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TOCQUEVILLE'S AMERICAN WOMAN AND "THE TRUE CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS"

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Thus, then, while they have allowed the social inferiority of woman to continue, they have done everything to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man. In this I think they have wonderfully understood the true conception of democratic progress.

For my part, I have no hesitation in saying that although the American woman hardly leaves her domestic sphere and is in some respects very dependent within it, nowhere does she enjoy a higher station. And now that I come near the end of this book in which I have recorded so many considerable achievements of the Americans, if anyone asks me what I think the chief cause of the singular prosperity and growing power of this people, I should answer that it is due to the superiority of their women.

— Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*¹

Women, although the moral and intellectual equals of men, should remain barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen? To us, the thought is repugnant, not to say wrong-headed.

At first glance there seems no better place to turn to—or run from—than Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* for the classic rationalization of male porcine prejudices against women. Tocqueville admires American women for their self-restraint and submissiveness to men, for their recognition of the necessity of this behavior, and for their opinion of its nobility. These women seem to put society's (or men's?) good before their own. Although Tocqueville applauds them for seeing that their only hope of happiness lies in domesticity, he never says that American women *are* happy. Rather, they tend to be sad and resolute, albeit proud. Yet their pride has limited justification according to Tocqueville's own logic, for he remarks repeatedly on the pusillanimity of the Americans in their preoccupation with mundane familial matters. In

sum, Tocqueville seems hostile to the just demands of women for social, political, and economic equality, and unconcerned with their quest for self-fulfillment. No wonder he erred in believing that American women could remain content with the situation he described.

I shall argue that this impression of Tocqueville's position is not simply incorrect but, rather, incomplete and, therefore, misleading. The problematic recommendation of moral and intellectual equality for women, accompanied by social (and political and economic) inferiority, must be appreciated in context. In context, it implies a devastating critique of American, or modern democratic, life as a whole. The recommendation follows close upon Tocqueville's revelation of the inevitable artificiality of American public life. It immediately precedes his thematic criticisms of democracy for its failure to give due recognition to the natural human inclination to pride and for its consequent dearth of proper outlets for great passion and laudable ambition. Despite America's professed foundation on natural rights, its democracy necessarily depends on conventions that obscure and even contravene nature. Even at its best, democratic justice rests on partial misconceptions both of human nature and of the significance of justice. Given the inauthenticity of American society, women have little or nothing to gain from coming out into it. If women have little to gain from staying at home because of the almost invariable pettiness of domestic concerns, American men away from home rarely take advantage of what few opportunities there are for a kind of worldliness that might bring human fulfillment. Only because they take no part in public life are America's women more likely to embody democracy's finer aspirations. Tocqueville's remark that the status of American women reflects the true conception of democratic progress is deeply and disturbingly ironic.

Tocqueville's Americans hold that women are equal, but different.² They discern natural physical and moral differences in men and women and think that the peculiar faculties of each are best put to different uses. Consequently, they apply the principle of division of labor to "the great work of society." They do not permit women to take part in business or politics; neither do they require them to engage in hard physical labor. Women cannot, but need not, leave their domestic occupations.³

Nor, however, do women reign within the household. To the Americans, democracy means regulation and legitimation of authority, not its destruction. The man, they believe, is the "natural head of the conjugal association." Women do not dispute this determination;

indeed, "they seem to find a sort of glory in the free relinquishment of their will, and they put their greatness in bearing the yoke themselves rather than in escaping from it."

Thus, American men and women have different duties and rights. Precisely what women do besides the dishes and in what their rights consist are not immediately apparent. Nonetheless, each "show[s] an equal regard for the part played by both and think[s] of them as beings of equal worth, though their fates are different." In particular, men are said to have a high regard for women's courage and intelligence. They respect their liberty and think nothing more precious than their honor.

Tocqueville's Americans avoid the errors of his Europeans. They hardly think of women as mere sex objects, as do those Europeans who virtually enslave themselves to erotic desires, while condemning women as weak and incomplete beings. Nor do the Americans, as do other, more progressive Europeans, wish to make men and women not only "equal, but similar." Both attitudes are to be deplored, but the latter is more to be feared because it is more fashionably democratic.

Although appearing to concur in the American principle of "equal, but different," Tocqueville does not explicitly endorse all aspects of it. Nor does he offer all the defenses of it we might expect. He attributes to the Americans a functionalist, economic rationale for their assignment of women's roles. They are at pains to keep women at home and subordinate there primarily because a thriving commercial society requires a stable family life.⁴ Businessmen need to be free to worry about things other than the whims and whereabouts of their help-meets. If domestic harmony is desirable for other reasons, the Americans do not bother to elaborate them. Do they believe the family important in the psychological development or moral education of children? Do they believe that men and women naturally complement one another, as pairs constituting wholes? The Americans are presumably correct that if men and women differ, they should have different functions. But why does Tocqueville not mention, on their behalf, the most obvious and relevant natural difference: namely, that women bear children? He barely suggests that women are less suited for hard physical labor. As for the distribution of authority within the household, why assume that the man is the natural chief? Precisely what is left for woman to do for the family, for society, and for herself? Why is she and she alone suited to do these things, whatever they are, and not to do others? Are the most important differences between men and women perhaps less natural

than the Americans suppose?⁵ Tocqueville leaves us wondering whether, if the Americans are right in treating women differently, they are right for the right reasons.

The context of Tocqueville's thematic discussion of women is "The Influence of Democracy on Mores Properly So-Called."⁶ Mores properly so-called are, according to a suggestion in the first volume of *Democracy*, "habits of the heart."⁷ They are a people's moral principles come to life in their characteristic unreflective comportment with one another and among others. Women figure so importantly in this context because, as Tocqueville contends, "it is woman who shapes . . . mores."⁸

In the discussion Tocqueville barely alludes to and never stresses natural differences between men and women. Rather, the important differences appear to be consequences of their respective situations and educations. American women undergo a proper moral education, appropriate to democracy. In this context nothing is said of men's receiving any education, although elsewhere we learn that they receive as much of an education as democratic politics can provide.⁹ Americans take pains to educate their women in part because their religion recommends it, but especially because their commercial prosperity requires it. What women learn is that reason dictates and courage makes possible moderation of desire and willfulness. This education accomplishes what the Americans intend it to, but also more. Women acquire the self-conscious virtue that brings dignity and equanimity, if not happiness. The possibility of men's appreciation of this virtue and of its benefits, Tocqueville suggests, exists only insofar as they can appreciate it in their wives.

