

ON CHANGE AND HUMAN NATURE IN ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE'S "THE OLD REGIME AND THE REVOLUTION" – A COMMENTARY

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Abstract: *The current study addresses two issues. Firstly, it tries to identify the causalities and conditionalities illustrated by Tocqueville's analysis of the French Revolution, by comparing the French and English societies. Secondly, it purports to describe the specific forms of subjectivity under the Old Regime, during the French Revolution and in post-revolutionary France, laying the foundations for what sociology would later conceptualize as methodological individualism. Tocqueville tries to capture the logic of social systems during periods of societal production and reproduction by closely looking at the inner world of the social actors, be they individuals or groups, this act of production manifests itself in. Discovering concepts of social psychology and the sociology of emotions within his discourse makes a lecture of Tocqueville's work even more relevant.*

Key words: *empiricism, apriorism, technocracy, despotism, centralization, hate, resentment.*

1. Justifying the choice of topic

Those familiar with Tocqueville's work point out that his discourse is a constant juxtaposition of multiple voices, of multiple idioms. The excellent study of Aurelian Craiutu *Tocqueville's Paradoxical Moderation* [3] is just one instance of the intense academic research addressing Tocqueville's writings, each note or letter signed by the illustrious French thinker being a subject for renewed debate and controversy. Foucault defines this phenomenon as the authorial function, namely "that which transgresses the contradictions arising within a series of writings" [5, p.46].

The author's intention is to approach Tocqueville's work from a sociological perspective and not from the perspective of political theory. This study will therefore focus on the way *The Old Regime and the Revolution* produces new ideas which can be used to outline a theory of social action. It will not endeavor to define the signifier, instead it will attempt, in a deleuzian manner, to see his "writing as a non-signifying machine, the only question being whether it functions, and if it does, how it functions" [4, p.15].

2. References in the analysis of change

Theoretically speaking, social change

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takes on two forms: revolution and reform. Reform attempts to improve parts or segments of the existing social system; revolution envisages the radical transformation of the entire society. Reform is typical for England, revolution is typical for France. The comparative method is used in order to understand two apparently similar societies (England and France), which actually function in different ways and which consequently display social differences with regard to the methods of generating change, implicitly leading to dissimilar results.

The purpose of using this method is not just to understand past actions (*"I have acted much like those doctors, who try to discover the laws of life in every dead organ"* [9, p.15]), but also imagining the scenarios which would have prevented certain outcomes: *"I have not restrained myself to identifying the cause of death; I have also attempted to also discover the means which could have prevented it"*. Tocqueville regrets the consequences of the French Revolution. His bold value judgments represent not only a starting point, but, we dare claim, also a conclusion of his study, which is a demonstration trying to accumulate knowledge until it achieves an almost medical scientificity. It is not by coincidence that Tocqueville regards governance as a medical procedure. His system of explanations encompasses agents of direct causality (which have produced the revolution and which were active in a particular context), as well as factors which have conditioned the revolution through their absence. We are confronted with two modal categories: that of possibility (of having been) and contingency (of not having been). Tocqueville introduces the possibility of hypothetical knowledge, but it must be stated that this deliberation on cause is not based on pure speculation, but on the comparative analysis of the French and English societies.

When Tocqueville looks at the historic position of the French Revolution, he claims that although it was an unexpected event, which took the world by surprise, *"it was only a complement for the most extended of tasks, an abrupt and violent resolution for a process ten generations in the making"* [9, p.41]. There are two sides to this statement. Firstly, the French Revolution is seen as an unexpected outcome of the human behavior preceding it, which confirms Marx' famous saying that *"they don't know it, but they still do it"*, meaning that individuals unintentionally create the circumstances which will later determine their lives from the outside. Secondly, Tocqueville claims that since the French Revolution was totally unanticipated – neither by politicians nor thinkers – the reliability of predictions in social sciences is problematic.

The government's inability to anticipate a rupture of such magnitude can be explained in multiple ways. Both the absence of a precedent, which could have mentally mapped such a possibility, as well as the lack of relevant information, had their toll on the development of the situation. The 18th century is marked by a social fragmentation which results in different *modi operandi* for each significant social group. The government instrumentality being unable to control them, it attempts to assemble them within a dependency towards the existing power structure. By prohibiting free speech, the government conditioned itself to operate using unreliable information, information that could not be verified. We can assume that by exerting strong control over the press, unwanted but potentially useful information never reaches the government. The fear of dissent restricts the flow of public information.

