

## BOUDON ON TOCQUEVILLE

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Alexis de Tocqueville is one of the most discussed, most elusive thinkers in the history of social science and political theory. This is not because his writing is elusive or inaccessible, although he has been charged with an excessive concern with style, but rather because so many interpretations have been imposed on it, and from so many points of view. Raymond Boudon's book on Tocqueville, *Tocqueville aujourd'hui* (2005; 2006 English translation cited hereafter), concentrating on the second, "sociological," volume of *Democracy in America*, takes a particular, distinctive approach. It is a text, fundamentally, about explanatory form: about the types of explanations found in the text. Its aim was to "reconstruct its methodological principles from the analyses of the second *Démocratie* – based on a primary principle: that of axiological neutrality" (2006, p. 29). But there was another, which will be our primary concern here: "A further basic principle of Tocqueville's is his preference for explanation" (2006, 29). The "reconstruction" is also explicitly presentist, as the title makes clear. As he puts it, at one point, "We do not come across the word 'value' used in its modern sense in the work of Tocqueville or that of Durkheim. But if we want to have an idea of the significance of their thinking, it is helpful to retranslate it into a language that has become more familiar to us" (2006, p. 25). Similarly for "explanation": Boudon wants to translate into a familiar language unlike Tocqueville's own. Boudon is not only interested in understanding these explanations in light of present concerns about explanation, but also about the similarities to others in the "classical" sociological tradition with present resonance, notably Weber and to some extent Durkheim, though primarily with what can be thought of as the present rational-choice or analytical sociology paradigm, broadly construed. This then is a self-conscious reconstruction of Tocqueville, for a particular purpose – getting an idea of the significance of their thinking – and a particular audience – "us" – meaning present day sociologists.

The term “value,” I hope to show, is part of a family of problematic terms that reveal a gap between Boudon and Tocqueville that goes beyond historical changes in terminology. But it is a gap that is both difficult to understand and crucial for present concerns, and not just in sociology. To understand the issues requires a good deal of background. The claims of Tocqueville aujourd’hui, together with other writings of Boudon, provide a way into these tangled issues, which involve not only such anachronistic terms as “value”, but the question of the limits and applicability of ordinary psychology and rational choice to matters of belief, the nature of belief itself, the meaning and limits of “understanding” in explanation, the role of the tacit and the problems of characterizing it, as well as the meaning of Tocqueville’s own explanations and characterizations of the differences between the democratic and aristocratic modes of existence.

#### RECONSTRUCTIONS, TRANSLATIONS, AND LACUNAE

The topic, and Boudon’s approach to it, falls within the general category of “history and philosophy of science,” which is the way I will treat it here. So it is perhaps useful to think about what a reconstruction does, and about the various kinds of reconstructions. Understanding what he is attempting, and then gauging this, thus, requires a brief excursion into the methodology of interpretation itself. The kind of “rational reconstruction” envisaged by Imre Lakatos (Lakatos 1970) for the history of scientific theories was different from Boudon’s. For Lakatos, the task of the historian was to reconstruct the problem-solving of the scientist. To do this required understanding the problem as it appeared to the scientist and employing a notion of scientific rationality to explain how they solved it. The “reconstructive” aspect is a matter of displaying the rationality of the response: showing why it was a rational response, despite whatever distractions appear in the historical record about the motives, religious beliefs, and so forth of the scientist that might have been part of the story. The point is historical. However, it uses our notions of rationality and applies them to enable our construction, or translation, of the problem situation: to make it intelligible, which is necessary because it is no longer our problem situation. The effect is to reduce scientific advance to situated problem solving.

Tocqueville set up a highly specific and constrained problem situation. His repeatedly announced aim was to understand the effects of democracy, as well as its sources. The source and cause was this: “The democratic social order in America springs naturally from some of their laws and conceptions of public morality” (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 417). The aim of the book was

“only... to demonstrate how equality has modified” both “our inclinations” and “our ideas”: 2006 [1835], p. 417). He frankly acknowledges the existence of powerful causal elements, influencing “opinions, instincts and feelings due to circumstances strange,” including “the nature of the country, the origin of the colonists, the religion of their founding fathers, the enlightenment which they acquired, and their former habits, all things unconnected to democracy.” Similar factors operated in Europe “different from those operative in America but equally untouched by the fact of equality” (2006 [1835], p. 417). This provided the basis for a comparative analysis dealing with the sole cause of democracy and the sole effect of distinctive mores and ideas. But Tocqueville disavows any attempt to account for either the causes or consequences of these other things, save where they relate to his main theme: they are, so to speak, confounders whose possible influence must be separated from the main one. So, this is already a causal problem with a specific structure, involving the category of democracy and the categories of non-democracy. For him, democracy as an egalitarian form of society was a historical novelty, which produced a novel human type with novel social relations, novel habits of the heart, and novel receptivity to particular kinds of ideas (2006 [1835], p. 417-18). Democracy was always contrasted to a society of ranks, and specifically to the two forms of aristocracy to which American society was most closely related, the French and the English. His empirical evidence is mostly directed at the contrast between these societies, as Tocqueville constructs them. This construction he substantiates “empirically” in a particular way – by citing his own observations of the normal practices and attitudes of the different societies. Tocqueville, it should be noted, was an exceptional observer, so the evidence consists in telling details that reveal the differences he is seeking.

The Lakatos version of rational reconstruction is emphatically not Boudon’s. Boudon is concerned neither with historical reconstruction nor with explaining Tocqueville in terms of his intellectual context and interlocutors, nor with the grand issues in political theory and history he engages with elsewhere, which provide insight into Tocqueville’s motivations. Nor does Boudon engage historically with the methodological issues of Tocqueville’s own time, particularly his relation to J. S. Mill, to Auguste Comte, to François Guizot, and to the ideas about social scientific laws that they were engaged in constructing. In Mill’s case, the ideas he was constructing were, arguably, a response to Tocqueville’s work, which he praised in reviews and in his correspondence with Tocqueville as a friend and ally (see Suh 2016). One of Mill’s constructions fits Boudon’s interpretation of dependent casual laws very closely, indeed more closely than anything in Tocqueville’s own self-explanations.

But Boudon's strategy is limited in another way that will concern me. The particular classical figures Boudon identifies Tocquevillian arguments with, Weber and Durkheim, share a common feature, one that becomes obvious when they are compared to such contemporaries as Franklin Giddings, William Sumner, Gabriel Tarde in France, and his admirers in American social psychology in the US, such as Charles Ellwood and Edward A. Ross. These contemporaries were focused on ideas like "consciousness of kind", mores, interaction and interstimulation, sympathy and empathy, and imitation, or, to put it more broadly, with what Ellwood called the psychological foundations of society. They trafficked in notions like instinct, had a concern with evolution and the relation of social life to its evolutionary biological origins, and to issues that would now fall under the category of cognitive science. Like Mill, and indeed arguably like Tocqueville himself, they believed that there were basic psychological laws that were the ultimate determinants of sociological phenomena, modified in their effects by local circumstances. In a sense, Boudon agrees with this. But his view of these psychological laws is different. For him, the relevant laws are those of folk psychology and rational choice, together, as we will see, with "understanding".

