This book is not a history of the French Revolution, whose story has been too brilliantly told for me to imagine retelling it. It is a study of that Revolution.

In 1789 the French made the greatest effort ever undertaken by any people to disassociate themselves from their past, and to put an abyss between what they had been and what they wished to become. In pursuit of this aim they took all kinds of precautions to bring nothing old into the new order—they put themselves under strict constraint to make themselves different from their ancestors. They overlooked nothing in their effort to disguise themselves.

I have always believed that they were less successful in their unique enterprise than observers have thought, or than they themselves thought at first. I am convinced that, despite themselves, they retained from the old regime most of the feelings, habits, and even ideas which helped them make the Revolution that destroyed it. Unintentionally, they used the debris of the old regime to construct the framework of their new society. Thus, in order to properly understand the Revolution and its work, one must forget for a moment the France of today and ask questions of a France that no longer exists. That is what I have attempted to do in this book; but it has been a more difficult task than I expected.
The object of this book is to understand why this great revolution, which was simultaneously taking shape all over Europe, broke out in France rather than elsewhere, why it was so natural a product of the society it was going to destroy, and how, finally, the old monarchy could fall so suddenly and so completely. In my mind, this is not the end of the work. My intention is, if I have the time and energy, to follow the Frenchmen of the old regime with whom I have lived so intimately through the upheavals of the Revolution; to see how they were changed and transformed in the course of events, yet never changed their nature, always reappearing with slightly different faces, but always recognizable.

I will begin by examining them during the first stage of ‘89, when equality and liberty shared their devotion; when they wanted to create not only democratic institutions but free ones; when they sought not only to destroy privileges but to honor and recognize rights. It was a time of youth, enthusiasm, pride, a time of generous and sincere emotions, whose memory, despite its mistakes, will always be preserved by humanity, and which, for a long time to come, will trouble the sleep of all those who wish to corrupt or enslave France.

While rapidly following the course of that revolution, I will try to show what events, what errors and miscalculations, made those same French abandon their original course and, forgetting liberty, desire nothing more than to become the equal servants of the master of the world. I will show how a stronger government, much more absolute than that which the Revolution had overthrown, arose and concentrated all power in itself, suppressed all the freedoms so dearly bought, and put vain idols in their
place. I will show how this government called the votes of electors who could neither inform themselves, nor organize, nor choose, "the sovereignty of the people"; how it called the assent of silent and servile assemblies "free taxation." I will show how—while taking away the nation's ability to govern itself, destroying the chief guarantees of law, the freedom to think, speak, and write, that is, the most precious and noble of the conquests of '89—the government continued to adorn itself with the halo of the Revolution.

I will stop at the point where the Revolution seems to me to have just about finished its work and given birth to modern society. I will then consider the new society itself; I will try to figure out in what respects it resembles that which preceded it, and in what it differs, what we have lost in this immense transformation of everything, and what we have gained. I will finish by trying to see into our future.

Part of this second work is sketched out, but it is still not ready for publication. Will I be able to finish it? Who can say? The fate of individuals is still more hidden than that of nations.

I hope I have written the present work without prejudice, but I do not pretend to have written it without passion. It would hardly be possible for a Frenchman to feel nothing when he speaks of his country and ponders his times. I admit that in studying our old society in all its aspects, I have never entirely lost sight of our modern society. I wanted to discover not only what illness killed the patient, but how the patient could have been cured. I have acted like a doctor, dissecting every organ in order to discover the laws which govern the whole of life. My purpose has been to paint a picture both accurate and instructive. Whenever I encountered in our forefathers any of those manly virtues which are most necessary in our times and which have almost disappeared, I have highlighted them: true independence of mind, high ambition, faith in ourselves and in a cause. I have also taken care to cast light on the vices which, having devoured the old society, continue to gnaw at our own, so that in seeing the evil they have done, we can better understand the evil they can still do. To attain this goal, I have not refrained from offending anyone; whether individuals, classes, opinions, or memories, however respectable they may be. I have often done it with regret, but always without remorse. May those whom I have thus displeased pardon me in consideration of my sincere and disinterested purpose.

Some may accuse me of displaying too strong a taste for freedom, which, I am assured, is hardly of concern to anyone in France today. I ask those who reproach me thus to take into account that in my case this habit is very old. It was almost twenty years ago that, speaking of another society, I wrote almost exactly what I am now about to say.