The lack of freedom prevents the individuals from developing the ability to

anticipate and imagine a sudden improvement of their situation. It also prevents those in power from identifying the threats for the future which are generated by the present. We define freedom as the rule of law and consider it its task to protect those lacking power from the excesses of those who possess it; in Tocqueville's words: "*free institutions are as necessary for those preeminent citizens, for whom they signal the dangers they face, as they are for the common man, whose rights they defend.*" [9, p.161] As the French Revolutions associates fear with the act of governance it manages to emphasize the significance of freedom. In a more modern, popperian parlance, it can be claimed that Tocqueville's interests lie more with minimizing suffering rather than maximizing happiness, trying to find a compromise between the possibility of necessary domination and the protection of the rights of the common man. Herein lies the meaning Tocqueville attaches to his own scientific research: offering useful references for finding this point of balance. His breaking down of facts, decisions, mechanisms is directed at the actors of the political field.

The French society of the time is defined by multiple segmentations. There are for instance two different types of public discourse: the administrative discourse and philosophical one. If the English society is characterized by an empiricism which is directly related to social action, in France, apriorism is hegemonic. The reason for this state of affairs will be addressed below. Unlike the English, the French "*are attracted to abstract theories, complete systems of lawmaking and to the perfect symmetry of law*", while displaying "*contempt for facts*", and desiring "*the immediate and total transformation of the entire social structure, according to the principles of a unique plan, instead of addressing the reform of its parts*" [9,

p.165]. We are witnessing the emergence of strong references of philosophical nature, which, by means of their coherence, validate a truth the individual has to adhere to, giving birth to the Man of the French Revolution. This discourse is not *predictive*, it doesn't lead the present into the future; it tends to be *prophetic*, offering an image of the future which has to change the present – apriorism is always linked to a form of Messiah complex.

A specific philosophical *Weltanschauung* is always strictly related to the existing social organization and its *modus operandi*. Both France and England are class societies, but whereas France is marked by centralization, Britain is marked by decentralization. The directing value within French society is equality. The British society instead defines itself by its freedom. The French Revolution emerges from a centralized class society, in which freedom tops neither the public nor the private agenda.

The fact that French thinkers will be drawn to abstract theory is closely linked to the *modus operandi* of the Ancien Régime during a period of modernization defined by an increasing social mobility. Both modernization and social mobility directly affect the balance between the *professional* and the *layman*, as defined by Bourdieu, tipping it toward the former. The emerging technocrats are actually "institutional entrepreneurs"; not only possessing the necessary knowledge for governance, but also for implementation. This knowledge enables them to devise a system of control. The technocrats will make their entry within the political field and obtain a position of monopoly thanks to their knowledge, which represents the condition of their survival, subsequently limiting access to the field and becoming a caste. To achieve this goal, they will not only throttle the flow of information in public space and silence the public

discourse on governance [9, p.85], but also make use of violence in order to repress those trying to get access to a position of power. By creating what Bourdieu terms *political inequality*, they will attempt to block any form of dissent.

Despotism, seen as a monopoly on power, is achieved by means of a technocratic monopoly on knowledge. Despotism nevertheless provides an outlet for discussion: the field of philosophical debate which will soon be occupied by writers and philosophers. They will be granted "*unrestricted freedom to speculate on various general and abstract theories pertaining to religion, philosophy, ethics and even politics*" [9, p.85]. The resulting discourse will favor the universal over the specific, the abstract human nature over factual human behavior.

Tocqueville believes that a practical exercise of governance would have prevented the French from being magnetized by "*the ideas of writers, as they had done, since they would have retained a pragmatic mentality rendering them immune to the temptation of pure theoretical thinking*" [9, p.160]. If they had enacted institutional reform, they would have copied the English in "*gradually altering the spirit of their institutions through practice*". But the 18th century is the century of motion and speed, and the reforms in question were regarded as being time-consuming. "The crisis of the age" will manifest itself most poignantly in the *state of exception*.