This is a large gap, and it raises a question about Tocqueville himself: can he be assimilated to Boudon's psychology? Edling and Hedstrom, in their article on Boudon, "Tocqueville and Analytical Sociology" (2009), defend the forgetting of earlier thinkers. Leaving out these older figures and their concerns makes a certain kind of sense. They have dropped out of the current discourse in sociology. They did not survive the period, dominated by Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, which pointedly ignored them until they were themselves superseded by rational-choice; a process in which Boudon played a great role (Turner 1993). The problem situation of these older figures was different as well. They were all, in some respect, concerned with the problem of Darwinism as it was reduced to the slogan "survival of the fittest," and were attempting to identify the pro-social psychological forces that explained or underlay social life. The flaw in their use of these concepts was that they tried to do too much with them. This led to reductive accounts of society, and many similar attempts at reduction, including rational choice. In any case, they were effaced within sociology as it professionalized into national traditions, especially when "social psychology" turned into the study of attitudes and the quantitative rejection of null hypotheses as the standard of proof (Danziger 1990; Greenwood 2003). But they were also omitted from the line of succession cited by Boudon, which included and stressed Weber and Durkheim. They were omitted in Weber because of his self-imposed limitation of sociology to subjectively meaningful action; in Durkheim because of the Renouvier-derived concept of the idea

of autonomous laws of sociology, and of the collective consciousness and the implied dualistic psychology that replaced it.

But there is more to the story, both with respect to Tocqueville and Boudon, and it is a sufficiently confusing and consequential one to try to untangle. Boudon ridicules “depth psychology” in the form of “mimetic desire” to explain conformism, one of Tocqueville’s important explananda in his discussion of democracy (2006, p. 86-7). In the case of conformism, Boudon’s response is to reduce the issue to his own terms, with the comment that “Benthamite utilitarianism is sufficient” (2006, p. 87). But for many other things, and perhaps conformism itself, Benthamite utilitarianism is not sufficient. Tocqueville himself spends a great deal of time on “natural propensities of the human mind” (2006 [1835], p. 447), instinct, and unconscious effects. These concerns do reappear in Boudon, but indirectly, in the form of conditions of understanding. He comments that

Tocqueville, Weber and Durkheim did not lose their way by concocting theories that deny the existence of human nature and which make man the integral product of his environment, such as those of the Marxists and culturalists. If the idea that the human being is entirely conditioned by his environment is taken literally, how would it be possible to understand the behaviour of individuals belonging to cultures very different to our own? The very concept of “understanding” supposes that there are cognitive processes and affective mechanisms that transcend “cultures”. (Boudon 2006, p. 102.)

This may seem like an arcane issue, but it can be clearly stated: if we accept that there are “cognitive processes and affective mechanisms” that transcend culture, are we not back in the world of the post-Darwinians looking for the psychological foundations of society? Why is this not a kind of depth psychology? Is this not in conflict with, or at least an alternative to, even an extended version of rational-choice? Can things like mores be accounted for in this model? Or do they operate in terms of the kinds of explanations – mimesis, for example – that Boudon avoids?

These questions point to a tension over cognitive and affective processes that recurs in various forms, both in Boudon’s writings and in his uses of Tocqueville for polemical purposes. It will be my concern in what follows, for “presentist” reasons that are parallel to Boudon’s own to ask: what might, in a future “sociology,” be the role of cognitive processes and affective mechanisms not accounted for by rational choice broadly construed, including “understanding”. Although the concepts of these earlier thinkers dropped from the standard lexicons of sociologists, the phenomena they pointed to did not disappear, and

live on as lacunae in sociological accounts. Some of them have been revived in contemporary cognitive science. Tocqueville was concerned with many of these lacunae, a point to which I will return at the end. But the lacunae haunt Boudon as well. Reconstructions leave something out: part of the job of understanding Boudon as well as Tocqueville is to understand what was left out, how it was left out, and to ask whether it matters, and why.

## BOUDON'S TOCQUEVILLE

286 Boudon shows that the lens he chooses for his reconstruction in order to identify arguments and forms of reasoning in Tocqueville's most "sociological" work is in fact a powerful one, and that at least a few of Tocqueville's arguments can be assimilated to it or interpreted in terms of his idea of rational action. But the basis for identifying methodological commitments in Tocqueville's own writings is thin. For Boudon, Tocqueville's significance as a methodological innovator rests on his having "founded the sociology of ideas, of beliefs and of values" (Boudon 2006, p. 11), and on his rejection of "both those who see only chance in history and those who see only necessity," as well as "those who see history as merely a combination of chance and necessity" (Boudon 2006, p. 8), those who see history as determined by individual will and those who see it as the product of social forces, because they neglect the crucial role of ideas in historical development. A "basic principle," affirmed by Tocqueville,

is that social processes are always a result of the combined effects of chance and necessity. Necessity, to the extent that they are always the result of a basic cause that is part of human nature. Chance, to the extent that the opportunities that allow a group or individual to improve their situation are far from being always due to necessity. (Boudon 2006, p. 101.)

Chance and necessity stand in for a variety of other polarities, around which Boudon organizes his interpretation.

The upshot of these affirmations is negative: they exclude reductive accounts which appeal to culture or laws of history, or to the acts of leaders. But the significance is positive: to implicitly affirm the crucial role of ideas, or rather people with their ideas, in historical development, but in conjunction with social forces, mores or culture, and individual wills. There are two major steps in this reasoning: the first is about individual rational action, the second about the long-term institutional and collective processes that they can be used to explain. As Edling and Hedstrom note in their comment on Boudon (2009), the logical structure here is from individual action to institutions or collective

phenomena produced by individual actions which persist and then influence future individual actions: what came to be known as “Coleman’s boat”. This is then applied to, or found in, Tocqueville’s own reasoning, especially in the example I will discuss below: his accounts of the spread of Christianity and also of the revolutionary ideals of the Enlightenment. The point of these accounts is to explain, in terms of individual action, what the rejected alternatives purport to explain: long-term trends that look like “laws” supervening on individual action and differences in culture of the kind cultural determinisms focus on.

