



Book Alexis de Tocqueville

Prophet of Democracy in the Age of Revolution - A Biography

Hugh Brogan
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Recommendation

Many experts consider Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* the best book ever written on democracy and on the United States. Published in two series of separate volumes, in 1835 and 1840, Tocqueville’s political classic is filled with an astonishing number of penetrating insights and acute observations on the nature of democracy, the character of Americans and the exceptional nation they were carving out of the wilderness in the 1800s. Many of Tocqueville’s remarkably prescient judgments remain as valid today as they were when he wrote them more than 160 years ago. Hugh Brogan, political scientist and professor, provides an informative account of the life and times of this brilliant French intellectual who expertly captured the essence of America and Americans. Brogan’s heavily annotated, exhaustively referenced book is both exceedingly comprehensive and highly nuanced. Many say that to understand America, you should read Tocqueville’s classic book. *BooksInShort* says that to understand its renowned author, you should read this commanding biography.

Take-Aways

- Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to America in 1831 to study the prison system.
- The trip resulted in his great masterpiece, *Democracy in America*.
- Tocqueville believed that unlimited democracy, though not immediately suitable for France, represented its inevitable future.
- In his wide travels throughout America, Tocqueville saw that democracy truly worked. This ran counter to everything he had experienced in Europe.
- An aristocrat by birth, Tocqueville learned in America that the middle class could successfully govern a modern nation.
- Tocqueville’s trip to America turned him into a radical – that is, a republican.
- Tocqueville greatly admired American federalism.
- Tocqueville explained that he wrote *Democracy in America* to help future democratic nations better govern and direct themselves.
- After the book came out, Tocqueville became a noted political figure in France.
- Ironically, Tocqueville, democracy’s great champion, once wrote that he didn’t like it.

Summary

A Young Nobleman from Normandy

Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville was born in 1805 to a venerable aristocratic family in Normandy. He grew up to be a profound intellectual and the celebrated author of *De la démocratie en Amérique (Democracy in America)*. His forebears were proud members of the long-standing *ancien régime* that ruled

France for hundreds of years up until the French Revolution in the late 1700s. Throughout his life, Alexis de Tocqueville enjoyed the many, though diminished, privileges that noble families retained after the Revolution, and he wrote a famous book entitled *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*.

“I have long wanted to visit North America. I shall go there to see what a great republic is like.” [– *Alexis de Tocqueville*]

Tocqueville was democracy’s prophet, champion and proselytizer. Yet, from his childhood to his death in 1859, he was, from his head to his toes, a nobleman, and always conscious of his and his peers’ aristocratic rights. His family strongly supported the Bourbon kings. In 1793, his great-grandfather, Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes, served as Louis XVI’s counsel before the National Convention. Not only was this renowned philosopher unsuccessful in the King’s defense, but he also soon followed Louis to the guillotine.

“[I wish] our royalists could see the domestic progress of a well-ordered republic...the real and effective liberty which everyone there enjoys.” [– *Tocqueville*]

Tocqueville was related by marriage to the ultra-royalist François-René de Chateaubriand, a noted French politician and writer. After the Empire fell, Chateaubriand followed the Bourbons into exile, though he eventually returned to France. The French Revolution had a profound effect on Tocqueville’s life and thinking. The revolutionary forces temporarily imprisoned many of his relatives, including his father. Unsurprisingly, though he was a proponent of democracy, Tocqueville routinely warned against the “tyranny of the masses.”

The Tocquevilles were “rustic Norman gentry, who spent their time farming or squeezing money out of the peasantry when they were not fighting in the King’s wars.”

As a child, Tocqueville was intelligent, eager, sensitive, respectful and warm-hearted, the type of youngster that charmed adults. Unfortunately, he inherited poor health from his mother, and illness plagued him throughout life until he finally died of tuberculosis at 54. Although he was raised in a devout Catholic family, Tocqueville rejected Christianity. Still, as a deist, he believed in God. Tocqueville possessed an anxious pessimistic personality. He suffered from constant doubt and feelings of loss, exacerbated, no doubt, by the unsettling upheavals that he and his family routinely experienced during and after the Revolution. Tocqueville could be hot-tempered. While he deeply loved his wife Mary (whom he later called Marie), Tocqueville once became enraged at her for dining so slowly, and threw the pie she was eating onto the floor. Nonplussed, Marie calmly asked the maid for another piece.