Deprived of empirical references, theory will generate a discourse similar to religion, excluding the relevance of context. Similarly, as soon as the Revolution expands beyond France, it will portray itself as independent of the specific character of people, form of government or age [9, p.33]. The fact that it has succeeded outside France can be explained by the

continental ubiquity of the same feudal institutions, based on the same spirit which had by now become timeworn.

Because of these properties and their shared significance, we can also define the French Revolution as a religious revolution: "*the French Revolution took to the real world, the way religion relates to the hereafter. It considers the citizen in an abstract way, completely detached from any particular society, the way religions conceive the human being in a general way, regardless of country and age*" [9, p.33] out of hate and frustration.

But where does all of this hatred originate from? Mechanisms of governance generate animosity between social groups and classes and, conversely, it is precisely this hatred which leads to despotic rule. Despotism hereby produces the demand for its own existence and hence, its own legitimacy.

During the period that precedes the French Revolution, the aristocracy is granted generous privileges and it is relieved of its old duties which included guaranteeing public order, carrying out judicial functions, presiding over public affairs and assisting those in need. This is the price the ruler has to pay for excluding this class from governance. The classical feudal system was based on a slow and inefficient mechanism for collecting taxes which relied heavily on the aristocracy. Because of its high costs, this mechanism would be replaced by a technocratic system which was to leave out the aristocracy while guaranteeing its privileges. Without any administrative duties, the nobility occupies those positions at the royal court which require no specific knowledge or education. They are now relying on the state's resources and are therefore controllable; a satisfying solution for one of the most significant problems any monarchy faces: the need to control the aristocracy. But its new

condition turns aristocracy into a cast, severing its ties to the lower classes which now have no reason to empathize with its condition.

The tax system is profoundly flawed, and it comes as no surprise that its bias is most effectively experienced by the peasantry, whose hatred toward aristocracy conceals its desire for equality. The peasant, now a private landowner, is faced with ever increasing contributions, eventually becoming *“the sole target of every abuse, having lived in isolation, silently feeding on his own prejudice, out of envy and hatred”* [9, p.222]. A reality originating in the political struggle for power of the elites, now generates social conflict. The lack of empathy of the nobility provokes the hatred of the peasantry.

Yet another factor of influence: the government expects the peasant to prosper at any costs. An entire disciplinary mechanism is conceived in order to reach this goal. The peasantry is forced to plant specific crops, to educate, to self-organize. In an already tense situation, the government imposes a program of modernization – a new burden for the peasantry which is expected to move quicker and quicker.

A lack of empathy towards the needs of the lower classes is manifested not only by the aristocracy, but also by the bourgeoisie, which instead of forming an alliance with the peasantry in order to fight inequality *“only sought to create new inequities, which would serve its interests: it was as eager to obtain exemptions as the gentleman who tried to preserve his privileges”* [9, p.18]. Instead of attempting to reform a discriminating tax system, a course of action which would undoubtedly have tempered the latent hostility, the bourgeoisie focused on ruthlessly securing new privileges for itself. The significant differences in life quality between the lower and upper classes, along with the

inequity of the expectations of the state and the lack of empathy between different social groups, all give the measure of this 18th century society, a society of high power distance.

The centralization and modernization of the state apparatus which renders an increasing number of individuals dependent on it generates resentment in its own way. As society changes, ever more social groups and activities are conditioned by the state. As these groups were getting caught up in the mechanism of social production and reproduction, the risk that this mechanism would falter meant a large part of society would be affected and frustration and discontent would only spread. This desiring machine which centers around the government includes renters, merchants, entrepreneurs, all those individuals desiring comfort and well-being and who will consequently amplify the social frustration.

As local liberties are restricted, governance shifts from a position of sovereignty to a position of tutorship, which is perceived as being *“synonymous to insolence”*. In Tocqueville’s own words: *“during the 18th century, local governance had degenerated and turned into a closed oligarchy”* [9, p.38], accompanied by a false democracy which allows for people to express their opinions but not to exert their will.

