

Liberating Women in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*

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Thus an inexorable public opinion reigns in the United States that carefully confines woman within the small circle of interests and domestic duties, and forbids her to leave it (Tocqueville 2000:565).

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the natural head of the conjugal association is the man. They therefore do not deny him the right to direct his mate...(Tocqueville 2000:574).

Americans, who have allowed the inferiority of woman to subsist in society, have therefore elevated her with all their power to the level of man in the intellectual and moral world; and in this they appear to me to have admirably understood the true notion of democratic progress (Tocqueville 2000:576).

The above passages from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* represent a reading of his writing that some modern-day feminists could not help but respond to with disgust. He promotes the American system of strict division of labor along gender lines in which woman remains subordinate to her husband in his house "as in a cloister" (2,3,10:565). What is perhaps even more disturbing is his belief that the only source of happiness for women is "within the conjugal dwelling." Before we conclude that his analysis is antithetical to women's liberation movements, I would like to take Tocqueville's advice and not "oppose... a detached idea to the sum of ideas" because when trying to refute Tocqueville's analysis of natural differences and the necessity of specified gender roles, I could, as Tocqueville states, "easily succeed." As an author "who wants to make himself understood," he often must "push each of his ideas to all its theoretical consequences and often to the limits of the false and impractical" (Tocqueville 2000: 15). I would rather take a deeper reading of Tocqueville and appreciate the more profound aspects of his analysis of the American gender situation in regards to American mores and use Tocqueville's own analysis to support the necessity of true equality for women that cannot be achieved within narrow gender roles. Moreover, I argue that given more information, Tocqueville himself would agree that in order for real equality and true democratic progress to occur, women must liberate themselves from the subordination that occurs with strict division of gender roles based upon natural

differences. His analysis of equality and freedom is too poignant, his illustration of tyranny of the majority too convincing, and his rhetoric about great ambitions too inspiring to not also have implications for feminist movements aimed at justice for all. Tocqueville's analysis thus can be used to refute the position that he seems to advocate.

Tocqueville is certainly not the misogynist pig that the earlier passages suggest. He advocates the American system of gender relations not for its inequality but for its great progress toward equality. He writes that "Americans do not believe that man and woman have the duty or the right to do the same things, but they show the same esteem for the role of each of them, and they consider them as beings whose value is equal although their destiny differs" (Tocqueville 2000:576). Tocqueville admires the respect that Americans show for their mates' distinct contribution based upon the "great principle of political economy." The natural differences between man and woman necessitate distinct roles. Although he never explicitly mentions what the gender differences are other than alluding to a difference in physical strength, one can assume he is referring to childbirth, maternal instincts etc. Nonetheless, these differences are what Tocqueville sees as logically leading to men serving as "the natural head of the conjugal association" and participating in the economy and polity while women perform domestic duties and never stray from home. Women are not allowed to leave the domestic circle, but are also not obligated to leave it. Tocqueville does not see this relationship as subordination but rather as each spouse playing an equally respected yet distinct role. Moreover, he remarks upon the "glory" that women take in submitting to their husbands and remaining in the domestic circle. Tocqueville's laudatory comments about the distribution of gender roles in America, however, are simply tangential to his larger discussion of mores in America. Women are of interest not for their ability to clean the house but for their ability to transmit the mores due to their unique education and situation. These mores, according to Tocqueville, are of the utmost importance to the maintenance of democracy, and the American division of gender roles is the best way to maintain them.

Tocqueville seeks to elucidate a system of gender roles in which man and woman, due to their natural differences, play distinct roles but are treated with equal respect for their respective roles, morality, and intellect. Due to their distinct characteristics, education, and situation, women serve a distinct role and therefore practice "the great principle of political economy." He remarks that Americans "have carefully divided the functions of man and woman in order that the great social work be better done" (Tocqueville 2000: 574). This argument is far from misogynistic and in some ways even logical. It praises the work women do in the domestic sphere rather than disparaging or belittling it as many men in his time, and women in ours, do now. It exposes the necessity for certain roles such as

housework, childcare, and upkeep of mores to be performed and respected, and in a most basic society the system he advocates makes sense; when men are limited to the field, women being limited to the house does not seem like oppression but rather necessity. The division of roles Tocqueville describes, however, is not limited to family farms or even economic roles, but extends to every form of civic participation.