Life as a Lawyer

Tocqueville studied the law and became an unpaid *juge-auditeur* (magistrate) at the Versailles prefecture. There he worked with lawyer Gustave de Beaumont, who became a lifelong friend and close companion. A great lover of learning, Tocqueville began a course of independent study with Beaumont. While their system of learning was informal, it was extremely rigorous, covering history and other subjects. As the member of a wealthy, aristocratic family, Tocqueville was able to manage easily without his own income, but after two years of diligent work, he hoped to be promoted to a paying position. When the great-nephew of the French minister of finance got the position Tocqueville wanted, he knew he was thoroughly stymied in his legal career. Further, political upheaval in France seriously precluded his future professional prospects. He therefore suggested to his friend Beaumont that they take this time to travel together to America.

Journey to America

Tocqueville proposed that he and his friend travel extensively throughout the *République des Etats-Unis*, turning that fascinating new country into their own special learning laboratory. They would thoroughly study the nation’s new democracy, its system of governance, and the attitudes and mores of its citizens, whom they would extensively interview. This trip turned out to be the great turning point in Tocqueville’s life.

“It is no paradox to say that the greatest event of Tocqueville’s life occurred before he was born: The French Revolution which decisively influenced almost everything that ever happened to him.”

To undertake this long journey, the two men needed to supply some sort of rationale to secure a leave of absence from their jobs at the Versailles prefecture. At the time, prison reform was an important topic in France, so they proposed to study America’s new prisons and issue a fact-finding report upon their return to France. Of course, prison reform was of secondary interest to them, since their ultimate goal was to learn as much as they could about the new American republic. However, the authorities were impressed with the preliminary work Tocqueville and Beaumont did as part of their prison reform study proposal, and granted the necessary leaves of absence. On April 2, 1831, they set sail for America on the ship *Le Havre*.

“Any American, taken at random, will be found to be hot in his desires, enterprising, adventurous...an innovator.” [– *Tocqueville*]

The two elegant young noblemen quickly made valuable contacts on board. They befriended a Miss Edwards, who helped them with their English. They also became close to the Schermerhorn family, wealthy New Yorkers who were returning home after a stay in Europe. On May 9, the *Le Havre* docked at Newport, Rhode Island, and the men boarded a steamship to New York.

Enjoying the Journey

High society toasted Tocqueville and Beaumont everywhere they went. Indeed, the two Frenchmen were nothing less than social sensations. The upper crust Americans they met were greatly taken with the grace, breeding, elegance and intelligence of the two young Frenchmen. Plus, the Americans felt honored that the French government had dispatched two representatives to their country to learn all they could about America’s penal system in order to improve their nation’s approach to this problem.

“These lands which are...nothing but one immense wood will become one of the richest...most powerful countries in the world.” [– *Tocqueville*]

Tocqueville and Beaumont thoroughly studied numerous prisons, including the famous Sing-Sing prison, just north of Manhattan, and the prisons in Philadelphia, where

the Quakers' had instituted world-famous prison reform. Tocqueville and Beaumont's eventual penal system report – *Le Système pénitentiaire aux États-Unis et son application en France* – was well-received in France. But the two young men never lost sight of their primary task: learning all they could about America, its inhabitants and its democratic form of government.

“It is a mark of Beaumont's excellent character that he never seems to have felt jealous of this rising star...[yet] if the characters of the two friends differed, their intellects were profoundly alike.”

During their nine-month stay in America, Tocqueville and Beaumont traveled extensively. Besides New York City, their journey also included stops in Albany, Buffalo, Boston, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Pontiac, Detroit, Nashville, Charleston and New Orleans, among other places. They spent some time briefly in Canada, including the area that is now Quebec.

Tocqueville “despised...the politics of low ambition, vulgar camaraderie and envy.”

Tocqueville and Beaumont constantly wrote letters home to their families, describing their adventures, and offering their observations regarding the U.S. and its citizens. Along with their extensive notes, these letters eventually helped to lend structure to the books that they wrote when they returned to Europe. Tocqueville, of course, wrote *Democracy in America*. Sympathetic to social justice, Beaumont wrote a novel entitled *Marie, ou l'esclavage aux États-Unis*, a social critique about slave life in America.