Action is the normal focus of rational choice. The difficulties arise when this form of explanation is extended to belief. Boudon’s own views on cause and the explanation of belief can be found in the entry on belief in the Boudon-Bourricaud Critical Dictionary of Sociology (2015 [1990]). The focus of the entry is to refute or complicate the claims made by Marxism of class determination of belief, and also ideas about culture as a determinant of belief<sup>1</sup>. But much of the entry is engaged with the same issues Boudon later discussed in relation to Tocqueville. The Marxist and culturalist accounts are replaced with the idea that “beliefs must be understood and analyzed as responses to interactive situations” (Boudon 2006, p. 47). This points them to examples where the expected class determination of belief is falsified and the actual causes take the form of adaptations to situations and their meaning to the subject (Boudon 2006, p. 46). The systemic nature of belief is crucial to meaning to the subject. Thus, the adherence of many Jewish intellectuals to communism in France is “less because of the universalism of the Judaic tradition than because ancient practices tended to distance them from the university establishment, which in the main tends to the right” (Boudon 2006, p. 47). But we are warned that it would be excessive to treat beliefs in all cases “as dependent variables”. In the case of the Protestant ethic, for example, “from it comes the idea that beliefs can play the role of independent variables, that is to say, appear as a cause rather than an effect” (Boudon 2006, p. 48).

The reasoning here requires a good deal of unpacking. But there is a key to it that bears on everything else that follows. A form of epistemic voluntarism is part of the argument. “Responses to interactive situations” are not cases

1 The basic thoughts of the sociological tradition, they comment: “can be gathered under several principal titles: the sensitivity of beliefs compared with reality; the more or less systematic character of beliefs; the role and function of beliefs in the determination: 1) of the objectives of individual action and social action; 2) of the most appropriate means for the realization of these objectives; the relation between social structures and beliefs; the role of interests in the determination of beliefs – in other words the full significance of the utilitarian theory of beliefs.” (Boudon and Bourricaud 2015 [1990], p. 42.

of mechanical “determination”. The term “adaptation” is crucial: this is a term covering the whole range of responses to the “interactive situations” in question. Moreover, the responses have meaning to the subject. The meaning, as is suggested by the case of the Jewish intellectuals, can derive from “ancient practices” as well as the immediate interactive situation. Adaptation in this broader sense might be summarized by the notion of “convenient to believe”. What is convenient to believe is the result not merely of one’s interests, one’s immediate objectives, the encompassing social structure, comparison with reality, or the place of the belief in the more or less coherent belief system of the agent, which make some beliefs harder or easier to accept – more or less convenient to believe in the broader sense of convenient in the face of these multiple situational constraints or inconveniences. A simple example of this would be the beliefs involved in the self-justification of actions to others.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish intellectual might well find it to be more convenient, given the interactional situations he is routinely faced with, to adhere to the beliefs underlying communism and to justify himself more readily to his co-religionists and peers than to rebel against them and adhere to the prejudices of the more rightwing establishment, of which he is not a part and with whom he does not interact. This is a paradigm case, and it does have parallels in Tocqueville. But it is also a complex case, which the use of the notion of “ancient practices” shows: assimilating them to the model of rational choice is possible, for example, through such means as showing the rationality of conformism. The idea that we must choose to believe is sometimes called epistemic voluntarism: what someone believes is a matter of acceptance. But the question of the nature of what is being conformed to raises its own questions: are they “ideas” in the sense of epistemic voluntarism, or something that does not conform to the rational choice model of choice of beliefs?

Boudon’s primary concern was not to defend rational choice as a psychological model of belief formation and acceptance. His concerns are rather with the sociological issues: how do the dominant ideas change? But the topic of epistemic voluntarism bears on both. The Victorian temptation was to say that rationalization was the long-term process that produced change. In short, we just got smarter, less superstitious, and so forth (Lecky 1919 [1865]).

Tocqueville’s achievement, for Boudon, was that he brought people back in with their ideas, in an explanatory rather than evaluative way – one of

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2 Sperber and Mercier have made what I think is an important point of distinguishing practices of justification and explanations of action (2011, 2017). I have suggested elsewhere that one can assimilate justification to action explanation by way of the Andy Clark’s concept of predictive processing (2018, pp.62-36, 105, 107-109). But I will not pursue this point here.

which is objective, or for which we can have evidence. The result was a model of explanation that accounts for ideas and also for their social consequences, such as their diffusion and competition with other ideas, causally, rather than through dependence on an ideological account of the truth of the beliefs. How did Tocqueville manage this? As Boudon suggests,

...Tocqueville explains beliefs, changes in beliefs, the rhythm of the process of diffusion of beliefs, and the outcome of the conflict between competing religious belief systems, by the action of causes. These can be identified on the basis of evidence, and they reside in the motivations experienced by individuals situated in a given context that encourage them to embrace one or other of the belief systems available in the market. (Boudon 2006, 18; emphasis added).

For Boudon, this was Tocqueville's problem and also his achievement. But it also reveals a deeper problem.

The "quest for objectivity" and the idea that the causal effects of ideas "can be identified on the basis of evidence" are difficult to put into practice. Like Weber, Boudon says, "Tocqueville wants to see the new science seek an objective route into the subjective" (Boudon 2006, p. 13). The last phrase is central to what follows. The reality that is sought is the subjectivity of the other, his beliefs, or the values that consciously motivate him: this is the force of "motivations experienced by the individual." "Experienced by" with respect to motivations implies consciousness, which in turn implies the person who is being explained and understood has subjective access to these beliefs: they are the kinds of beliefs he or she would affirm explicitly. So what is the objective route into the subjective? As we will see, this depends on a related question, which is more basic and even more problematic: how does "the objective" causally influence or produce "the subjective"? For Boudon, this necessarily becomes a question about the rational basis of belief. But it is important to see why this is the case. It depends on assimilating belief explanation to action explanation.

The causes of actions for Boudon are "motivations" understood as beliefs and values: "motivations," understood as a combination of beliefs and values, conforms to the "belief-desire" model of action explanation, in which beliefs and desires taken together are causes (Bittner 2001; Davidson 1963; Turner 2017). "Experienced by individuals situated in a given context" is an important qualification, as is "available in the market". But the result is familiar from the problem of historical explanation generally. It is one of reconstructing the situation, the beliefs and values that directly cause actions. The problems begin with beliefs and values themselves. It is one thing to attribute them and treat

them as parts of the causes of action. It is another to account for them, and also changes in beliefs, within the framework of the belief-desire model. Boudon's use of the term "people's ideas" is telling: the aim is "to understand why individuals accept or reject them". To say that is to say the acquisition of a belief is being treated as an action, within the explanatory framework of situated rational choice. To believe is to choose to believe something. The translation to "values" enables this: what were understood as involuntary tacit acquisitions of customs and mores, such as "ancient practices," is assimilated to the model of value-choice in the face of the utilitarian need to conform – adaptation or what is convenient to believe, and thus cases of epistemic voluntarism. But because we are changing terms, this is a rational reconstruction into our language: Caesar didn't have "values," in his own subjective terms, but we use these terms to reconstruct his subjective situation.