The philosophers and writers are embittered by their inability to expand their freedom. The French Revolution is an expression of this network of grievances gravitating around the concepts of equality, autonomy and freedom. The revolution, along with the simplified world it imagines, both represent *“the fundamental technical condition of modernity, the alliance between the improvement of life and its simplification out of which the society of consumption would later evolve”* [7, p.47]

All of these factors obviously interact in multiple and subtle ways. The absence of social connections between different groups (classes, businesses or families) is related to the emergence of a subject governed by "*limited individualism*". By craving material gains and immediate welfare, this form of individualism "*stifles every public virtue*". Despotism, as a form of governance, not only produces this type of subjectivity, but also multiplies it, renders it hegemonic. Tocqueville registers a new relationship between authoritarianism and this desire for a welfare that lacks freedom, is unable to transcend material values or place itself in a superior context, that of morality.

The horizontal fragmentation due to the lack of communication-generating contacts and empathy are complemented by a vertical segmentation concerning the governed and the governing. This segmentation is caused by the government attempt to gain full control over its subjects by depriving them of the possibility to create bonds. This situation restricts the government's ability to detect threats and to act accordingly. Its full consequences are experienced during times of crisis and penury. If the government is not heard, "*no one answers its cries for help*". Since the social fabric is fragmented, society cannot coalesce. The social layering lacks solidarity because "*the upper classes only understand the struggles of the people, and especially the peasantry, with the greatest difficulty*" due to radically different lifestyles and worldview. Without common interests which could create bonds, solidarity cannot be expected to develop. Hence, "*the opacity which conceals and separates individuals from one another becomes inscrutable and two persons could live side by side for eternity without ever getting to know each other*" [9, p.152]. The French Revolution aims to instantly remove the

social and political fragmentation and end the political deadlock, introducing the uproar to the political field.

The 18th century bears witness to the *intoxication* of the relationships between social groups and the division of social classes. Both acts are described by Tocqueville as being "*crimes of the monarchy*" since they were intentionally brought about, in order to facilitate governance. Instead of addressing dissent, the government chose to annihilate it. And "*it is a sight to behold when the government, overwhelming and absolute as long as it is not disputed, is dazzled when it is confronted with the slightest form of opposition*" [9, p.128]. Similarly, the lower classes have no other means of reacting to oppression except for violence. Both parties lack the tools which would enable negotiation.

The accumulation of resentment occurs against this backdrop, surprisingly coinciding with a general improvement of life quality. This feeling wasn't just a reaction to the absence of happiness under the existing conditions. It was much more of a retrospective sensation of regret concerning *the happiness that could have been*, the happiness that has been lost. Born out of the materialism of an emerging modernity, this feeling represents an innovation in self-awareness. If improvement was possible now, why didn't it happen earlier? Ironically, the raise in quality of life is coupled with an exponential increase in the individuals' level of expectations and aspirations; the gap between desires and the status quo has widened!

The man of the Ancient Régime is resentful when looking at the past and frustrated while considering his future. In his present he is a prisoner of his condition as a hostage-terrorist. This situation stems from the organization of the tax system. At the time, tax collectors were selected

randomly and the amount of tax to be paid fluctuated depending on the collector's personal judgment. The whole system is conditioned by the collector's "*fears, weakness, flaws*". He is a hostage and a terrorist at the same time, or, as Tocqueville states, quoting a contemporary source, "*the partiality toward his own parents, friends or neighbors, hate, the desire for vengeance, the need to be protected, the fear of being disliked by the wealthy, who are his potential employers, all blur his sense of justice*" [9, p.144].

Among those factors which have favored and kindled the revolutionary spirit through their absence, Tocqueville includes the loss of credibility of the Catholic Church, the skepticism towards religion in general, and the government's own disregard for the law.

While attempting to gain total control, the government issues laws which are impossible to apply in real situations. In order for things to function, it then resorts to the *state of exception* in an attempt to make up for the lost time. The state of exception defines the political (Carl Schmitt), it strengthens bureaucracy but weakens the rule of law, making every law seem transgressible in the public perception. In fact, the law is disregarded even by those who enforce it. Within the rule of law, the state of exception outlines the perimeter for a state of nature. Agamben [1, p.37] claims that if the exception replaces the rule, the difference between rule of law and the state of nature is erased, rendering transgression and compliance indistinguishable, "*in this situation, respecting or breaching the law are one and the same thing*" [1, p.52]. This explains why "*for the subject of the Ancient Régime, the pedestal the law had to occupy within the human spirit is vacant*" [9, p.88]. This is the cause for the revolutionaries' casual take on the legislation of the Ancient Régime, and the

transformation of the state of exception in a form of governance.