Democracy in America

Through his extensive travels, as comprehensively detailed in his book, Tocqueville came to learn that democracy truly works in America. He saw democracy as a balance of equality and liberty. He noted that the U.S., with its dedication to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” differed radically from Europe with its aristocratic heritage and onerous caste system. In America, the white male citizens of the nation (but not women, slaves, Indians and indentured servants) were equal. Moneymaking, entrepreneurship, innovation and self-sufficiency were important, and noble titles were not. Private individuals, and separate townships, cities and states could determine and pursue their own primary interests. This contrasted sharply with Europe, where rigid lines tightly drawn across society severely limited freedom of action and opportunity.

“I supposed that the world was full of demonstrated truths...But when I applied myself to considering them, I perceived nothing but inescapable doubts.”
[– *Tocqueville*]

One incontrovertible fact became clear to Tocqueville as he traveled across the America of the early 19th century: The middle classes – the farmers, shopkeepers, artisans, workmen and other “commoners” – could come together in a democratic fashion to govern themselves properly. When he met U.S. President Andrew Jackson, Tocqueville was impressed with the relative simplicity of the White House compared to Europe's gilded palaces. He noted that Jackson, as head of state, apparently had no guards or courtiers. This was in sharp contrast to regal Europe, where a king could not swivel his head without bumping into some fawning member of the royal court. Tocqueville felt that American democracy was a brilliant triumph. Next to the successful American republic, he regarded the French republic as an “unclassifiable monster.”

“He understands how religion can make men live in peace and prepare them to die quietly. So he regrets the faith which he has lost and...fears to snatch it from those who possess it still.”

Tocqueville was a brilliant, lucid writer, which becomes immediately apparent when you read *Democracy in America*. The book is one of a kind. It is filled with good sense, and accurate observations and judgments, many of which are just as valid today as when Tocqueville first penned them during the 19th century. Tocqueville presents important new ideas in elegant prose. His dazzling masterpiece “sweeps you away.”

“Tocqueville's prose, though dazzlingly lucid, was so packed with thought that it resisted superficial readers.”

The first series of volumes, which were received with great success, covers four main areas: an introduction, U.S. political institutions, political society and nondemocratic elements in America. The book repeatedly stresses that the people are sovereign in America. Tocqueville also carefully describes the U.S. court and jury system. Importantly, the book warns against the tyranny of the majority. Plus, it foresees the Civil War that would tear the U.S. apart from 1861-1865.

“I was thought of as a poor eccentric, who, robbed of his career, wrote...to kill time, admittedly a tolerable occupation since at any rate it is better to write a bad book than to go whoring.” [– *Tocqueville*]

Tocqueville hoped his book would convince his French countrymen to give democracy a chance. He understood that they could not all somehow magically transform themselves into Americans; indeed, the proud Frenchman would have shuddered at such an idea. But he firmly believed that the American system of democracy was transferable to other nations, including France. Nevertheless, ever a patrician, Tocqueville believed that the citizens of any democracy – including America – always require guidance, and he assumed that such guidance should always emanate from the privileged, upper class of society – that is, his own social strata. Tocqueville understood and accepted his own aristocratic instincts. Liberty and eternal truths were his primary passions. He thoroughly despised government centralization (which he considered evil), mob rule and what he termed “the threat of democratic despotism.”

Fame and Position

After the publication of *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Tocqueville became a famous man, not only in France and America, but throughout Europe. Intellectuals widely praised his book, including England's John Stuart Mill, with whom Tocqueville developed a close friendship. Mill wrote that the book represented the “beginning of a new era in the scientific study of politics.”

Tocqueville received numerous awards, and was inducted into the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* and the *Académie française*. Further, he was elected time and again to the French parliament. While he was a natural politician, Tocqueville never cared for politics *per se*. Indeed, he detested party politics. In his

later years, he continued writing, and he experienced various political triumphs and pratfalls. This included being briefly imprisoned by Louis Napoleon, who became the emperor of France after a coup in 1852.

Tocqueville's Last Days

Sickly throughout his life, Tocqueville was routinely beset by illnesses of one sort or another, including influenza and severe stomach attacks. Despite his relatively frail constitution and ill health, he was an avid traveler and an amazingly energetic writer. During the creation of one of his books, he described himself as toiling away like a monk in a monastery. His health began to seriously deteriorate in his late forties. He contracted tuberculosis and, surrounded by his wife, family and friends, he died in Cannes at age 53.

About the Author

Hugh Brogan is a research professor of history at the University of Essex in England. He is a former journalist with *The Economist*. Brogan taught extensively at various U.S. universities. His principal field of study is the history of the United States, with an emphasis on politics.