290 There is no place in Tocqueville that he affirms this "everyday" or "ordinary" psychology model of explanation of belief: it is Boudon's own reconstruction. But he explicitly attributes it to Tocqueville's explanatory practice:

The next question will thus be to determine the type of psychology that is appropriate. Ordinary psychology or depth psychology? Here again the analysis of Tocqueville's work brings a clear response; all that is needed is ordinary psychology, the same that we use in everyday life. It is the only one that can legitimately deliver both conviction and consensus. Following the work of the American sociologist Robert Nisbet (1966), this approach has sometimes been described as "rational" psychology. But it is preferable to speak of "ordinary" psychology, since the causes of behaviour reside not only in reasons but also in motivations. (Boudon 2006, p. 109.)

For Boudon this meant that motivations could be understood largely in terms of utilitarianism. As he says of Tocqueville, "He paid a glowing tribute to the utilitarian tradition. It is 'of all the philosophical theories, the most appropriate to men of our time' and 'it contains a large number of truths that are so evident that all it takes is to enlighten men as to their existence for them to see them' (DAII, p. 173)" (Boudon 2006, p. 129). But Boudon also identifies a tension: "At the same time he knew that 'beyond his material concerns, man still has ideas and feelings' (DAII, p. 173) and that it is essential to take account of this important fact if we want to explain social phenomena in a satisfactory manner". And for Boudon this implied that "[Tocqueville] appreciated why it was so important not to replace the model of homo oeconomicus with a model in which man is conceived to be fundamentally irrational, as if he was

driven by cultural, social, psychological or biological forces”. Tocqueville was in the middle:

In advance of his time, he refused, as did the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (1977), to make man into “a rational idiot”. But he also rejected the idea of making him into an “irrational idiot” subjected to forces over which he has no control (Boudon 2006, p. 129).

As we will see, Tocqueville used language that is difficult to interpret in these terms. But the reconstruction enables Boudon to give an account of collective phenomena. As he puts it in a discussion of Root (1994), these considerations allow for an explanation of national differences in patterns of protest:

Like Tocqueville, Root sees collective phenomena as the out-comes of understandable and individual motivations and reasons. The average Londoner readily admits that a member of parliament elected in the provinces is hardly likely to be impressed by his protest, while the average Parisian knows that, even today, demonstrating in the rue de Varenne or the rue de Grenelle, outside the offices of the Prime Minister or the Minister for National Education, may well be effective. The Parisian and the Londoner have the same psychological make-up, but their behaviour takes account of the institutional factors characterising their two different contexts. (Boudon 2006, p. 38.)

The difference, in short, is not a matter of “cultural determinism”, or cultural difference, or even of the psychological makeup that results from different social experiences – the Parisian and Londoner have the same psychological make-up – but a result of more or less utilitarian ordinary rational selection in different contexts that produces consequences at the level of collective phenomena.

The existence of a variety of opinions or ideas allows for a “market” of choices, and therefore a market-like mechanism of selection, with collective results. The fact that people conform to the selections of others, to the dominant opinion, as an adaptive mechanism, together with market selection, produces a climate of opinion. But the “choice” model also allows for intellectual novelty and invention, and for ideas in this way to be explanatory:

The irrefutable existence of this mechanism of rational selection of ideas contains within itself, let us recall, a refutation of all “culturalism”. It is accepted that certain values derive from adaptive mechanisms and may in consequence

be different from one culture to another. But it may not be affirmed that values can be introduced only through the operation of adaptive processes. (Boudon 2006, p. 70-71.)

“Introduced” is the key term here. For most people, the mechanism is adaptation to the values that were already present to be conformed to. But some people invent the value ideas that others use to adapt to new situations.

## SUBJECTIVIZATION AS A PROBLEM

Boudon gives the example of the spread of Christianity in Rome and the subsequent spread of rationalism out of Christianity after Luther as models of this kind of explanation. He comments that Tocqueville argues that

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the Roman Empire was a favourable terrain for the expansion of Christianity. Why? Because a single God is a symbolically appropriate representation of the Emperor, but also because the status of the subject recalls the image of a central authority, whilst the obligation that all have to be subject to the Emperor evokes the submission to God. (Boudon 2006, p. 14)

This is also an explanation that requires some unpacking. Boudon calls it a “theory,” and comments that “This theory can be compared with that of Weber, who was also concerned with why Christianity so easily entered the Roman Empire” (Boudon 2006, p. 14). As Boudon reconstructs him,

Weber put forward the idea that monotheistic cults, initially that of Mithra and then Christianity, were attractive in particular to the functionaries and soldiers because they reminded them in a symbolic manner of the organisation of the Roman Empire. As soon as Eastern monotheistic cults appeared in the religious ideas market, Roman soldiers and functionaries were easily converted. (Boudon 2006, p. 15)

Christianity was a winner in a newly created marketplace of ideas, with buyers, so to speak, in a novel condition, which made a particular idea attractive to them because it “reminded” them – an “ordinary” cognitive mechanism – in a “symbolic manner” – perhaps a bit more mysterious mechanism – of an organizational fact, which led them to being “easily converted” – also a somewhat less ordinary cognitive process. Tocqueville does not say this, but only that there is a certain similarity in ideas of a single God, which is a

symbolically appropriate representation of the Emperor, that recalls the image of a central authority, and because the political notion of submission “evokes” the theological one (Boudon 2006, p. 14).

For Boudon, what is of interest here is the social conditions, not the psychology, but the psychology has an important effect: the mixture of peoples in Rome and their subservience to a single God-like Emperor unified them in a universalistic way. He takes from Tocqueville that “the ‘social state’ of the Roman Empire had introduced a certain degree of equality, according to Tocqueville, in the form of the equality of all under the Tutelage of the Emperor” (Boudon 2006, p. 16). This equality was, in a sense, external: it was a legal status.

What kind of explanation is this? Epistemic voluntarism is at the core: it is a choice. The social situation of the agents, in this case, the functionaries and soldiers, was that they were alike in being subjects to a central authority: the epistemic situation was that there was a marketplace of ideas with a particular set of intellectual goods. But “social state”, in this case, actual Tocquevillian terminology,<sup>3</sup> implies something more, perhaps involving a subjective condition in response to an actual state of affairs. This turns out to be an important difference.