There are other factors, which couldn't have been controlled directly, but which affected the nature of the revolution. Among them: the population of Paris. In the 18th century, the state no longer controls the economy and in spite of an obvious attempt to limit the expansion of Paris, this goal could not be achieved.

Erasing difference – by neglecting local culture or by trying to standardize the individual ("*in spite of differences of condition*") – favors the success of the Revolution. The same ideas haunt every spirit. The people have common concepts, notions, a common language. Philosophers and writers gain a monopoly on public opinion ("*the tyranny of hegemonic discourse*") which compensates the inability of society to express resentment through public action. Symbolic and political power have different sources, and neither coincides with the economic power. A cleavage in the judgment of social status is but a natural consequence, which will not be tolerated by a despotic rule based on a monopoly on administrative knowledge.

3. Possible meanings

The Old Regime and the Revolution debunks several aspects of the theory Marx and Engels develop around the same time in works such as *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *The German Ideology* or *Economic and Philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. For Tocqueville, the bourgeoisie is by no means the "*oppressed state under feudal rule*" as Marx and Engels define it. Secondly, they harbor different views on the origins of revolution and whether they occur when a class is under unbearable pressure. The third aspect concerns the Marxist assumption that a period's dominant ideology is the ideology of the ruling class.

All of these ideas, which are cornerstones for the Marxist Weltanschauung, are disputed by Tocqueville's study: at one point during the Middle Ages, the bourgeoisie stopped being a class of the oppressed; a revolution can occur even while the quality of life is improving and it is sparked not only by those in need, but possibly also by those living in comfort and desiring more. Finally, the dominant ideology during the French Revolution belonged to a social group of outsiders, with no position within the power apparatus.

The social realities of the Ancient Régime were analyzed starting from axiomatic philosophical principles rather than from the practice of governance and the managerial knowledge it produces. The success of the revolution validates this approach, and, in the spirit of German "pure philosophy" as Tocqueville calls it, Marx and Engels will further the rupture produced by the French thinkers, denying the importance administrative knowledge. According to their outlook, the philosophers' task is to see society not for what it is but what it has to be (as the writers of the Ancient Régime had done before), since, as Marx' 12 thesis on Feuerbach famously states, "*Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it.*"

Modernization during the 18th century is also coupled with the discovery of autonomous reflection. People have certain expectations from society but also develop the conscience that they can enact change. Public debates criticizing the status quo spawn a state of "mental equality" within society which tries to compensate social inequality; "*abstract theories about the nature of society have become topics of discussion for loafers, even sparking the imagination of women and peasants*" [9, p.158]. This is the birth of what will later be called *ideology* since "*theory turns into*

a material force as soon as it conquers the masses". The individual is publicly obedient and privately outraged. The people are no longer a passive consumer of ideology, as serfdom has stopped existing for a long time. Thanks to ideology, a *community of conviction* comes into being and, as Sloterdijk states, truth is separated from reality and ideological activism is the "*most powerful weapon of the weak*" [8, p.35]

Tocqueville confronts this utopic tendency of French philosophy, according to which "*it was finally possible for the spirit to live in the ideal citadel the writers had built*" [9, p.164], with the modus operandi of English society, where "*those who theorized governance, and those who governed were inseparable: some were putting the new ideas into practice, while the others were adjusting and perfecting theory by resorting to facts*" [9, p.164]. Marx' perspective, neglecting administrative knowledge and favoring philosophical deliberation, will lead to tremendous problems for both communist governments and their subjects.

But Tocqueville also registers the moment when wealth is separated from governance. During the 18th century feudal privilege and social responsibility are being uncoupled, making way for the perception of privilege as being undeserved. If wealth isn't coupled with social responsibility and an authentic concern for the marginalized and poor; if wealth is self-sufficient and isolated, animosity is automatically generated. As Hannah Arendt points out: "*what makes men obey or tolerate real power and, on the other hand, hate people who have wealth without power, is the rational instinct that power has a certain function and is of some general use*" [2, p.17]. The disintegration of the security apparatus and the injustice of the tax system create an atmosphere of rebellion.

