his analysis with a broader scope? Perhaps. Whether or not a radically different French society was indeed born from the ashes of the fires fed by these ideals is peripheral to the far-reaching lesson taught by the French Revolution. This lesson resounded in men of Tocqueville’s time and continues to have influence today. The Revolution “appealed to the universal laws... and championed the natural rights of man... In short, the lesson of the Revolution has not been lost even on those who have most reason to detest it” (9–13). Though Tocqueville leaves open the question of whether a radically new society was indeed born, the ideals of the Revolution would, as he claims, continue to influence all people, both leaders and citizens, ad infinitum.

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