The mere fact of subservience to the single emperor and mixing of peoples are external or objective “causes”, to the extent that we can speak of “cause” in an unproblematic way in relation to the “causes” of beliefs and values.<sup>4</sup> But these facts are external: the idea itself is abstract, and also external to the individual, but becomes subjective. How does it become subjective? How is the problem of the relation of objective to subjective content solved? This is a problem Boudon flags for us with his comment that “Tocqueville wants to see the new science seek an objective route into the subjective. It is still doubted, even today, that this is possible” (Boudon 2006, p. 13). The term “evokes” (2006, p. 14) is at least a start on this problem: what is evoked is a subjective response. And we get similar language in other contexts. Declarations of the rights of man

spread so readily because they made abstractions of any particular national or cultural context. Such declarations were comparable to religious texts to the

3 Though probably taken from François Guizot (Guizot 1972, p. 153; see Richter 2004).

4 Obviously this is not Tocqueville’s or Boudon’s problem alone. Elster’s article on Tocqueville’s account of the coming of the French revolution captures the issue in its title: “Preconditions, Precipitants, and Triggers” (2006). Each of these terms is “causal,” and the preconditions included the “values and beliefs” of the Enlightenment, which are part of the subjective. But to explain the subjective, to be “the sociology of ideas, of beliefs and of values” that Boudon claims Tocqueville founded, needs to be something else.

extent that they expressed general ideas on the rights and duties of men towards each other that were considered to be applicable to any particular context. “The French Revolution worked in the same way as the religious revolutions (...) it considered the citizen in an abstract way, outside of any particular society, in the same way as the religions considered man in general” (Tocqueville 2004, p. 62). As a result the religion of the rights of man spread through the same mechanisms as the great traditional religions (Boudon 2006, p. 17-18).

“Were considered” is the term that points to subjectivization. And it is one that can be, like evoked, supported by evidence: we can show what people said when they considered the term applicable to any context. The fact of abstraction facilitated general acceptance. Later, he notes the role of criticism, especially exemplified by Luther, which led to its extension from one previously uncriticized sphere to another, and of the equality of men. These were also subjectivized by virtue of being “considered,” which is something for which we have evidence. Similarly, we have something like the force of ideas, which “encourages”

... the causes of Christianity’s success are also those of its decline. It insisted on the equality of men, but equality encouraged criticism. By encouraging criticism, equality also encourages disbelief (Tocqueville 2004, p. 178). Earlier than others, and in particular before Durkheim and Weber, Tocqueville had realised that Christianity was the religion of the end of religion. (Boudon 2006, p. 19)

This gets us a causal sequence, or at least a genealogy, from Christianity to equality, to criticism, to disbelief. It is more or less an exemplary explanation of a collective phenomenon. And it has the elements of Coleman’s boat. But we can ask some basic questions about it, including two crucial ones. Is this a good model for explaining these cases? And was it Tocqueville’s explanation? The last question, as it happens, provides a path to answering the first.

## CONDITIONAL LAWS, ORDINARY PSYCHOLOGY

Boudon’s general methodological commitments with respect to explanatory form are clear. He attributes them to Tocqueville, whom he places in a familiar line of intellectual successors.

In their writings on the methodology of the social sciences, Weber (1922), Popper (1986 [1957]), and Hayek (1953) have, each in his own terms, developed the idea that one of the essential objectives of the social sciences

is to establish conditional laws, and have made clear that a law of this sort is only plausible from the point at which it can be considered to be the fruit of understandable psychological motivations and reasons on the part of the individuals concerned. (Boudon 2006, p. 39.)

This is a model explanatory form. And it is also the one Boudon wishes to reconstruct Tocqueville in terms of. There are two distinct parts of it: the idea of conditional laws and the model of action explanation. And there is a vague corollary, to the effect that understanding is linked to non-material features of human nature. The idea that equal conditions lead to the acceptance of general ideas, exemplified by Christianity in Rome and the rights of man in Europe, is a model conditional law. So we may suppose that it gives us a clue to the problem of relating the objective to the subjective.

The idea of conditional laws is more puzzling than it appears, though less puzzling in principle than in relation to Tocqueville's own practice, which plays with the idea in subtle ways. As noted, the core idea is found in Mill, and indeed represents its own historical puzzle, because while this discussion, in the context of the inverse deductive method, is most clearly applicable to Tocqueville's practice, Mill ascribes the method to Comte (Jones 1999; Suh 2016):

If, therefore, the series of the effects themselves did not, when examined as a whole, manifest any regularity, we should in vain attempt to construct a general science of society. We must in that case have contented ourselves with that subordinate order of sociological speculation formerly noticed, namely, with endeavouring to ascertain what would be the effect of the introduction of any new cause, in a state of society supposed to be fixed; a knowledge sufficient for the more common exigencies of daily political practice, but liable to fail in all cases in which the progressive movement of society is one of the influencing elements; and therefore more precarious in proportion as the case is more important. (Mill 1982 Book VI ch. 10, §4.)

One important point needs to be made about this. Tocqueville's literary practice was to play with paradox: to identify what might be expected and to then show the surprising alterations or combinations that were actually produced. One can think of his analyses as identifying a condition of a law, and showing why, because of this condition, the law does not hold in particular cases or in particular respects. Tocqueville does not use this (Comtean and Millian) language, though he does speak of causes.

There is a sense in which a general law that is not “conditional” simply needs to be taken as given: there is nothing additional to be said. As Mill says, explanation is the substitution of one mystery for another. But conditional laws imply conditions, or at least claims about the absence of nullifying conditions, for the application of the general law, as well as conditions for the exceptions to it, which are not mysteries. The law-like statement in Tocqueville is one we have already seen noted by Boudon (2006, 19): “By encouraging criticism, equality also encourages disbelief” (Tocqueville 2004, p. 178). The case of Democracy in America turns out to be one where the law does not simply apply. America is not simply an application of a general law, but an exception to the very process the law describes: it does not lead to religious skepticism, but the opposite.

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The idea that there was a natural succession toward first universalized beliefs, then skepticism from dogmatic local religious attachments, such as those of the people absorbed into the Roman Empire or Europeans in the progression from the Reformation to the Enlightenment, is an example of a conditional law. It was not a general law or universal truth. It was contradicted by the fact of American religiosity and religious diversity. The intervening cause was a local historical one: “It was religion that gave birth to the English colonies in America. One must never forget that. In the United States religion is mingled with all the national customs and all those feelings which the fatherland evokes. For that reason it has peculiar power” (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 432). But the power had another explanation, which is relevant to the problem of belief acceptance:

In this way Christianity has kept a strong hold over the minds of Americans, and – this is the point I wish to emphasize – its power is not just that of a philosophy which has been examined and accepted, but that of a religion believed in without discussion.