Tocqueville believes that those who “give both the same functions, impose the same duties on them, and accord them the same rights... mix them in all things—labors, pleasures, affairs” are “striving to equalize one sex with the other” which in the end “degrades them both” (Tocqueville 2000: 573-574). The argument for the “separate but equal” hypothesis is convincing especially when based upon the seemingly indisputable logic of nature. Indeed, it even allows for the distinct contributions of the genders that many modern day feminists advocate. The situation that Tocqueville describes, however, is not one in which women are simply given the opportunity to make a unique contribution to society. It is one in which women are systematically and socially excluded from public participation in the economy and politics due to nebulous and undefined natural differences. The natural differences are so overstated and the roles are so restrictive that “separate but equal,” even in gender relations, *must be* inherently unequal.

These natural differences, of course, are not unfounded, for anyone who denies there are certain basic differences between man and woman is at best naïve. Rather, they are overstated when used to explain the necessity for strict, distinct gender roles to such an extent that the term “equality” may no longer be used to describe their relation. In fact, the overstatement of natural differences emphasizes a point that Tocqueville makes when discussing the necessary conditions for perceptions of equality. He explains that the equality found in democracy allows for greater compassion than in other systems because “each of them can judge the sensations of all the others in a moment: he casts a rapid glance at himself; that is enough for him” (Tocqueville 2000: 538). Because he sees all other men as similar to himself, the American man feels compassion for all other men. When another man suffers, he too suffers.

He goes on to explain that this is not true of slaveholders toward slaves, because the slaveholders do not identify with the slaves nor consider slaves their equals, “Thus the same man who is full of humanity for those like him when they are at the same time his equals becomes insensitive to their sorrows as soon as equality ceases” (Tocqueville 2000: 538). Women, therefore, cannot be truly considered men’s equals because equality is based upon sympathy for others that one sees as similar to himself. The man, seeing “the natural differences” between himself and his wife, cannot “cast a rapid glance at himself” and feel true sympathy for her position. The woman does not become resentful because she has been

socialized to believe that her unequal position next to man is the only acceptable and virtuous role. This is dangerous because it is antithetical to the natural progression of mankind toward equality and democracy. And while Tocqueville believes democracy has many vices, he also recognizes that “the gradual development of democratic institutions and mores, not as the best, but the sole means that remain for us to be free” (Tocqueville 2000: 301). Freedom, which I take to be the noblest goal of humanity according to Tocqueville, is thus curtailed in the American system of gender roles.

Tocqueville may argue then that freedom is not truly curtailed in the American system because women enter into the marital bond out of choice. They choose who they will marry and have a basic understanding, due to their truly laudable democratic education, of what they are getting themselves into. He does not comment on the limitations of that choice namely, the lack of alternative to marriage short of prostitution and the inability to extract herself if marriage turns out to not be what a woman’s democratic education prepared her for (Tocqueville 2000: 568-570).

...it seemed evident to me that they made a sort of glory for themselves out of the voluntary abandonment of their wills, and that they found their greatness in submitting on their own to the yoke and not in escaping from it. This is at least the sentiment that the most virtuous women express: the others are silent, and one does not hear in the United States of an adulterous wife noisily claiming the rights of woman while riding roughshod over her most hallowed duties (575).

It is highly contestable that women considered submission and abandonment of their wills “a sort of glory” or “greatness”, but even if we take the happy disposition of women as a given, we must not be convinced that people who have but one path and know no alternatives, are truly happy with their situation. Moreover, the women’s happiness is almost impossible to measure, quantifiably or qualitatively, when the women have been socialized to believe from the beginning that submission is “a sort of glory” and that happiness is only found in the conjugal dwelling. Additionally, when Tocqueville describes the European woman who quickly believes herself to be the “seductive and incomplete being” that the men make her out to be, he could just as easily be describing the American woman who quickly believes herself to be the submissive yet “virtuous” being that men consider her. It seems then that the apparent willing and happy submission of women in America is a mixture of happy acceptance of the inevitable and a conditioned belief in societal opinion.