Early on, the American girl is exposed to "the doings of the world," and especially to its "vices and dangers."¹⁰ Instead of being "cloistered" in her parents' home, she is forced to learn the art of combatting desires and to gain confidence in her own forces. Learning of "the most tyrannical passions" in her own heart and becoming aware of their effects on others, "seeing them clearly, she judges them without illusion and faces them without fear." Without forsaking all pleasures, she remains her own mistress; her reason "never lets the reins go." Her "singular skill and happy audacity" are most impressively displayed when she directs her words and thoughts in "sprightly conversation; a philosopher would stumble at every step along the narrow path [she treads] with assured facility." Tocqueville's American girl is street-smart and spunky.

As a woman, she abandons the "freedom and pleasure" of her father's house for the obligations of marriage assumed in her husband's "cloister." The street-smart, spunky maiden becomes the demure matron. For a woman to defy public opinion is to endanger "her peace of mind, her honor, and her very social existence." Has she then struggled to escape the clutches of tyrannical eros only to fall into those of a tyrannical public opinion?

The change from a condition of freedom and pleasure to one of obligation and denial dictated by public opinion is said by Tocqueville to be both natural and by choice. To deny that this is natural is to make the most characteristic American error.¹¹ Americans are would-be individuals; they tend to have complete confidence in their own rational powers, but no respect for anyone else's. When it becomes obvious that this self-confidence is unwarranted, democrats, in their chagrin, bow to an all-powerful public opinion. The sole consolation to their vanity is that this public opinion has no identifiable source. To deny that this particular submission is by choice is not quite correct, either. A woman, after all, knowingly chooses marriage, not to mention her particular spouse. In making her choice, she accepts its conditions and, having made it, she sticks to it.

Someone might object that in most societies we know of, especially in Tocqueville's day, women have not been perfectly free not to marry. So woman's choice of marriage does not amount to an exercise of her liberty. To this Tocqueville's matron might respond that the objection rests on an incorrect view of choice and freedom. And for Tocqueville, a proper understanding of choice is most important. If he is at pains to make anything clear in *Democracy*, it is that human beings do have significant and real choices to make, but that choices are always circumscribed by chance and necessity.¹² All choices are alike in this respect: from deliberation on a constitution for a unified nation composed of preexisting, semiautonomous states,¹³ to a fundamental affirmation of democratic over aristocratic politics coupled with a choice of liberal over servile egalitarianism,¹⁴ to the selection of a spouse. In human affairs there are no wholly new, no wholly free, beginnings.¹⁵ If in Tocqueville's universe there is no place for reactionaries,¹⁶ neither are revolutionaries altogether welcome.¹⁷ Democracy in particular offers even less opportunity for revolutionary thoughts and deeds than Tocqueville himself might recommend.¹⁸ Choices arise in given situations and are among finite possibilities. Moreover, they are

made by human beings with passions that naturally incline them to pursue some or other ends,¹⁹ with habits that shape their mode of pursuit,²⁰ and with premises and ways of thought that color their judgment of both fact and value.²¹ However much Tocqueville's American woman (or anyone else²²) is habituated to subordinate her own passions to rational direction, she cannot effectively choose to remake the world and its inhabitants anew, according to her wishes. If marry she must, marriage she must choose. For his part, the American man may choose what to work at, but not whether to work—however little he needs or desires to.²³

Tocqueville's matron can freely submit to the seeming tyranny of public opinion as if she alone had dictated its rules insofar as she can appreciate the reasons behind its presuppositions. Tocqueville never suggests that anyone can do without society and its benefits, even when he recommends maintaining one's distance from the crowd.²⁴ From the outset a necessary, although not sufficient, condition of America's prosperity was its thriving commerce.²⁵ And commercial nations have necessities of their own.²⁶ Although the American woman can respect these facts, she might also see that the individual who endeavors at limitless satisfaction of desires does not exercise, but rather surrenders, his or her liberty—to the erotic passions of youth or to the seemingly more sober, but in fact more intoxicating, quest for material well-being through commercial activity. Tocqueville suggests that the sadness of democracy's women is a consequence of their husbands' relentless pursuit of wealth.²⁷ The unerotic character of affairs of the heart in America is at least as much a consequence of men's preoccupation with business as of women's discipline.²⁸ Finally, a wife may well submit to her husband's less than reasonable demands because she senses what Tocqueville himself asserts: No matter how just a revolutionary's cause, the men and women who attempt revolutions are rarely honorable or happy.²⁹

What makes the transformation of the American girl into a wife natural and by choice is her knowing and willing affirmation of her imperfect lot and her acceptance of democracy's dubious mores as mores. As Tocqueville would have it, her acquiescence is no less an act of courage and wisdom than of moderation.³⁰ Woman's is the human condition, properly understood. What the American woman "does" is to acknowledge this in a manner that commands the respect of all.

In Tocqueville's presentation it seems to matter less which sex remains at home than that one sex does remain there. Division of labor

in the great work of society is appropriately by sex because mores, as "habits of the heart," are most affected by what touches the heart. Although Tocqueville portrays American marriages as strikingly, appallingly, unerotc, he insists that men respect their wives. Elsewhere he contends that people living in democracies refuse to acknowledge superiorities in others, resenting and denying them.³¹ When men's and women's rights and duties differ, when men do not have to compete with their wives, there is less cause for envy and more opportunity for sexual attraction to engender admiration.

* * * *

What is most surprising—and revealing—in Tocqueville's discussion is his silence about natural differences. He thereby suggests that woman's designated place in the home is a matter of convention, not nature. If so, then it is fair to press the issue: Why should women rest content with what might be conceived of as an arbitrary designation?³² Today it is commonly thought that women are the worse off for being distinguished from men. In opposing an arbitrary differentiation of the sexes proponents of women's liberation promise in its stead justice and self-fulfillment for women as well as for men. Neither can be achieved, it is contended, if women remain the social, economic, and political inferiors of men.