And further,

In the United States there are an infinite variety of ceaselessly changing Christian sects. But Christianity itself is an established and irresistible fact which no one seeks to attack or to defend.

And this had derivative effect on American morals.

Since the Americans have accepted the main dogmas of the Christian religion without examination, they are bound to receive in like manner a great number of moral truths derived therefrom and attached thereto. This puts strict limits on the field of action left open to individual analysis and keeps out of this field

many of the most important subjects about which men can have opinions.  
(Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 432; emphasis added)

Two things are notable about these comments: the dogmas and the moral truths that follow from them are not a product of examination or discussion, nor are they open to analysis, and perhaps more importantly, they are not even a subject on which men can have opinions. It is questionable whether there is anything like an act of acceptance of the kind epistemic voluntarism envisages, or in the sense envisioned by the model of rational action. These dogmas are not a matter of choice. The adherence to Christianity was not a case of epistemic voluntarism, much less a choice in a market. It is dogma without authority or speculation, which is to say, without conscious adoption, conversion, or decision.

Tocqueville's thought here is a complex one. On the one hand, Americans have a philosophy, which amounts to an epistemology.

... it is noticeable that the people of the United States almost all have a uniform method and rules for the conduct of intellectual inquiries. So, though they have not taken the trouble to define the rules, they have a philosophical method shared by all. ...to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them and looking through forms to the basis of things—such are the principal characteristics of what I would call the American philosophical method. The Americans never read Descartes' works because their state of society distracts them from speculative inquiries, and they follow his precepts because this same state of society naturally leads them to adopt them. (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 429)

The point about this “philosophy” was that, although it was sometimes articulated, it was not an abstract or even explicit doctrine. It was fundamentally tacit: no one has taken the trouble to define the rules. These were precepts that were followed, shared by all, but not articulated as a doctrine. If it were, and propounded authoritatively, or arrived at by “speculative inquiries”, it would contradict the basic feature of the “philosophy,” that individuals “seek by themselves and in themselves the only reason for things”. This is what makes them naturally, meaning unreflectively, Cartesians.

Paradoxically, however, this kind of self-reliance makes them slaves to opinion. Social opinion and common patterns of behavior had a special role in this society.

Not only is public opinion the only guide left to aid private judgment, but its power is infinitely greater in democracies than elsewhere. In times of equality men, being so like each other, have no confidence in others, but this same likeness leads them to place almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public. (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 435)

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Adaptation to this community and conformity were important, and as Tocqueville saw it, somewhat frightening – the rise of mass society was the theme of J.-P. Mayer’s early interpretation of Tocqueville’s work (Mayer 1939, 1940). But what was also striking to Tocqueville was the absence of this kind of pressure in the aristocratic society of France, in which the aristocrats simply ignored the opinions, and even the humanity, of others. In that context, the kind of social learning that characterized the American setting didn’t exist: universalism as a philosophy was simply an abstract idea, not a tacit understanding of the world rooted in daily experience. The “state of society” is in this sense not a determinant in the sense of Marx or culturalism, but a social learning environment that “naturally leads” to the kind of non-explicit “philosophy” in which individuals are self-reliant. This is an explanation in terms of a social state, but the relevance of the social state is in terms of experiences and learning from them.

If we make another distinction, we might account for this anomalous result. But how did Americans get that way? Boudon cites a “law” that might be taken to explain it:

Another Law. Human nature is singular, but the psychology of the human being varies with social context. In particular, equality changes its sensitivity. In their most illustrious period, the Romans cut the throats of enemy generals after they had been dragged in triumphant procession behind a chariot, and fed their prisoners to wild animals for the amusement of the people. Cicero, who greatly bemoaned the idea of a citizen being crucified, had nothing to say about such atrocious abuses of victory. It is clear that to his eyes a foreigner was not at all the same sort of human being as a Roman (DAII, 542). (Boudon 2006, p. 48; italics in original.)

And there is an application of this law to France:

Very much the same was still true of the eighteenth-century France where Madame de Sévigné could write to her daughter that “hanging seemed (to her) such a refreshment”, because in her time, as Tocqueville points out, “it was not clearly understood what suffering was if the person was not a gentleman” (DAII, 541).

“Democratic” societies are by contrast differentiated by the fact that “the severity of people is softened” (DAII, 541). For example, “when the ranks are more or less equal, all men think and feel in much the same way, and anyone can at any moment imagine what the all the others would feel [...] There is no woe whose pain could not be appreciated” (DAII, 541) (Boudon 2006, p. 48-49).

When Boudon uses the term “psychology” here and claims it varies with social context, he is consistent with Tocqueville, to be sure. This was the basic problem that the second volume of *Democracy in America* was devoted to: the psychological effects of democracy. Whether this account can be re-interpreted in terms of “ordinary psychology” is an open question, but even Boudon does not try to do so. Instead, he relies on the more elastic notion of understanding: we can “understand” why the severity of the people is softened, even if we cannot explain it.

It may be noted that in the *Ancien Régime* (1955 [1856]) Tocqueville noted the obverse of the softening of this law in France: where inequality, together with mutual isolation, led to not regarding inferiors as fully human, yet sympathizing in the abstract, and the persistence of both attitudes even after the revolution. The explanation for this was that “It was no easy task making fellow citizens” out of people “who had for many centuries lived aloof from, or even hostile to, each other and teaching them to co-operate in the management of their affairs” (Tocqueville 1955 [1856], p. 107).

The peasants’ upbringing and way of living gave him an outlook on the world at large peculiar to himself, incomprehensible to others. And whenever the poor and rich come to have hardly any common interests, common activities, common grievances, the barriers between their respective mentalities become insuperable, they are sealed books to one another, even if they live their lives side by side. (Tocqueville 1955 [1856], p. 135)

And he makes a telling observation:

We are reminded of the conduct of Mme. Duchâtelet, as reported by Voltaire’s secretary: this good lady, it seems, had no scruples about undressing in the presence of her manservants, being unable to convince herself that these lackeys were flesh and blood men! (Tocqueville 1955 [1856], p. 183)

Tocqueville makes other comments about the incommensurability of world views or mentalities – social context dependent psychology, in Boudon’s own terms. Tocqueville notes that “The genuine love of freedom, that lofty

aspiration which (I confess) defies analysis...is something one must feel, and logic has no part in it" (Tocqueville 1955 [1856], p. 169; emphasis in original). And such comments, which are ubiquitous in Tocqueville, point to a number of problems for any interpretation, and specifically for reconciling Boudon's basic methodological premises with his own practice. In what follows, I will focus on one issue: the apparent gap between any version of rational choice or ordinary psychology and the kind of explanation needed to account for radically divergent world views or mores, or what Tocqueville calls "habits of the heart" (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 287).