Tocqueville goes on to limit the feelings of “glory” and the “greatness” to women he deems virtuous. The supposed free choice of women to perform her “most hallowed duties” is perhaps the most significant barrier for women to free themselves of the narrow limitations placed upon her by society. Interestingly Tocqueville at this point in his book remains conspicuously silent about a main focus of his writing: the tyranny of the majority. Tocqueville admits that the source of women’s limitations is public opinion: “Thus an inexorable public opinion reigns in the United States that carefully confines woman within the small circle of interests and domestic duties, and forbids her to leave it” because if she did so she would be “putting her tranquility, her honor, even her social existence in peril” (Tocqueville 2000: 566). Women, in being forced by society into a willing acceptance of their fate, are submitting to men just as the democrat submits to the majority which he lambastes: “in sacrificing their opinions to him, they prostitute themselves” (Tocqueville 2000: 247). Tocqueville would surely condemn tyranny of the majority of such a destructive form.

Delba Winthrop in her article on “Tocqueville’s American Woman” presents the argument 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” (Winthrop 245). Her argument, while persuasive, reveals, as I believe she would agree, a very negative and pessimistic view of American democracy.

She believes that the artificiality of public life is due to false pretense of equality and a sense of justice based upon self preservation. While I admit that there is a high degree of artificiality in the public sphere in large part due to immediate pursuit of material gain, I do not agree with her belief that Tocqueville’s opinion of democracy is so bleak nor with some of the major tenets of her argument. The major tenets of Winthrop’s argument I would like to refute are the idea that equality in America is a false pretense and that justice based upon self-preservation is a bad thing. Both of these arguments boil down to a distaste for a common sentiment: sympathy. The equality Tocqueville describes as taking hold in America is based upon sympathy for others that one sees as similar to oneself; the justice as defined by Tocqueville is based upon self-preservation and sympathy for others’ right to self-preservation. Winthrop sees this sentiment as artificial because of its emphasis on “need rather than ability” (Winthrop 1986: 247). This is certainly true, but not indicative of the artificiality of a society to such a degree that it would lead one to believe it better to remain outside the society altogether. Sympathy can be taken to an extreme in which the emphasis on needs renders society incomplete and ineffective (such as in Communist societies), however, sympathy when used to develop feelings of equality and justice are actually the only means of ensuring a

lasting, functioning society. Equality is an inevitable force in society and justice necessary for its preservation.

American democracy's future is thus not nearly so bleak as Winthrop describes nor so artificial. I cannot, on the grounds Winthrop provides, conclusively declare that women are better off being systematically excluded from society and should not be given the chance to declare a preference. Tocqueville points out many of the negatives of American democracy but does not condemn it to eternal artifice from which it is best to escape. The purpose of his book is not to warn individuals to fight or avoid democracy as it is found in America, but rather to point out the good and bad, so that individuals may best adapt to the inevitable force of equality. He advises his readers, "It is no longer a question of retaining the particular advantages that inequality of conditions procures men, but of securing the new goods that equality can offer them" (Tocqueville 2000: 675). He does not recommend an abdication of society but rather an effort to make the best of the new situation that one can. I believe that the liberation of women may actually be a way to "not... strain to make ourselves like our fathers, but strive to attain the kind of greatness and happiness that is proper to us" (Tocqueville 2000: 675).

If Tocqueville's own logic can be used to disprove much of his argument for the division of roles along gender lines, why does he so adamantly advocate it? One reason becomes apparent when we re-examine his purpose in including this section in the first place: mores. The most important role women play is to "make" the mores of society. And it is with mores that Tocqueville is truly concerned. The chapters on women and the family are embedded within Part 3 which is entitled "Influence of Democracy on Mores Properly So-called." Tocqueville defines mores:

...not only do I apply it to mores properly so-called, which one could call habits of the heart, but to the different notions that men possess, to the various opinions that are current in their midst, and to the sum of ideas which the habits of the mind are formed.

I therefore comprehend under this word the whole moral and intellectual state of a people (Tocqueville 2000: 275).

Tocqueville considers mores to be of the utmost importance: "The importance of mores is a common truth to which study and experience constantly lead back. It seems to me that I have it placed in my mind as a central point; I perceive it at the end of all my ideas" (295). Tocqueville attributes America's ability to maintain democracy as well as its "great prosperity" to its mores. It is no wonder then that Tocqueville finds women's education and role in America so fascinating.

