Definition: Tocqueville, Alexis de from Philip's Encyclopedia

French historian. Sent on a fact-finding tour to the USA by the French government, he produced Of Democracy in America (1835), the first in-depth study of the US political system. His later work includes L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution (1856).

Summary Article: Tocqueville, Alexis de from A Glossary of Political Theory

Born into a royalist aristocratic family, his father having narrowly escaped execution from the Jacobins. Tocqueville entered government service in 1827 but found it impossible to support the new Orleanist monarchy established in the July Revolution of 1830.

Between 1831 and 1832 he visited the USA, and his Democracy in America appeared in two parts – in 1835 and 1840. The book won him international acclaim and after the second part appeared, he was elected to the Académie française. In the book he argued that democracy requires religion and individualistic customs, and he was struck by the high levels of local participation in the American polity. Yet it could be argued that the book is really about American liberalism rather than democracy.

In 1835 he visited Ireland, and noted the growing rift between Catholics and Protestants. In 1839 he was elected deputy in Normandy and remained a member of the Chamber until 1848. After the February Revolution of 1848 he was elected to the Constituent Assembly and served on the commission that drew up the republican constitution. He was elected to the new Legislative Assembly in 1849, and for a few months was minister for foreign affairs. He was bitterly opposed to Louis Napoleon's coup d'état, an event that ended Tocqueville's political career.

In 1856 he published his unfinished masterpiece The Ancient Regime in which he characterised the French Revolution as the greatest property transaction in history. He also corresponded with J. S. Mill.

See also: Jacobins, liberalism, democracy, property, Mill

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