The only kind of response that might adequately meet this argument, I believe, is a demonstration that democratic public life is not and cannot be just enough or fulfilling enough to bring meaningful "liberation" to either sex. Men are not better, but worse, off for their being out and about. In our democracy they are necessarily unhappy, and so would women be. This, sad to say, is Tocqueville's point. If he is correct, women would not do well to complain of their unjust designation. But this also means that informed resignation to democracy's defects is as much as a woman or a man can reasonably hope to accomplish in (and for) democracy. And, for Tocqueville, there is no realistic alternative to democracy in the foreseeable future.³³ To raise our collective consciousness, flout conventions, and overturn or amend our laws and constitution in an attempt either to perfect or to radicalize liberal democracy will only exacerbate its defects. For their efforts women will be neither freer nor happier.

Today's women's movement anticipates and advocates rectification of the injustices women have long suffered. Practically speaking, this

usually means that women shall no longer be denied on arbitrary grounds jobs or (for the upper-middle class) "career opportunities." For most jobs today sex is an irrelevant criterion. The goal of economic and social equality for women is surely just—if it is reasonable to think that a democratic society can indeed do away with arbitrary classifications such as sex.

When Tocqueville first observed America, he remarked the "natural, frank, and open" manner of her social intercourse.³⁴ Americans do not stand on formalities; on the contrary, they despise all formalities.³⁵ In their everyday relations they are gentle and sympathetic, and they come readily to the aid of their fellows who are in need. Even in business matters they regard one another as equals in freedom and dignity, if not in assets. Being wealthy gives no man the right to command another, and being poor creates no duty to obey. Only a contract, voluntarily entered into by all parties, can do this.

A contract is, as Tocqueville well knew, a formality, a convention. So democracy does need some formalities, even as it contemns them all. Then perhaps it is necessary to look more closely at the "natural, frank, and open" manner of Tocqueville's Americans.

Americans treat one another gently and with sympathy because they believe that all are similar and equal. "Each instantaneously can judge the feelings of all the others; he just casts a rapid glance at himself, and that is enough. So there is no misery that he cannot readily understand. . . . It makes no difference if strangers or enemies are in question; his imagination at once puts him in their place."³⁶ In principle, the equality Americans recognize is equality of ability: "Providence," they hold, "has given each individual the amount of reason necessary for him to look after himself in matters of his own exclusive concern. [This] is the great maxim on which civil and political society in the United States rests."³⁷ In fact, however, the perceived or presumed equality that moves democratic citizens is an equality of need. "Experience is not slow to teach them that although they may not usually need the help of others, a moment will almost always arrive when they cannot do without it. . . . There is a sort of tacit and almost unintentional agreement between them which provides that each owes to the other a temporary assistance which he in turn can claim at need."³⁸

Equality, or rather a perception of equality, makes sympathy possible. The perception of equality is an act of imagination. Sensing one's own needs, one attributes them to another who, as an equal, must feel them

as well. That the perception is or is not correct is somewhat beside the point, for public opinion "creates a sort of fancied equality."³⁹

Thus, underlying democracy's natural, frank, and open manners is a dogmatic belief in human equality and a preoccupation with need rather than ability. As Tocqueville has made clear, the American neither knows nor cares to know much about his fellow citizens. Nor, for that matter, does he know much about himself. Here at home, where the belief in equality reigns, it is exceedingly difficult to offend an American, and especially to convince him that his conversation is unwelcome. He is unable to judge the reaction of his listener because he himself has never had "any interest in eagerly seeking the company of particular fellow citizens."⁴⁰ It does not occur to him that some people distinguish between stimulating and boring conversations because he himself has never been stimulated by any conversation. He has never experienced and reflected on the need for the kind of knowledge that might be acquired in a conversation in which others reveal their peculiar needs and abilities. Lacking knowledge of others, of all that he needs from them, and of all that human beings are capable of giving one another, he relies on democratic dogma to inform his mores. When this reliance is impossible, as, for example, when visiting the still inegalitarian Europe of Tocqueville's day, the American is quick to take offense. Sensing that rank still matters, he flaunts his wealth and boasts of his distinguished ancestry. In his anxiety, he thus reveals both his vanity and the extent to which civility rests on settled conventions, whether aristocratic or democratic.

America's democratic mores are to be admired for engendering "mutual tolerance" and "virile confidence,"⁴¹ and for effecting a rough justice. But they can hardly be said to promote what we today speak of as self-fulfillment or what Tocqueville calls "self-interest properly understood"—because they do not foster self-knowledge.

Justice, Tocqueville suggests, is always defined by "the universal and permanent needs of mankind."⁴² It is realized in democracy's social and economic relations at times by "tacit almost unintentional" agreements, but more obviously by explicit and deliberate contracts. In principle, all citizens are equal, equal as free individuals. In fact, no society yet has eliminated all distinctions of wealth and poverty and their consequences. Nonetheless, a belief in equality does help assure that relations of command and obedience between individuals, rich or poor, are created only by "a temporary and freely made agreement" establishing supe-

riority and inferiority.⁴³ The boss can be supposed to have as great a need to hire help as has the laborer need of his day's wages. Because the terms of the unequal association are both temporary and willingly accepted by both parties, each can maintain his dignity as an equal in moral freedom.

The "fancied equality" sustained by the formality of a contract secures a semblance of justice and dignity in democracy's social and economic intercourse. Yet underlying the contract is a tacit, involuntary recognition of the most universal and permanent need, the desire for self-preservation experienced by every human being. This recognition is sharpest when particular needs and unequal abilities are disregarded.