Because it is on the surface the best reason to maintain the nineteenth century American domestic situation that Tocqueville describes, I think it entirely

necessary to illuminate Tocqueville's understanding of the American domestic situation and its relationship with mores. Tocqueville believes religion to be the primary source of mores in America. Religion influences men but reigns sovereign over women because she is not overtaken by material concerns. A concept that Tocqueville sees as closely linked is that a peaceful home life free of "tumultuous passions and" "domestic sorrows" is necessary to maintain a peaceful, ordered government. One can easily conceive of a society in which man and woman could participate in society without either spouse completely being taken by material concerns. Both man and woman could receive "a democratic education to safeguard women [and men] from the perils with which the institutions and mores of democracy surround" them (Tocqueville 2000: 565). Both man and woman could allow religion or some other source of morality to reign sovereign over themselves. If there is anything natural to women that allows them to better make mores, then they may make them in society as well as at home.

A peaceful home free of passion and sorrow seems impossible in any domestic situation; however, women's participation in society is not contrary to the sources of domestic felicity that Tocqueville cites. Tocqueville describes good mores as being the result of the equality of man and wife. It is evident that the mores he discusses in this section are domestic in nature because he closely links chastity with good mores. Tocqueville uses "chaste" and "regularity of mores" interchangeably when discussing the severity of mores in different countries (Tocqueville 2000: 567-568) and declares that American novels' chaste women corresponded directly with American mores (568). Equality allows for greater fidelity in marriage because "woman always exercises her choice freely" (569). He therefore closely links the equality of man and woman as well as woman's freedom of choice as the principle sources of fidelity and therefore domestic felicity. Tocqueville is not at fault for not fully comprehending the extent to which women could be equal to men and freely exercise her choice in marriage. No, he is not at fault for praising the system in which he believed women were most respected, considered equals in the truest sense, and given the most freedom of choice. He can only be faulted for not recognizing the possibility of an even better system in which man and woman were truly equal and woman had complete freedom of choice including the choice not to marry.

Tocqueville's point-of-view on women's roles, therefore, can only be understood as separate arguments: one for division of labor along gender lines and the other for the maintenance of mores through religion. The first can easily be refuted by an advanced society in which both man and woman can contribute equally to the economic and political prosperity of the state. The second is more profound and difficult for the modern feminist to accept because within it, there is truth. If both man and woman contribute to the political and economic sphere, who

will make the mores? How will we maintain a peaceful and orderly home life? How will we maintain a peaceful and orderly society? There are, of course, no perfect answers to these questions, just as the system that Tocqueville describes is not nearly as perfect as he describes. Yet, if we look at the true problems and solutions that Tocqueville provides, we can find a solution based upon the freedom of choice and equality that Tocqueville praises. It may be as Winthrop states in her article, “that someone has to stay home” (Winthrop 1986: 253) or it may be that if man and woman both received the education designed to maintain mores in society and at home that they could find a way to share the burden of making mores. Moreover, Tocqueville actually warns against getting too caught up in “the same mores” because doing so limits great nations to stagnation (Tocqueville 2000:15). It may also be that the mores that come along with the liberation of women could be even more beneficial than the ones during Tocqueville’s time. The only way to tell, unfortunately, may be trial and error. No matter the system, determining a person’s fate solely on his or her gender is at best arbitrary and at worst tyrannical.

Tocqueville actually warns against the foundation upon which the idea of gender roles is based, economic survival and prosperity, when he states, “If citizens continue to confine themselves in the circle of small domestic interests, there to become agitated without rest, one can apprehend that in the end they will become almost inaccessible to those great and powerful public emotions that trouble peoples, but develop and renew them” (Tocqueville 2000: 616). Indeed, it is pursuit of fortune that causes Americans to “compel the soul to employ all its strength in doing mediocre things—which cannot fail soon to limit its view and circumscribe its power” (601). This is “why one finds so many ambitious men in the United States and so few great ambitions” (599). Men become complacent in their status and limit their thoughts to momentary needs, “in democracies the ambitious are less preoccupied than all others with the interests and judgments of the future: the present moment alone occupies and absorbs them” (603). What then of our forefathers’ great ambition and foresight? “Every revolution enlarges the ambition of men”, but these ambitions will only continue to be large “as long as the revolution lasts” plus “some time after it has ended” (600). Tocqueville expresses his great fear for democracy:

People believe that the new societies are going to change face daily, and I am afraid that in the end they will be too unchangeably fixed in the same institutions, the same prejudices, the same mores, so that the human race will stop and limit itself; that the mind will fold and refold itself around itself eternally without producing new ideas, that man will exhaust himself in small, solitary, sterile motions, and that, while constantly moving, humanity will no longer advance (Tocqueville 2000: 617).