## HIDDEN FORCES AND CULTURALISM AGAINST RATIONAL CHOICE

300 Is there a genuine explanatory gap between rational choice or ordinary psychology explanations (supplemented perhaps by a rich notion of "understanding") and the facts of cultural difference? Or does Boudon have a way, consistent with his methodological commitments, of eliminating this apparent gap? And if not, does Tocqueville at least point to an alternative solution to the apparent gap? These questions take us deep into the wilds of methodology, but they are unanswerable otherwise.

Boudon's comments on culturalism and its Marxist-influenced variants, presumably of the Bourdieu variety, are explicit, and negative:

God knows well enough that the contemporary human sciences readily assign the processes they want to explain to hidden forces, under the persistent influence of Marx or Freud, and also of a variety of intellectual movements, such as culturalism, structuralism or sociobiology (Boudon 2004, 2005). By making human behaviour the result of causes operating without the knowledge of the subject, all of these movements turn their backs on the notion that human behaviour should be considered "in principle" to be understandable in the Weberian sense. (Boudon 2006, p. 42.)

This is a more radical "principle" than it appears. It is not Weber's, who considered human action – not behavior – to be his sole topic, and took the criteria for being action, that it was subjectively meaningful, to be less than an explanation even of action (Turner and Factor 1994, p. 29-44; Weber 2019 [1922], 81, 93-94). For him, the subjective meaning was a veneer over a more complex set of causes, some of which were unknown or even not "understandable" to the agent in the sense of being subjectively meaningful to him. Subjectively meaningful action, as distinct from behavior, which might be instinctual, purely emotional, or habitual, happened to be the thing that the

sociologist was concerned with, not the whole explanation of behavior or even of “action.” Boudon goes much farther: “According to this principle it is the reasons and motivations of the subject, as far as the sociologist can reconstruct them, that should be considered as the sole causes of his behaviour” (Boudon 2006, p. 42)

Weber would have rejected “sole causes”. This “principle” is a radical methodological claim. Is it Tocqueville’s? Boudon wishes to claim it is: “It is because he believes in a methodology that sees the understanding of human behaviour as an essential element of any form of analysis, that Tocqueville so vehemently rejects the mechanical theories of philosophers of history, of historians and of the social theorists of his time” (Boudon 2006, p. 41)

On the basis of his critique of hidden causes and generalisations, Tocqueville adopts a methodology centered on the idea that the beliefs and behaviour of individuals are driven by understandable reasons and motivations rather than social, cultural, psychological or biological forces. This methodology allowed him to put forward an impressive number of conditional laws in the second *Démocratie* and *L’Ancien Régime*, that still appear even today to be solid and convincing. It is readily noted that Tocqueville is greatly concerned to ensure the credibility of these laws by showing how they follow on from “understandable” motivations and reasons on the part of individuals in respect of their own environment – in the wider sense of that term. (Boudon 2006, p. 44.)

But Boudon’s own précis of Tocqueville’s methodology is less radical than the “principle” and is stated as a negative: “By refusing to give weight to the intentions, reasons and motivations of the human being, the intellectual movements I have just referred to are examples of the theories that Tocqueville so detested because they ‘exclude [...] men from the history of mankind’” (Boudon 2006, p. 42). This is a different claim than the rejection of hidden forces and the insistence that human behavior should be understandable in the Weberian sense. It merely excludes those doctrines that refuse to “give weight” to conscious motivations.

Boudon is going beyond, at least on the surface, both Tocqueville and Weber: Tocqueville’s position seems to be instrumental and concerned with establishing and not ignoring understandable motivations; Boudon’s with asserting their explanatory sufficiency. He attributes the idea that understandable motivations are sufficient for explanation to an identifiable tradition that not only includes Weber, but can be extended to account for Durkheim’s explanation of the relation of crises to the suicide rate.

The approach recommended by Weber, Popper and Hayek assumes that the analyst can reconstruct the motivations and the reasons that are the causes of the actions, beliefs or attitudes of individuals. The theory of understanding that would later be developed by Weber is based on the assumption that it is in principle possible to reconstruct the reasons and the motivations of any given social actor, whatever his cultural distance from the observer, once care has been taken to collect the necessary data. (Boudon 2006, p. 39.)

He argues that the fact of understandability itself requires us to acknowledge the universality of basic cognitive and affective mechanisms:

If the idea that the human being is entirely conditioned by his environment is taken literally, how would it be possible to understand the behaviour of individuals belonging to cultures very different to our own? The very concept of “understanding” supposes that there are cognitive processes and affective mechanisms that transcend “cultures”. (Boudon 2006, p. 102.)

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And this suggests, though he does not say it directly, that the universal cognitive processes and affective mechanisms in question equate to “ordinary psychology” as supplemented by “understanding.”

The apparent gap between this kind of explanation and the differences in culture that motivate culturalism thus disappears in principle: it is filled by “understanding”. It can also be made, sometimes at least, to disappear in practice. Commenting on Durkheim’s account of suicide, Boudon reinterprets Durkheim’s observation that “In all cases, the greater the intensity of the crisis, the lower the rate of suicide, and as the crisis calms down, the higher the rate of suicide mounts”. Boudon explains this in individualistic terms consistent with ordinary psychology, or at least an ordinary understandable response: it “is because during a period of crisis those most likely to commit suicide have a greater incentive to forget their personal problems for a while” (Boudon 2006, p. 40). To apply Boudon’s methodological strictures fully, one would need to reinterpret all of the apparent culturalist and hidden causes explanations in a similar universalistic way, or dismiss them. And indeed Boudon supplies examples of how this might be done.

But Boudon also qualifies this methodological argument in a way that returns to Tocqueville’s instrumental view

Let us clarify matters. If a theory concerning the reasons and motivations that inspire the behaviour of an individual seems to be incompatible with certain data, it would be advantageous to stay as long as possible within the framework

of the rational, and to attribute the actor's behaviour to reasons and motivations that are readily "understandable". (Boudon 2006, p. 45.)

It is "advantageous" to stay inside the framework as long as possible. But in this passage at least this is only a prudential rule. It can be further explained by our preference for hypotheses that can be assessed for their credibility by an observer.

