

Tocqueville, Alexis de (1805-1859).

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□ Abstract

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) was a French intellectual and politician, who has been variously considered as historian, sociologist, and political theorist. His most well-known work is *Democracy in America* (1835–1840), a classic study not only of democracy in America but of democracy itself. Sociologists have found in this analysis of the early years of the American Republic a seminal source of inspiration for the study of contemporary American society and politics. By the 1970s, the interest of sociologists in Tocqueville’s work began to dwindle. By contrast, in political science Tocqueville’s status as a classic thinker of democracy was never in question. In recent years, however, sociologists have joined political scientists in responding to Tocqueville’s call for a “new political science”. His writings provide sociologists with an enduring source of inspiration for the analysis of social problems such as slavery, revolution, inequality, individualism, materialism, religion and colonialism.

□ Main text

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) was a French intellectual and politician, who has been variously considered as historian, sociologist, and political theorist. His most well-known work is *Democracy in America* (2 vols., 1835–1840), a classic study not only of democracy in America but of democracy itself. Another key work is *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), where he analyses the origins of the French Revolution and discusses how equality and freedom can be reconciled. In these writings, Tocqueville makes use of his extraordinary ability to observe social and political life to inaugurate the methodical study of how individual choice and cultural mores are intertwined with the broad structures of society, politics and the economy. Tocqueville was not only a man of letters, however: he was also a man of action. Indeed, for much of his life, Tocqueville was involved in French politics. In political office, he supported a number of liberal causes (including abolitionism) as well as the French colonization of Algeria. Tocqueville’s canonization as a sociological classic is mainly due to his two-volume *Democracy in America* (2004). Sociologists have found in this analysis of the early years of the American Republic a seminal source of inspiration for the study of contemporary American society and politics. The key sociological contribution of *Democracy* is the observation that America functions under an “equality of conditions”, which impacts all aspects of daily life. In mid-twentieth century America, this was often interpreted as a prescient critical analysis of the challenges of mass democracy. As American society changed in the 1970s and the post-war liberal consensus was increasingly put into question, the interest of sociologists in Tocqueville’s work began to dwindle. By contrast, in political science Tocqueville’s status as a classic thinker of

democracy was never in question. For example, in the early 2000s neo-conservative political philosophers (e.g. Mansfield 2010) have found in *Democracy* a seemingly inexhaustible source of intellectual ammunition against left-wing liberalism. In recent years, however, sociologists have joined political scientists in responding to Tocqueville's call for a "new political science" that would work to resolve the inherent paradoxes of democratic societies. Some have found in *Democracy*'s denunciation of slavery a key precursor of the study of the American Republic from the perspective of race relations (Margree and Bhambra 2011). Others have tried to mine *Democracy* for methodological lessons for current generations of social scientists interested in countering the excesses of methodological holism (Elster 2009). Others still have been exploring anew Tocqueville's original preoccupation with the role of participation in public life either by restricting it to membership (and legitimacy) based on personal interaction (Putnam 2000), or by considering it more broadly as a combination of social participation and shared values (Clark 2014). Tocqueville's writings have provided sociologists with an enduring source of inspiration for the analysis of many crucial social problems – slavery, revolution, inequality, individualism, materialism, religion, colonialism and many others – since the nineteenth century and promise to continue to do so well into the twenty-first century.

See also: Abolitionism; Government, types of; Imperialism; Individualism; Indigenous Peoples; Institution; Methodological Individualism; Mores; Observation, Participant and non-Participant

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