Consequently, the more just democracy's social and economic relations are, the less humanly satisfying they will be. They are not merely artificial, but superficial. Democratic sympathy is an abstract sentiment, said by Tocqueville to be felt as keenly in the presence of a stranger or an enemy as in the presence of a friend. Contractual relations are legalistic,⁴⁴ intended to be of short duration,⁴⁵ and cemented only by a mutual regard for money.⁴⁶ "Souls remain apart."⁴⁷

Democracy's social mores and economic justice depend either on an absence of self-awareness and reflection on the full range of human needs and desires or on knowledge of the political utility of a pretense of equality.⁴⁸ Surely it is right to doubt that arbitrary advantages such as inherited wealth, inherited race, or inherited sex should be a source of authority over others. But what of seemingly relevant natural or cultivated inequalities, such as intelligence, resourcefulness, dedication, and self-discipline? Neither can these become sources of authority if the tendency of democratic conventions is to obscure these qualities or to deny their significance. Just as for men, a gain of social and economic justice for the female sex as a whole will not mean an unqualified gain for women, all of whom have individual needs and abilities. Democratic conventions are needed to spare us dehumanizing, demoralizing confrontations with the necessities that at times threaten to overwhelm us. But these conventions create arbitrary classifications even while abolishing others. And sex is not the most arbitrary of these. Unfairness of some sort must persist, because equality is only a partial truth. Democratic justice inevitably discourages the reflection on the truth of peculiar needs and abilities that is indispensable for both true justice⁴⁹ and individual fulfillment.

* * * *

Immediately after the chapters on women Tocqueville predicts that, contrary to the expectations of some, a democratic society will always be composed of "a large number of little private associations . . . within the great political society."⁵⁰ This, he says, is "very natural."⁵¹ "The personal pride of each individual will always make him try to escape from the common level, and he will form some inequality somewhere to his own profit."⁵² Earlier, Tocqueville noted that the Americans who boasted so loudly of their egalitarian society when in Europe boasted even more loudly of their private purses and pedigrees. Women were said to be proud in their submission to democracy's men and mores, even proud of it. The theme of the remaining chapters of the section on mores is precisely ambition, pride, and the opportunities for their expression in a democracy.⁵³

As Tocqueville foresaw, we today are reluctant to laud ambition and pride (especially in white males), because we suspect their undemocratic potential.⁵⁴ But we do speak often of "self-fulfillment" and "human dignity," insisting that both are necessary for happiness. Whatever fulfillment and dignity mean, they are surely nothing to be ashamed of. Nor are they matters of indifference, as we do not take them for granted but, rather, earnestly pursue them. Despite our democratic insistence that dignity inheres in all human beings and that, barring injustice, self-fulfillment is within the reach of each, we must concede that fulfillment confers special dignity. For we know that all do not achieve it, even when we define it to suit particular capacities and incapacities. However grudging our acknowledgment, self-fulfillment is a source of pride. Doubtless, our notions of self-fulfillment and dignity differ from what Tocqueville meant by great ambition and the pride of achievement that completes it.⁵⁵ Differences notwithstanding, their relevance to the concerns of women in a democratic society is as Tocqueville understood it: Today it is supposed by virtually all advocates of women's liberation that active participation in the economic and political life of a democracy is needed for women's fulfillment. This is the supposition that Tocqueville questions.

In modern democracy almost everyone's ambition is directed partly, if not wholly, at economic success—be it a job, a career, or a commercial empire.⁵⁶ One reason for America's economic vitality, Tocqueville thought, was our fascination with chance, our daring acceptance of nature's challenge to conquer her.⁵⁷ But the conquest takes the specific form of commercial activity in part because democratic Americans take great interest in their material well-being. "Equality makes the passion for physical pleasures and an exclusive interest in immediate delights

predominate in the human heart. These instincts of different origin mingle with ambition, and it takes its color from them."⁵⁸ This democratic proclivity is ultimately destructive of a "proportionate, moderate, and yet vast" ambition that can evoke admiration.⁵⁹

Wealth becomes the universal object of passionate but plodding, all-consuming yet petty, ambition. Each man seeks to taste every pleasure in his allotted time; for the same reason he habitually pursues quickly and easily obtained pleasures. Few are inclined to risk immediate gratification for intense satisfaction.⁶⁰

Moreover, when everyone has an equal chance at success, all try to advance at once. Consequently, competition slows the pace of each. "Hatred of privilege and embarrassment in choosing" force everyone to proceed by well-defined small steps.⁶¹ In themselves, modern democratic economic institutions are increasingly centralized, bureaucratized, and subjected to government regulation.⁶² All ambitions are whetted, but none is satiated and none enlarged. Even those who appear to have "made it" are uneasy in their comfort,⁶³ and circumspect in their dreams.⁶⁴ Habitual preferences, egalitarian principles, and economic and political expediencies frustrate ambition until it is not so much moderated as unmanned.⁶⁵ American businessmen are licentious mediocrities, mediocre in their licentiousness. Their successes bring them no sense of fulfillment; their strivings are, on reflection, not much for others to admire.

* * * *

Some advocates of women's liberation would readily concur with Tocqueville's conclusion that having a job or a career, devoting oneself solely to economic success for either its material or its psychic rewards, will not bring happiness. What is more difficult to see, from Tocqueville's perspective as well as our own, is that involvement in democratic politics may be no more fulfilling. Tocqueville applauds the Americans for nothing so much as their attachment to free institutions and their propensity to form voluntary associations, including political associations.⁶⁶ He praises these institutions and associations not only as bulwarks against tyranny, but as democracy's indispensable means of nurturing civilized human beings.⁶⁷ At the same time, he voices no objection to the Americans' denial to women of all political rights but the right to listen to political discourse.⁶⁸ How, then, might Tocqueville argue that neither society nor women suffer from women's exclusive

occupation with domestic matters, an occupation of which he is obviously contemptuous?⁶⁹

Political participation can mean anything from voting in elections to serving jury duty, from holding a government job by political appointment to winning elective office, from attending a rally to masterminding a *coup*.⁷⁰ Women need no longer campaign for the suffrage and never have fought too hard for jury duty; nor have they yet demanded an equal right to stage *coups*. They have organized special interest groups, become active in party politics, and begun to run for elective office. Why would Tocqueville not have welcomed these developments? After all, he speaks of local political institutions, epitomized by the New England town meeting, as the “primary schools” of liberty⁷¹ and of political associations as “great free schools.”⁷² By participating in local government citizens acquire a taste for freedom and learn its habits. Ambition is aroused, but rather than being frustrated it is tempered by affection and disciplined to respect the formalities of political order.

