

Tocqueville in American Sociology

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Abstract

The status of Tocqueville in the history of sociological thought has been widely underestimated among contemporary sociologists, although there are admittedly some important exceptions. This essay aims at rectifying this general misjudgment by demonstrating, in some detail, the centrality of Tocqueville's ideas in recent, mostly postwar, development of certain sociological theories, such as the pluralist theory of liberal democracy, the theory of mass society, and the various attempts at theorization in the area of revolution and collective political violence.

The essay further shows Tocqueville's adeptness in the use of ideal types and in applying the logic of comparison to his historico-sociological analyses. Such methodological achievements of Tocqueville's have become more widely recognized recently and are certainly to be better appreciated in view of the recent revival of comparative historical sociology.

It, finally, points to Tocqueville's contributions to the study of the mores and national character of the Americans and underscores particularly the bearings of his profound insights into the tension between egalitarianism and individualism upon recent discussions of some fundamental issues in American society.

The essay concludes with the conviction — a sad note — that some of us are bound to return, from time to time, to engaging in dialogue with Tocqueville as long as mankind continues to be entangled in the dialectic of freedom and equality.