In the midst of the shadows of the future we can already perceive three clear truths. The first is that today humanity is driven by an unknown force which we can hope to moderate, but not to defeat, which sometimes gently urges and sometimes shoves us towards the destruction of aristocracy. Second, of all forms of society, the one where aristocracy does not and cannot exist is just the one which will have the most difficulty escaping absolute government for long. The third truth, finally, is that nowhere does despotism produce such pernicious effects as in just this kind of society; for, more than any other kind of government, despotism favors the development of all the vices to which such societies are especially prone, and thus pushes them in the direction in which they are already inclined to go.

People today, no longer attached to one another by any ties of caste, class, guild, or family, are all too inclined to be preoccupied with their own private interests, too given to looking out for themselves alone and withdrawing into a narrow individualism where all public virtues are smothered. Despotism, rather than struggling against this tendency, makes it irresistible, because it takes away from citizens all common feeling, all common needs, all need for communication, all occasion for common action. It walls them up inside their private lives. They already tend to keep themselves apart from one another: despotism isolates them; it chills their relations; it freezes them.

In these kinds of societies, where nothing is fixed, everyone is constantly tormented by the fear of falling and by the ambition to rise. Money has acquired an astonishing mobility, ceaselessly changing hands, transforming the status of individuals, raising or lowering families, and at the same time becoming the chief means by which to distinguish between people. Thus, there is virtually no one who is not constantly compelled to make desperate efforts to keep it or to make it. The desire to enrich oneself at any price, the preference for business, the love of profit, the search for material pleasure and comfort are therefore the most widespread desires. These desires spread easily among all classes, even among those previously most distant from them, and if nothing stops them they soon succeed in demoralizing and degrading the entire nation. But it is the very essence of despotism to favor and extend them. These debilitating passions help despotism, they occupy men's minds and turn them away from public affairs, while making them tremble at the very idea of a revolution. Despotism alone can furnish these passions with the secrecy and shadow
which make greed feel at home, and let it reap its dishonest profits despite dishonor. Without despotism these passions would have been strong, with it they are all-powerful.

Liberty alone can effectively combat the natural vices of these kinds of societies and prevent them from sliding down the slippery slope where they find themselves. Only freedom can bring citizens out of the isolation in which the very independence of their circumstances has led them to live, can daily force them to mingle, to join together through the need to communicate with one another, persuade each other, and satisfy each other in the conduct of their common affairs. Only freedom can tear people from the worship of Mammon and the petty daily concerns of their personal affairs and teach them to always see and feel the nation above and beside them; only freedom can substitute higher and stronger passions for the love of material well-being, give rise to greater ambitions than the acquisition of a fortune, and create the atmosphere which allows one to see and judge human vices and virtues.

Democratic societies that are not free can be wealthy, refined, even splendid, powerful because of the weight of their homogeneous mass; one can find there private virtues, good family men, honest merchants, and very worthy squires; one will even see some good Christians, for their country is not of this earth and the glory of their religion is to bring them forth amidst the greatest corruption of mores and under the worst governments: the Roman Empire in its greatest decadence was full of good Christians. But what will never exist in such societies are great citizens, and above all a great people, and I am willing to state that the average level of hearts and minds will never cease to decline as long as equality and despotism are combined.

This is what I said and thought twenty years ago. Since then nothing has happened to make me change my mind. I proclaimed my high opinion of liberty when it was in fashion, and one can hardly think badly of me for maintaining it when it is no longer in style. Indeed, in my love of freedom perhaps I differ less from my opponents than they imagine. What person could be naturally base enough to prefer dependence on the caprice of one man, rather than follow laws which he himself has helped to make, if he thought his country had the virtues necessary to make good use of freedom? I don't think such a person exists. Despots themselves don't deny that freedom is a wonderful thing, they only want to limit it to themselves; they argue that everyone else is unworthy of it. We do not differ over whether freedom is worthwhile, but over the higher or lower opinion we have of people. Thus one can state that the preference that one shows for absolute government is in direct proportion to the contempt that one has for one's country. I hope I may wait a while longer before converting to that opinion of France.

Without praising myself, I think I can say that this book is the product of considerable labor. There is one short chapter which alone has cost me more than a year of research. My pages could have overflowed with notes; I have chosen to insert only a few of them at the end of the book with references to the relevant pages in the text. There one will find examples and proofs. I could provide much more upon request if anyone thinks it worthwhile to ask.