It is in the township, the center of the ordinary business life, that the desire for esteem, the pursuit of substantial interests, and the taste for power and self-advertisement are concentrated; these passions, so often troublesome in society, take on a different character when exercised so close to home and, in a sense, within the family circle.⁷³

The New Englander is attached to his township because it is strong and independent; he has an interest in it because he shares in its management; he loves it because he has no reason to complain of his lot; he invests his ambition and his future in it; in the restricted sphere within his scope he learns to rule society; he gets to know those formalities without which freedom can advance only through revolutions, and becoming imbued with their spirit, develops a taste for order, understands the harmony of powers, and in the end accumulates clear, practical ideas about the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights.⁷⁴

Presumably self-interest is refined when enlarged with views both to a common interest and to differing opinions about what self-interest might be. Deliberation on how to link individual and common interests is promoted over sympathy—that is, over an unreflective identification of interests. Political, as well as moral and intellectual, associations are particularly important in the articulation of unusual or novel opinions. “Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another.”⁷⁵ These associations are a counterpoise to democracy’s morally and intellectually stultifying economic associations.

Tocqueville's praise of political activity is unequivocal, but his expectations for its consequences are guarded. When ambition is turned toward politics it is, for the most part, moderated and disciplined. Great ambition, however, is still more likely to be directed to business than to politics.⁷⁶ Should it remain political, it is likely to make of an ambitious politician not so much a public servant as a public lackey.⁷⁷ Or perhaps worse, when democracy fails to provide a respectable public outlet for great ambition and the desire for recognition, it becomes a breeding ground for the desperate ambition that animates military *coups d'état*.⁷⁸

The moderate, disciplined ambition that finds its outlet in political association has as its purpose "to make some political opinion triumph, to get some politician into the government, or to snatch power from another."⁷⁹ For Tocqueville, there is one substantive disagreement that lies at the base of all political partisanship, a disagreement expressed in opinions "as old as the world itself and . . . found under different forms and with various names in all free societies. One party want[s] to restrict popular power and the other to extend it indefinitely."⁸⁰

Since the time of Jefferson's election in 1800, Tocqueville contends, proponents of the former opinion have lost their authority in American partisan politics to partisans of the latter, democratic opinion. Many of the principles of these aristocratic partisans were established by the Constitution, some "were introduced under their adversaries' slogans," and others continued to be held only by people who eschewed politics altogether.⁸¹ Thus, what we see of America's partisan politics takes place within a fundamentally democratic horizon, under which the greatest political dispute can be aired only indirectly. Although Americans hear everything, they listen to no political argument intended to point up democracy's defects.⁸² Tocqueville does not draw the conclusion from his analysis that one should consequently remain silent, but he surely holds out no promise of political success to those who have uncommon opinions about democracy's defects and their amelioration. The real benefits of political activity accrue to the man whose character is improved by engaging in it, not to others he might hope to benefit.

Democracy, Tocqueville believes, naturally gives rise to self-destructive excesses. Equality nourishes individualism and love of material well-being, and these combine to establish the empire of a public opinion that prizes egalitarian, hence imperfect, justice and settles for anxious mediocrity. Ordinarily these excesses cannot be moderated much, if at all, even by right-thinking politicians, but only by clergymen and women.⁸³ And what clergymen and women have in common is

precisely their exclusion from politics.⁸⁴ In Tocqueville's America the clergy, like women, were kept, if not by law then surely by public opinion, from taking part in politics. And they, like women, "seemed voluntarily to steer clear of power and to take a sort of professional pride in claiming that it was no concern of theirs."⁸⁵

At times Tocqueville suggests that there is a connection between clergy and women, not just a similarity:

[In America] religion is often powerless to restrain men in the midst of innumerable temptations which fortune offers. It cannot moderate their eagerness to enrich themselves, which everything contributes to arouse, but it reigns supreme in the souls of the women who shape mores.

In Europe almost all the disorders of society are born around the domestic hearth and not far from the conjugal bed. . . . When the American returns from the turmoil of politics to the bosom of the family, he immediately finds an image of order and peace. There all his pleasures are simple and natural and his joys innocent and quiet, and as the regularity of life brings him happiness, he easily forms the habit of regulating his opinions as well as his tastes.

Religion, which never intervenes directly in the government of American society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions, for although it did not give them the taste for liberty, it singularly facilitates their use thereof.⁸⁶

This passage should perhaps be read in the light of the deemphasis on woman's piety in the second volume of *Democracy*. There Tocqueville insists that "the Americans . . . have not relied on religion alone to defend feminine chastity; they have tried to give arms to her reasoning powers."⁸⁷ Young women are not reared in cloisters. What the clergy and women share is not so much piety as a recognition that democracy's passions can no longer be moderated effectively by a democratic politics that lacks "great parties." The principle of restriction of popular power can best be defended by exemplary abstinence from attempts to capture popular power to further any end. The point is most effectively brought home, so to speak, by assuring democratic citizens that private life remains a viable and attractive alternative to the "turmoil" of politics and business. If this end is accomplished, the consequences of private life will be far from contemptible. But someone has to stay at home to make the point.

Tocqueville intends to show that neither business nor political life is truly fulfilling or liberating; neither has an end that is both meaningful and attainable. Therefore, woman's lack of opportunities is no more a

misfortune for her than for the men she benefits in abjuring worldliness. Moreover, the civilizing effect he credits to political activity as a necessary supplement to economic activity he also credits to women's education for domesticity. From political association citizens "learn to submit their own will to that of all the rest and to make their own exertions subordinate to the common action."⁸⁸ From their premarital education women learn to submit to the direction of husbands who respect their courage, intelligence, and understanding.

Nor is the pride women take in maintaining their place so unjustified as it might first seem. When Tocqueville accuses the Americans of a pusillanimity bred of taking seriously nothing but mundane familial concerns, his criticism applies no less to men, whose concerns are expressed in their public actions, than to women, whose thoughts remain private. Democracy's politics, like its business, is rarely more than a generalization of self-interest.⁸⁹ In his remarks on American and democratic honor Tocqueville contrasts honor, which "is only effective in full view of the public" to "simple virtue [which] feeds upon itself contented with its own witness."⁹⁰ "True dignity in manners consists in always taking one's proper place."⁹¹ Democracy assigns to no one but woman "a proper place," and its conventions preclude all but woman from making the necessary judgments among men to determine their natural place.

