

## Centralisation / Decentralisation

Tocqueville's discovery of American democracy—its institutions and modes of functioning—led him to reflect, in light of the decentralisation at work in the United States, on the nature, role, and operation of centralisation in France and in Europe more broadly. To this end, he wrote to his father on 7 October 1831, asking him to draft a short memorandum on centralisation.

Drawing on both his American experience and the insights from his father's memorandum, Tocqueville developed two major ideas on the subject. First, as he explains in the first volume of *Democracy in America*, it is absolutely necessary to distinguish between two types of centralisation: governmental and administrative. Second, as he later demonstrates in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, centralisation as a whole is primarily an inheritance from the Ancien Régime, rather than the exclusive result of the Revolution or the Empire. He describes how everything was “directed from Paris”: “The volume of paperwork was already enormous, and the slowness of administrative procedure so great that it would take no less than a year for a parish to obtain authorisation to repair its steeple or its presbytery.”

The Revolution, and even more so the Empire, merely reinforced this trajectory, which Tocqueville identifies as the natural slope down which democracies are inclined to slide.

In *Democracy in America*, he devotes an entire subchapter to the effects of administrative decentralisation in the United States, and to the crucial distinction between governmental and administrative centralisation. While governmental centralisation is useful for providing coherence and efficacy to the exercise of power, administrative centralisation, by its tendency to occupy the entire political space, hampers the development of individual or collective initiative. In Tocqueville's view, democracy can only thrive if citizens are active; the natural and almost inevitable expansion of administrative centralisation inhibits such activity, depriving individuals not only of their capacity to act, but eventually even of their desire to do so. “It excels, in short, at preventing, not at doing.”

Tocqueville nevertheless acknowledges that a natural link exists between the two types of centralisation. He notes that a political regime may enjoy strong governmental centralisation without succumbing to administrative centralisation (as in England), or that, conversely, an empire lacking governmental centralisation is condemned to impotence (as in the historical case of Germany):

“Centralisation is a word repeated endlessly in our time, and which few people take the trouble to define. There are, however, two very distinct kinds of centralisation, and it is important to know them well. Certain interests are common to all parts of the nation, such as the creation of general laws and the conduct of foreign affairs. Others are specific to certain localities, such as communal undertakings. To concentrate the direction of the former in a single place or a single hand is what I call governmental centralisation. To concentrate the direction of the latter in the same way is what I call administrative centralisation. (...)”

One can see that governmental centralisation acquires immense strength when joined with administrative centralisation. It then habituates men to the complete and continual abstraction of their own will; to obedience—not once and in a single matter, but always and in everything. Not only does it subjugate them by force, but it also seizes them through their habits; it isolates them and captures them one by one in the common mass.”

These two types of centralisation thus support and reinforce each other, yet Tocqueville insists they are not inseparable:

“In our time, we see a powerful nation, England, in which governmental centralisation is carried to a very high degree: the State seems to act as a single man. (...) For my part, I cannot conceive how a nation could live, let alone prosper, without strong governmental centralisation. But I believe that administrative centralisation serves only to enervate the peoples who submit to it, because it continually seeks to extinguish civic spirit. (...) It may well contribute to the fleeting greatness of one man, but never to the lasting prosperity of a people.”

The confusion is common: when one says that a State cannot act because it lacks centralisation, one is almost always, without knowing it, referring to governmental centralisation. Germany, Tocqueville writes, never succeeded in harnessing its full national strength, not because of administrative failings, but because of its lack of unified governmental authority.

He further adds:

“I am convinced, moreover, that there are no nations more exposed to the yoke of administrative centralisation than those whose social state is democratic. (...)”

Administrative centralisation thus appears as a latent and natural danger for European democratic societies, a danger from which the United States has been spared by virtue of its unique historical trajectory as a democracy from the outset. Tocqueville admired the effects of American decentralisation, especially its ability to unleash individual initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, an expression of enlightened self-interest which, because it serves the common good, takes on a properly political dimension:

“What I admire most in America is not the administrative effects of decentralisation, but its political effects. In the United States, the homeland is felt everywhere. It is an object of concern from the village to the entire Union. The citizen attaches himself to every interest of his country as if it were his own. He glories in the nation's triumphs; in its successes, he sees his own efforts recognised and rises with them; he rejoices in its prosperity, from which he benefits. He feels for his country something akin to what one feels for one's family, and it is again a kind of egoism that binds him to the State.”

It is important to note, however, that although Tocqueville praised the advantages of decentralisation as he observed it in America, he never translated this into a concrete political programme for France. He criticises the excesses of French centralisation, yet ultimately accepts that the State must pursue territorial development policies, for example by financing railways or defining the legal framework for social assistance.

In 1848, among the eighteen members tasked with drafting the new Constitution, only Lamennais, Beaumont, Tocqueville, and to some extent Odilon Barrot supported decentralisation. Lamennais posed the question from the very first session, demanding that the Commission begin by establishing the status of local government. When his request was rejected, he resigned. Though sent by his peers to persuade Lamennais to return, Tocqueville, knowing the cause was lost, did not press the issue further.