Therefore, liberation movements of oppressed groups such as women are not antithetical to Tocqueville, but actually would serve, at least partially, to alleviate his fears of fixed prejudices and mores. He saw that liberation movements were possible, "If America ever experiences great revolutions, they will be brought about by the presence of the blacks on the soil of the United States" (610). He saw blacks, as I believe he would see women if he let go of the prejudices causing him to overemphasize their natural differences, as a group whose "inequality [of conditions]...will give rise to [revolutions]" (610). His prediction was prophetic because both the abolition movement and the civil rights movement intended to emancipate blacks from the drudgery of inequality and created the greatest revolutions and most influential political thinkers in the history of the United States.

This is the great salvation of democracy, that when they tyranny of the majority becomes oppressive to the extent that it excludes a class of people from the polity as a whole, they will take on the burden of revolution—they will foster the great ambitions. When Dr. Martin Luther King pronounced his dream of freedom of equality, he lifted up not only blacks, the oppressed, but also whites, the oppressors. His great ambition reminded America of the great ambitions of its forefathers. His great ambition was able to overwhelm basic economic, domestic interests and remind us of what we should truly cherish. What makes this so difficult for women is the great tyranny of the majority over the minds of both oppressor and oppressed. This tyranny of the majority that Tocqueville warned us of was both most powerful and most dangerous. That which limits freedom both of action and mind should cause nothing but fear.

Tocqueville's greatest fault was in not recognizing the tyranny for what it was and for praising the system which was better but not best. Much like the Americans that Solzhenitsyn warned in his 1978 Commencement Address entitled "A World Split Apart" about overconfidence in the superiority of every aspect of Western democracy over any aspect of Eastern society, Tocqueville, too, failed to recognize that there may be another system that could improve upon the contemporary American system of gender roles. Solzhenitsyn asked Americans to recognize that despite their superior system of governing there may be a higher goal which all people could strive for. So could Tocqueville have asked when addressing women's role in American society.

Why were the women's suffrage and feminist movements not able to create such great revolutions and great ambitions? While I would argue that they did engender great ambitions, I would also posit that they were hindered in their ability to engender a great revolution. This is partly because it was gradual and partly because the status quo was so firmly established. More importantly, it is because of the phenomenon in Tocqueville's explanation of equality and sympathy that I cited

earlier. While the women's movement was able to create a novel view of women's rights and human rights for some, it did not have the same overarching effect as the civil rights movement for blacks. This is in part because many men and even some women failed to see past the "natural differences" between the genders. These "natural differences" therefore prevented true sympathy based upon similarity to occur. Another integral factor is something that Winthrop pointed out in her 1986 article: that the movements may have been too focused on economic and professional concerns, forgetting that it was economic concerns that restricted them to the domestic yoke in the first place. It may be that another movement, "a radical transformation of society is required to liberate both women and men" (Winthrop 1986: 256) and create a great revolution that serves all of America.

The great revolutions of America are its saving grace. Tocqueville recognizes this nation-preserving perpetuity in the "ideas of a republic... [that] facilitate their use of it and assure its longevity...if the practice of republican government is often bad, at least the theory is good, and in the end the people always conform their acts to it" (Tocqueville 2000: 380).

So although the system of gender roles in nineteenth century America allowed tyranny of the majority to strip the American woman of freedom and societal participation, in the end, the American polity will correct this injustice. While the tyranny of the majority's reign is far-reaching and powerful,

the majority itself is not all-powerful. Above it in the moral world are humanity, justice, and reason; in the political world, acquired rights. The majority recognizes these two barriers, and if it happens to cross them, it is because it has passions, like each man, and because like him, it can do evil while discerning good (380).

It is justice and humanity that allow America to march forward toward equality and also toward freedom.

Tocqueville, despite his apparent advocacy of the position of women in America, promoted, in many ways, the liberation of women while providing insights into the transmission of mores that are not easy to dismiss. When finding a system that frees women from the tyranny of the majority, allows women to be true equals in the polity, and sparks the fire of great ambitions in all Americans, we must also consider how we will maintain and improve the mores that allow this democracy to prosper. And it can prosper as long as we continue to hold humanity, justice, and reason above majority opinion and allow revolutions to spark great ambitions to remind us of the ideas essential to our republic.

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