The glory Tocqueville's women find in submitting to the matrimonial yoke points to what is, for Tocqueville, a deeper truth. True worldliness, a truly comprehensive understanding of human beings as individuals and societies as wholes, is rarely given to those who must act in politics as if they possessed this understanding.⁹² When they must act they invariably carry their partiality too far, and create political orders that rest on either of the partial truths of democratic justice or aristocratic honor.⁹³ Politics is thus the most impressive exhibition of human boastfulness.⁹⁴ Yet the boast expresses the partial truth of human freedom, a partial truth infinitely more salutary than its counterpart.⁹⁵ It is an appreciation of this noble, yet somewhat comical, aspect of politics that engenders Tocqueville's magnanimous moderation. His characterization of America's superior women who submit to their husband's authority is a reflection of his own willingness to celebrate politics, inevitable imperfections notwithstanding. He leaves it to the wives of democratic men to share their judgments in private.⁹⁶

* * * *

"Everything that influences the conditions of women, their habits and their opinions, is of great political interest in my eyes," said Tocque-

ville.⁹⁷ Consequently, it would be unsound scholarship to dismiss or excuse his remarks on women as poorly thought out. Rather, I have suggested that Tocqueville's discussion of women was intended to provoke reflection on "the true conception of democratic progress"—that is, on his prognosis for democracy as a whole. If I am correct, it would be irresponsible for liberal democracy's proponents and opponents alike not to take up the provocation.

To say that the status of women as moral and intellectual equals but social inferiors reflect the true conception of democratic progress is to say that democracy will not further moral and intellectual improvement because it will not give public recognition to moral and intellectual superiority. There may be honorable and thoughtful human beings in a democracy, but they do not have democracy itself to thank for their virtues. They may impart their decency and wisdom to others, but they will not do so through democracy's most public and popular institutions. If democracy's excesses—its excessive egalitarianism and materialism—can be moderated, it will be by wives whose husbands can love them for their feminine manners and manly intelligence and energy.⁹⁸ Standing behind such women to remind them of this possibility and its importance are writers such as the author of *Democracy in America*.

Tocqueville's remarks on women are meant, to repeat, to shed light on what we may reasonably hope and fear from democracy.⁹⁹ Rather than undertaking a half-hearted self-defense against the accusation of hypocrisy, I shall suggest what I understand to be Tocqueville's relevance for us. To urge on his authority that today's women's movement slow or reverse its course would be foolish because impossible. It would also be unjust, even if one argued, with Tocqueville, that justice is not always the most important consideration.¹⁰⁰ Both history and justice are on the side of women's liberation. Moreover, it is pointless to offer practical objections to the social, political, and economic equality of men and women. The fact that women bear children can easily enough be accommodated by existing economic and political institutions, as can assumption of homemaking and child-rearing responsibilities by either women or men. What is to the point is Tocqueville's doubt that democratic life will be improved by making the sexes not only "equal, but similar." He fears that "the simple and natural" pleasures experienced at home will be lost to both men and women.¹⁰¹ With these natural, private pleasures the inclination and opportunity to appreciate virtue for what it is and to see the limitations of democratic justice and of public life as such may also be lost. No one

has yet shown Tocqueville's fears in this regard to be unfounded or irrelevant.

Having entered into democracy's political and economic life, women will rectify past injustices done them. They will benefit materially and receive public recognition for public achievements. These are not insignificant gains. But do they amount to liberation or fulfillment? Granted that many feminists now contend that a radical transformation of society is required to liberate both women and men. But precisely what is the shape of this new society that can dispense with all conventions, including democratic, that ensure a semblance of justice while society promotes individual excellence and happiness? These are the essential questions that women and men ought to be pondering today. I know no better way of learning to ask them than by a dispassionate and open-minded reading of Tocqueville's reflections on American women and democratic mores.

NOTES

1. II, iii, 12, 603. Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. by J.-P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1961). All quotations and page references are from *Democracy in America*, trans. by George Lawrence (New York: Doubleday, 1969), although the translation has been corrected where necessary.

2. The next five paragraphs are based on *Democracy*, II, iii, 12, 600-603.

3. Tocqueville's discussion of women is essentially one of the middle-class family (II, iii, 10, 594; II, iii, 11, 598). He excludes from consideration the very wealthy (e.g., southern aristocrats), the very poor, and blacks because it is the northern commercial family that "appears destined to be the norm to which all the rest must one day conform" (I, ii, 10, 385). Frontier women are included (II, iii, 10, 594) because neither frontier men nor women went out into society when they worked (I, ii, 10, 376).

4. The reason is sometimes said to be religion as well as commerce (I, ii, 9, 291; II, iii, 10, 592), but also commerce alone (II, iii, 18, 621-622).

5. My interpretation differs from, but is not inconsistent with, that of Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville et la nature de la démocratie* (Paris: Julliard, 1982), 117-120. Manent correctly stresses that Tocqueville is pleased to see American democrats' deference to what first comes to sight as a natural distinction. Manent's brief but incisive discussion of women is the only substantial one in the secondary literature of which I am aware. Perhaps most disappointing is the silence of John Stuart Mill in his review of the English translation of *Democracy*, published in the *Edinburgh Review* (October 1840): "Tocqueville's remarks on domestic society in America, . . . do not appear to us to be of any considerable value." John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. by J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 181-182.

6. II, iii.

7. "I here mean the term 'mores' (*moeurs*) to have its original Latin meaning; I mean it to apply not only to *moeurs* properly so-called, which might be called habits of the heart, but also to the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits" (I, ii, 9, 287).

8. II, iii, 9, 590; I, ii, 9, 291; but compare I, ii, 9, 305: "The Americans almost always carry the habits of public life over into their private lives."

9. See below, 19-23.

10. The next six paragraphs are based primarily on II, iii, 9-10, 590-594.

11. See II, i, 1-2, 429-436.

12. That this issue is thematic is suggested by the "Author's Introduction" to *Democracy* (11-19), and by the remarks about Providence at the conclusion of the book (II, iv, 8, 705). See also II, i, 20, 493-496 on democratic historians.

13. I, i, 8, 112-120, 364-366.

14. I, ii, 6, 245 with II, iv, 8, 705.

15. If the New World and its inhabitants were "*only waiting*" for American civilization (I, i, 1, 30), the colonists themselves had a Puritan and English aristocratic heritage that served as the point of departure for the Anglo-Americans (I, i, 2, 31-49; see especially 31-32, 48-49).