Although it seems implausible that the wood-chopper should want to burn logs in his hearth, it is possible that he wants to make a wooden object, a piece of furniture for instance. The observer can easily test the credibility of this second hypothesis. It is only when he has assessed all of the "understandable" motivations that the observer might envisage that he could venture an "irrational" interpretation and assume that the wood-chopper has a compulsive need to cut wood. (Boudon 2006, p. 45)

Weber explains the example differently: he finds that credibility is added to an interpretation by considering connected actions, such as taking the wood to a market. Boudon's point is about the preference for non-hidden causes:

In short, irrational explanations of behaviour should be considered as having a residual nature. As they introduce hidden causes and as they are in consequence not testable, they can only begin to be objectively confirmed if we are convinced that all possible "rational" explanations have been exhausted, that is to say all explanations in terms of understandable reasons and motivations. (Boudon 2006, p. 45)

He argues that these are principles "Tocqueville always follows in his analyses. He never uses an irrational interpretation of the behaviour that he examines for the reasons and motivations which lie behind its existence". Boudon claims that "Weber and Durkheim have no hesitation in treating rain dances as rational" (Boudon 2006, p. 45).

The apparent equation of rational and understandable – alien to Weber for whom affective responses were also understandable – goes both ways. It redefines "rational" in terms of what is understandable, and also implies that what is understandable is "rational" in an ordinary or quasi-ordinary sense. Tocqueville thus treats the cruelty that is a characteristic of "aristocratic" societies as rational – as understandable.

## THE TACIT AND SOCIAL LEARNING: THE UNRESOLVED PUZZLE

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The issues here are difficult to explain, much less resolve, for a number of reasons. But we can nevertheless gain clarity about them. The basic problem is one of language. We do not, and in principle cannot, adequately characterize the tacit in terms of the non-tacit, that is to say such explicit things as claims, beliefs, values, dogmas, assumptions, and so forth. To do so is to do violence to the tacit elements themselves, which characteristically are inexpressible: in Michael Polanyi's famous formulation of the concept of tacit knowledge, "we know more than we can say." What is tacit is at least partly inaccessible to us. It is embodied, at a cognitive level (such as pattern recognition) that is beyond our conscious control or involuntary), individual or personal in nature (hence the title of Polanyi's magnum opus *Personal Knowledge* (1962 [1958]), and only partly shareable with others, for example, by those who recognize overlapping patterns (Turner 2023). But we can deploy an impressive but problematic array of analogical terms to describe that which is tacit: mentalities, culture, presuppositions, and so forth, as well as the terms listed earlier, like values, which are employed analogically. But we also have Tocqueville's own term, "habits of the heart" (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 287), and Hume's treatment of causality in terms of habit or custom understood as habit.

The nature of this analogizing is important to understand, especially in relation to the concept of epistemic voluntarism. The overt meaning of value is associated with value-choice, and with an overt action or affirmation. It is voluntary and conscious, rather than tacit. The tacit analogue is neither. It is attributed because it is as if someone were making that choice or affirmation. This is a deeper problem than it appears: in many languages, there is no semantic difference between affirming or being committed to and knowing. This has been a longstanding issue with Bible translators (Needham 1972, p. 33, 36-37). But there is a problem with our own reflections and access to our tacit background. We can "reflect" and express our "assumptions", in accordance with the dictum "state your assumptions", but one can do this only analogically. Euclid could state assumptions. We can only, in effect, theorize about what we are "assuming". And our reflective theorization is itself limited by our language and the scope of comparisons we can make. A later thinker might find us to be unconsciously racist or sexist, but we would not have been cognitively or theoretically equipped to identify our own implicit biases. And even the notion of bias is being used analogically here.

But the confusion of knowing and commitment is telling. The habits of the heart are bound up with language, and acquired with language, but they are not the same. The mother who tells her infatuated teenage daughter "you

don't know what love is" is not making a solely semantic or linguistic point. She is alluding to an experience which is simultaneously embodied, emotional, customary, and irreducibly private or personal, learned with experience and feedback, yet at the same time partly recognizable and "understandable" in others. The word cannot exhaust or adequately portray this thing. And it is this kind of inexpressible habit of the heart that Tocqueville is alluding to when he speaks of freedom as a "lofty aspiration which (I confess) defies analysis...is something one must feel, and logic has no part in it" (Tocqueville 1955 [1856], p. 169; emphasis in original)

Boudon places great emphasis on the fact of symbolic similarities in accounting for the acceptance of beliefs: the similarity between the Christian God and the Roman Emperor, for example. And he notes Tocqueville's own appeal to symbols as "tools of moral teaching that are, if they are not irreplaceable, at least 'practical,' to use the qualification Tocqueville did not hesitate to employ in this respect" (DAII, 527) (Boudon 2006, p. 20). This has the effect of turning what is not understandable into something understandable, because it is overt or explicit. But this conversion to the explicit has the same limitations as reducing the mother's response to the semantics of "love." It does not capture the realm of feeling that goes with the symbols. When Tocqueville speaks of Americans unreflective devotion to Christian dogma and therefore to the "moral truths derived therefrom and attached thereto" (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 432) he is, similarly, not talking about explicit truths or derivations. He is talking about a regime of feeling together with reason, which is irreducible to either, but also tacit rather than explicit or overt, as symbols and their similarities are.

Whether this can be fit into Boudon's capacious category of understanding is an open question. But it is interesting that when he comments on these tacit differences, he appeals to something explicit: not the practical, but images. Boudon contrasts Tocqueville favorably to Guizot, who contrasts the "génie" (genius or spirit) of England and France with the comment that "anyone looking closely at the English genius would be struck by [...] the lack of both general ideas and of a haughty approach to theoretical questions". He commends Tocqueville for recognizing "the existence of these differences but rather than explain them by hidden forces such as 'génie' or 'principle' that Guizot employs, he explains them by the fact that the enduringly aristocratic nature of English society produces different images in the minds of individuals to those of their French counterparts" (Boudon 2006, p. 41). Can "images" do the work of filling the gap?

Boudon tends to reduce that which cannot be assimilated to ordinary psychology and understanding to the irrational and "hidden causes", which he rejects. This is a way of filling the gap. Tocqueville is open to filling the gap

in a different way: not by a theory, like culturalism, or by an account of the tacit. But he does supply something telling and vivid when he describes the social experiences that support the habits of the heart: both the experiences of democratic interaction, which support the “Cartesian” self-reliance of the American, and the separateness of people living side by side but in different class worlds of the aristocratic order. These tell at least part of a story about what we might call social learning: about the experiences that are the basis of the regime of feeling captured by the term “habits of the heart”. Tocqueville typically characterizes this in contrast to the ideas: “If, in the course of this work, I have not succeeded in making the reader feel the importance that I attribute to the practical – in a word, to their mores – in the maintenance of their laws, I have missed the principal goal that I proposed for myself in writing it” (Tocqueville 2006 [1835], p. 295). This realm of the practical does not fit into the category of the irrational. Far from it: the habits formed from practical experience are habits that result from feedback, the success and failure of practical efforts, and the social feedback that accompanies experience. But the diet of experience differs, as does the result. And this points to a kind of explanation of such things as the American dogma and the taste for freedom that is absent from Boudon.

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