The space of public action is restrained since personal freedom is lacking. The violence, frustration and insecurity engender is oriented – it has a target. This creates the belief that the context can be outweighed and that public action is possible. What will happen with the accumulated resentment and unhappiness when the borders of social space are less and less visible; when the elite disregards its responsibilities and freedom is no longer restricted?

Tocqueville exerts a notable influence on some postmodern thinkers, most noticeably Foucault, with whom he shares a common vision on the methodology of historical interpretation. We're talking about the dominant subjectivity under the Ancient Régime, during the French Revolution, and in post-revolutionary France. As Foucault states, "*it would be interesting to attempt to describe how, during the course of history, a specific form of subjectivity evolves; a subjectivity that is neither timeless, nor the reference point wherefrom truth spawns history, but a subjectivity which is a product of history, constantly made and unmade by it*" [6, p.93]

The Ancient Régime creates a subject plagued by resentment and frustration; who is able to be both a terrorist and a hostage in his relationships while also managing "*to protect his inner freedom even during the strongest external dependency*" [9, p.37]. This explains the government's ability to corrupt these persons, rendering them "*revolutionary and obedient at the same time*" [9, p.76], their penchant for administrative functions acting as a possible cause for both revolution and submission. For Tocqueville, although the French peasant is emancipated early on, he is still "*plagued by hardship*", "*able to endure anything as well as make everyone suffer*" [9, p.222]. Such is the personality the

French Revolution addresses and liberates at a time when religion experiences a total lack of credibility. Accordingly, the typical revolutionary will not know what to spare nor where to stop, "*pushing his own audacity to the point of madness*". He cannot be surprised by anything, is neither merciful nor hesitant when "*having to execute a plan*" [9, p.174]. The religious perspective on life is replaced by a philosophy of life as project, where the goal is all-important and justifies all means. Starting with the French Revolution, time itself has become impatient. As individuals apprehend that they can fulfil their desires during their lifespan, they no longer tolerate religious uncertainty and the idea of indefinite procrastination it is associated with. Nothing is postponed any longer, everything that can happen, happens right here and right now, and if previously "*expectations were adjourned into the transcendental*" [9, p.11], as the transcendental fades, the conditions are ideal for secular fanaticism to take over.

The French Revolution transforms the dual personality of the hostage-terrorist into the revolutionary whose audacity disregards morality, who in turn, turns into the obedient subject of post-revolutionary France, accepting power regardless of its legitimacy in order to protect his interests.

Freedom is restricted by the individuals' system dependency, which is either experienced directly, as is the case during the 18th century, or through government policies (*i.e.*, resource distribution) or instruments of governance (*i.e.*, centralization). The government and the individual see each other as antagonizing forces and the dominant ideology is, to paraphrase Weber, *purpose-oriented*. Tocqueville identifies a series of dysfunctions within the process of modernization of prerevolutionary France. Among them: demagoguery, bloated

materialism, egoism, the lack of civic spirit and critically, the emergence of human servitude and the restriction of freedom. Tocqueville discovers that the French Revolution opens the way for a world where moral values are secondary. Hence, the question he raises: can society function without moral capital?

For him, society's democratization is irreversible. But how can freedom still be rescued? Firstly, the distance separating social classes would have to shrink in order to produce empathy and solidarity. Morally, religion would have to be strengthened in order to counter the growing dauntlessness of the decision-makers. Politics would have to be governed by *moderation*, a concept Tocqueville borrows from Montesquieu and which is considered to be fundamental for Tocqueville's *Weltanschauung* by researchers like Aurelian Craiutu. These values would restrict the use of power from the inside, by striking a balance between interests and morality. For Tocqueville, the study of the French Revolution is a reminder of "*what modesty truly signifies*", a lesson future philosophers and politicians should deem worthy of their attention. Through self-restraint and by virtue of a renewed moral and religious conscience as well as moderation, the freedom of the other can expand. Those of us familiar with the philosophy of Hobbes or Locke wouldn't be surprised by such a thesis.

While discussing the function of science, Max Weber states that the subject must realize "*that his every action, or, depending on the circumstances, inaction, represents, with regard to its consequences, an expression of his support for particular values or his opposition to them*"[10, p.14]. This is precisely the purpose and preeminent achievement of Tocqueville's endeavor, an endeavor founded on value judgments which concludes with a judgment of values.

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