16. I, ii, 6, 236, 245; I, ii, 9, 314-315; II, iv, 8, 705.

17. II, iv, 7, 700.

18. II, iii, 21, 645.

19. The subject of the second part of Volume II is "The Influence of Democracy on the Sentiments of the Americans" (503-558). See also II, iv, 3, 671-674.

20. Part III is on mores (561-664).

21. Part I is on "The Influence of Democracy on Intellectual Movement in the United States" (429-500). See also II, iv, 2, 668-670.

22. American girls, recall, are compared to philosophers (II, iii, 9, 591).

23. II, iii, 18, 623. In the South men were constrained to choose not work, but leisure, for slavery made all southern whites an aristocratic class (I, ii, 10, 347-348).

24. I, ii, 7, 254-259; II, i, 2, 433-436; II, i, 10, 461; II, i, 15, 477; II, iii, 21, 641-645. It should be remarked that for Tocqueville, as distinguished from notable predecessors, there is nothing like a state of nature. Even America's noble savages seem to have descended from a higher civilization (I, i, 1, 29).

25. I, ii, 9, 279-286; I, ii, 10, 407. Even the Puritans sought material wealth as eagerly as "moral delights" (I, i, 2, 47).

26. II, iii, 18, 621-623 with 617: America's principles of honor are all intelligible with reference to the peculiar needs of a commercial nation.

27. II, iii, 10, 593-594 with Appendix I, Note U.

28. Although the education of American girls make them "chaste and cold rather than tender and loving companions of men" (II, iii, 9, 592), "all men living in democratic times contract, more or less, the mental habits of the industrial and trading classes; their thoughts take a serious turn, calculating and realistic. . . . No men are less dreamers than the citizens of democracy; one hardly finds any who care to let themselves indulge in such leisurely and solitary moods of contemplation as generally precede and produce the great agitations of the heart" (II, iii, 11, 598). Tocqueville does not suggest that commercial ambition is a form of frustrated or sublimated sexual desire. Rather, Americans have chaste marriages because their egalitarianism and preoccupation with business truncate

eros and stifle romantic idealism. This is the point of II, iii, 11, on "How Equality Helps Maintain Good Morals in America."

29. II, iii, 11, 597.

30. The American woman "judges [vices and dangers] without illusion and faces them without fear, for she is full of confidence in her own powers"; she has "singular skill and happy audacity"; "her reason never lets the reins go"; she is given "precocious knowledge of everything," taught to control passions, to defend herself, and to have confidence in her own powers; her reasoning powers have been armed (II, iii, 9, 590-591). "She is soon convinced that she cannot for a moment depart from the usages accepted by her contemporaries without putting in danger her peace of mind, her honor, and her very social existence, and she finds the strength required for such an act of submission in the firmness of her understanding and the manly habits inculcated by her education." Her freedom has given her the courage to sacrifice it; "she suffers her new state bravely, for she has chosen it." In marrying she exercises "her cold and austere powers of reasoning" and "strength of will" (II, iii, 10, 593). Although feminine in appearance and manner, American women "sometimes show the minds and hearts of men," and their courage, understanding, and clarity of mind are never doubted by men (II, iii, 12, 601-603). Nothing at all is said of women's being moderate out of natural inclination or piety (compare I, ii, 9, 291).

31. I, i, 3, 57; I, ii, 5, 198, 221; I, ii, 9, 310; I, ii, 10, 391; II, ii, 1, 505-506; II, ii, 13, 538; II, iii, 19, 632; II, iv, 3, 672-673.

32. I say "might" because at a certain point it would be necessary to raise the question from which Tocqueville here abstracts: namely, whether there are any relevant natural (biological and/or moral) differences between men and women.

33. For Tocqueville, the essential characteristic of democracy is "equality of condition," by which is meant primarily social condition. It may or may not be accompanied by rigorous political equality and will invariably be sustained by an opinion of human equality. Given this understanding, there is no fundamental difference between the kind of democracy anticipated in America and the various forms of socialism advocated by Europeans even in his lifetime. For the impracticality, if not impossibility, of an aristocratic restoration see I, ii, 9, 312-315; I, ii, 10, 399-400; II, iv, 7, 695; II, iv, 8, 705.

34. II, iii, 2, 567. This next section is based on the first seven chapters of II, iii, 561-584.

35. Their dislike of forms and formalities is both philosophical (II, i, 1, 430) and practical or political (II, iv, 7, 698).

36. II, iii, 1, 564.

37. I, ii, 10, 397.

38. II, iii, 4, 571-572.

39. II, iii, 5, 577.

40. II, iii, 3, 568.

41. II, iii, 3, 568.

42. II, iii, 18, 616 and context.

43. II, iii, 5, 576.

44. II, iii, 5, 576.

45. II, iii, 5, 576; II, iii, 6, 582.

46. II, iii, 6, 580-581.

47. II, iii, 5, 577.

48. At II, iii, 5, 579 Tocqueville suggests that there are only two opinions around which society can beneficially be organized. Should the truth lie between the two or elsewhere, asserting it would have dire political and moral consequences:

In aristocratic societies it often happens that a man's soul is not degraded by the fact that he is a domestic servant, because he neither knows nor thinks of any other status, and the immense inequality between him and his master seems the necessary and inevitable effect of some hidden law of Providence.

In a democracy there is nothing degrading about the status of a domestic servant, because it is freely adopted and temporary and because it is not stigmatized by public opinion and creates no permanent inequality between master and servant.

But in the journey from one social condition to the other, there is almost always a moment of hesitation between the aristocratic conception of subjection and the democratic conception of obedience.

Obedience, then, loses its moral basis in the eyes of him who obeys; he no longer considers it as some sort of divinely appointed duty, and he does not yet see its purely human aspect; in his eyes it is neither sacred nor just, and he submits to it as a degrading though useful fact.

49. God, whose justice Tocqueville will not doubt (I, *Introd.*, 18), "sees every human being separately and sees in each the resemblances that make him like his fellows and the differences which isolate him from them" (II, i, 3, 437). Compare ii, iv, 8, 704.

50. II, ii, 13, 605.

51. II, iii, 13, 604.

52. II, iii, 13, 605.

53. II, iii, 13-26. Chapter 16 is on the national vanity of the Americans, Chapter 18 on "Honor in the United States and Democratic Societies," Chapter 19 on ambition, and Chapter 21 on revolutions (which might be instigated by the "enterprising and ambitious" [638]). For other mentions of ambition, see Ch. 20, 633, 634; Ch. 22, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650; Ch. 23, 653, 654; Ch. 24, 655, 656, 657; Ch. 26, 660. For pride and dignity, see Ch. 13, 605; Ch. 14, 606; Ch. 15, 609, 610; Ch. 22, 648. For honor or honors, see Ch. 22, 647, 648; Ch. 23, 653; Ch. 24, 655.

54. For Tocqueville's gentle criticism of this view, see especially II, iii, 19, 603.

55. Surely the greatest difference is that we today tend to deny that there is a fixed human nature, whose perfection would constitute "fulfillment." See II, i, 8, 434.

56. I, ii, 9, 284-286; I, ii, 10, 347 with 385; II, i, 10, 462; II, ii, 18, 550; II, ii, 19, 552; II, iii, 17, 614-615; II, iii, 18, 621; II, iii, 22, 647-648.

57. I, ii, 10, 404; I, ii, 10, 413; II, ii, 19, 553.

58. II, iii, 19, 631.

59. II, iii, 19, 631.

60. II, ii, 11, 532-534; II, ii, 17, 548; II, iii, 19, 627-632.

61. II, iii, 19, 630.

62. II, iv, 5, 684-687.

63. II, ii, 13, 535-538.

64. II, iii, 19, 627-632.

65. Consider one of Tocqueville's most charming observations (II, iii, 19, 630):

In China, where equality has for a very long time been carried to great lengths, no man graduates from one public office to another without passing an examination. . . . The idea is now so deeply rooted in the manners of the people that I remember reading a Chinese novel in which the hero, after many ups and downs, succeeds at last in touching his mistress' heart by passing an examination well. Lofty ambition can hardly breathe in such an atmosphere.

66. II, ii, 4, 509-513; II, iv, 1, 667-668; I, ii, 4, 189-195; II, ii, 5-7, 513-524; II, iv, 7, 697.
67. II, ii, 5, 517.

68. Apparently, women were permitted to attend public meetings and to "forget household cares while they listen[ed] to political speeches" (I, ii, 6, 243).

69. II, ii, 2, 508; II, iii, 21, 639. Tocqueville does not extend his contempt to the aristocratic family because it is often a focus of the vast, far from petty, longing for immortality (I, i, 3, 52-53).

70. For Tocqueville's high praises of the benefits of jury duty, see I, ii, 8, 270-276; for his criticism of proliferating political appointments, see II, iii, 20, 623-624.

71. I, i, 5, 63.

72. I, ii, 7, 522.

73. I, i, 5, 69.

74. I, i, 5, 70. Local government, or decentralized administration, is an "association permanently established by law" (II, ii, 6, 518). See also I, ii, 4, 189.

75. For the importance of associations to the few who have new and therefore presumably undemocratic or antidemocratic ideas, see I, ii, 3, 132 (Tocqueville's report of a newspaper attack on the demagogic Jackson); I, ii, 4, 192; II, ii, 5, 516; II, ii, 6, 518.

76. II, ii, 19, 553; II, iii, 19, 632-633.

77. I, ii, 7, 257-259; II, i, 21, 497-500; II, ii, 4, 512.

78. II, iii, 22, 648-649; II, iii, 23, 653-654; II, iii, 26, 663-664.

79. II, ii, 7, 523.

80. I, ii, 8, 175. This marks the division between what Tocqueville refers to as "great parties":

What I call great political parties are those more attached to principles than to consequences, to generalities rather than to particular cases, to ideas rather than to personalities. Such parties generally have nobler features, more generous passions, more real convictions, and a bolder and more open look than others. Private interest . . . is there more skillfully concealed beneath the veil of public interest. . . .

Great parties convulse society; small ones agitate it; the former rend and the latter corrupt it; the first may sometimes save it by overthrowing it, but the second always create unprofitable trouble.

America has had great parties; now they no longer exist. This has been a great gain in happiness but not in morality.

81. I, ii, 2, 176-177, 178-179.

82. I, ii, 7, 254-259.

83. I, ii, 9, 290-294; II, i, 5, 448-449. Manent argues impressively that American religion, although apparently separated from politics, is ultimately rooted in public opinion as "the sigh of the democratic citizen oppressed by the excess of his liberty" (*Tocqueville et la nature de la démocratie*, 135).

84. I, ii, 9, 295-301; II, i, 5, 448-449.
85. I, ii, 9, 296.
86. I, ii, 9, 291-292.
87. II, iii, 9, 591.
88. II, ii, 7, 522.
89. II, i, 21, 497-500.
90. II, iii, 18, 626.
91. II, iii, 14, 606.
92. I, ii, 3, 186-187; II, i, 2, 433-434; II, i, 3, 437-441.
93. I, *Intro.*, 16-17; I, ii, 6, 245; II, iii, 18, 616; II, iv, 2, 668-669.
94. II, i, 12, 469-470; II, i, 18, 488-489.
95. II, i, 20, 493-496; II, iv, 8, 705.
96. II, iii, 12, 602: "Americans constantly display complete confidence in their spouses' judgment and deep respect for their freedom. They hold that woman's mind is just as capable as man's of discovering the naked truth, and her heart as firm to face it."
97. II, iii, 9, 590.
98. II, iii, 12, 601.
99. *Introduction*, 19; II, iv, 7, 702.
100. See, for example, Tocqueville's treatment of the jury as an institution (I, ii, 8, 270-272). It must be considered not a mere judicial institution, but "above all a political institution." By this Tocqueville means to consider not whether litigants are treated as justly as possible by juries, but whether jurors are educated by their experience. Having been educated, jurors can be expected to dispense justice.
101. Tocqueville's most flattering portrait of democratic life is found in his description of the democratic family (II, iii, 8, 584-589). Democracy gives freer rein to "filial love and fraternal affection [and] all the spontaneous feelings rooted in nature itself" (589). Matrimonial ties are not mentioned in this chapter, however.

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