

The Way We Were: Alexis de Tocqueville on Women and the Family

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Contemporary readers of Democracy in America usually find much of what Tocqueville describes still recognizable. With respect to women, however, that is emphatically not the case. Yet despite the dramatic social changes since Tocqueville's visit, Americans have not entirely abandoned the model of marital bliss that he recommends or stopped wondering whether all of the changes have been for the better. As we contemplate our proliferating choices (and those we have lost), we would do well to keep Tocqueville's admonitions and recommendations in mind. Democracy in America helps us to think about the proper meaning and scope of both equality and freedom and how those goods might be preserved and combined with others such as family and community.

We are all too familiar with the decline of the American family and its associated phenomena: divorce, deadbeat dads, female-headed households, promiscuity, abortion, out-of-wedlock births, domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, and addiction. The list of pathologies is long, and the statistics are grim. It was not always thus. The most famous visitor to the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville, praised the well-ordered home life of its citizens. Further, in his great work *Democracy in America*, he argued that the nation's republican political order rested upon this firm domestic foundation.

Tocqueville follows in a long tradition of political thinkers—from Plato to Rousseau, from Aristotle to Montesquieu—who have been attentive to the links between the domestic and political realms. Understanding these

connections involves an inquiry into *mœurs* (or “mores”), an elusive term that Tocqueville initially defines as “habits of the heart.”¹ Although he goes on to indicate that he will give the term a more capacious meaning encompassing “habits of the mind” as well as the heart, the core of his inquiry remains with sentiments and “mores properly so-called.”² Their importance cannot be overestimated: Based on what he had seen of the depravity of Europe, Tocqueville ventured to pronounce that “almost all the disorders of society are born around the domestic hearth, not far from the nuptial bed.”³

In view of the degree to which our own dysfunction, public and private, has increased, perhaps we need to remind ourselves of the way we once were. In practice, of course, a simple return to the past is neither possible nor entirely desirable. Nonetheless, if Tocqueville’s insight—that healthy politics depends on healthy homes—is true, then sound policy in the 21st century will require a sophisticated awareness of the state of American sexual mores as the beginning point for serious thought about whether and how the family might be rescued and reinvigorated and the nation thereby righted.

We can start by following Tocqueville’s comparative method: He reveals the essential features of the new, democratic American household by juxtaposing it to the old, aristocratic European model. In tracing his presentation, the differences between the American scene then and now will be clear even to observers less perspicacious than America’s favorite Frenchman.

Puritan Origins: Faith and the Family

Democracy in America is composed of two volumes, published five years apart in 1835 and 1840. Although Tocqueville is emphatic that the “two parts complete one another and form a single work,” each volume has a distinct character: The first sketches “the visage of the political world”; the second, “the aspect of civil society.”⁴

Tocqueville’s account of the United States begins not with the Revolution of 1776 or the Founding of 1789, but rather with the emigrant embarkations on the New World in the early 17th century.⁵ He studies the nation in the

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 275.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

4. See the “Notice” that opens Volume Two, p. 399.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

“swaddling clothes” of its “cradle.” Tocqueville is intent on understanding the fundamental features of this commencement, which put a genetic stamp on the future. As he says: “Peoples always feel their origins.”⁶

Although there were various early arrivals by various peoples and nations to various parts of the continent, Tocqueville is most struck by the Puritan settlements in New England. “Everything there,” says Tocqueville, “was singular and original.”⁷ Other colonies “had been founded by adventurers without family; the emigrants of New England brought with them admirable elements of order and morality; they went to the wilderness accompanied by their wives and children.”⁸ This original domesticity had profound ramifications. Well-educated and well-off in England, the Pilgrims did not emigrate because of dire poverty or to improve their fortunes, but rather “to obey a purely intellectual need.... [T]hey wanted to make *an idea* triumph.”⁹ Like all colonists, the Puritans were adventurers, but of a unique sort: Tocqueville calls them “pious adventurers” who wanted to “pray to God in freedom.”¹⁰

Tocqueville is critical of the narrow sectarianism of the Puritans, pronouncing some of their laws “bizarre or tyrannical” on account of their interference with “the domain of conscience.” Nonetheless, in general, he greatly admires the way in which family, faith, and democratic liberty were harmonized in the New England towns.¹¹ He claims that this special cooperation constitutes “the point of departure”—the point or “first cause” that establishes the national character and marks out the trajectory of the nation:

[T]he character of Anglo-American civilization...is the product (and this point of departure ought constantly to be present in one’s thinking) of two perfectly distinct elements that elsewhere have often made war with each other, but which, in America, they have succeeded in incorporating somehow into one another and combining marvelously. I mean to speak of the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom*.¹²

6. Ibid., p. 28.

7. Ibid., p. 32.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid. (emphasis in original). Tocqueville notes that the Virginia settlements were different. There, the first inhabitants were “turbulent spirits” such as “young people of disordered families whose parents had sent them to spare them from an ignominious fate” and “fraudulent bankrupts, debauched persons and other people of this kind.” Ibid., p. 31, note 2. These “gold seekers” immediately introduced slavery. Quite aware of the significance of 1619, Tocqueville concludes that “the influence of slavery, combined with the English character, explains the mores and social state of the South.” Ibid., p. 31. Tocqueville will return to the topic of slavery and race in the long final chapter of Volume One.

10. Ibid., pp. 33 and 32.

11. Ibid., pp. 39 and 38.

12. Ibid., p. 43 (emphasis in original).

Although family is not mentioned in this passage, it turns out that the key to this marvelous combination is in fact the family, since it is within the domestic circle that *mœurs* are shaped. Family is the mediating institution between religion and politics. Despite the official separation of church and state, there is an “indirect action” of religion on politics through *mœurs*. “It is in regulating the family,” says Tocqueville, that religion “works to regulate the state.”¹³ Religious governance of the private sphere—in other words, the superintendence of sexual purity in particular—is direct, whereas the beneficial political consequences of that moral control are indirect. Religion serves as the “safeguard of mores,” and mores then become the “guarantee of laws.”

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So powerful is this influence among Americans that Tocqueville declares that religion—although it “never mixes directly in the government of society” in America—should be regarded as “the first of their political institutions.”¹⁴ Religion underwrites freedom not by preaching freedom, but by doing the opposite: guiding the proper use of freedom by making men, and especially women, moral. This accounts for Tocqueville’s paradoxical claim that “it is when [religion] does not speak of freedom that it best teaches Americans the art of being free.”¹⁵

According to Tocqueville, religion’s message of restraint and obedience is internalized most thoroughly by women. Religion, he says, “reigns as a sovereign over the soul of woman, and it is woman who makes *mœurs*.”¹⁶ Interestingly, Tocqueville admits that religion is often insufficient to control male behavior; only women can keep men in line. By embodying the religious principle of self-control, women enable men to arrive “at happiness through regularity of life.”¹⁷ Women’s religiously fortified moral power

13. Ibid., p. 278.

14. Ibid., p. 280.

15. Ibid. See Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” for a picture of marriage that links austerity and freedom.

16. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 279.

17. Ibid.

greatly enhances the status of marriage: “Of the world’s countries, America is surely the one where the bond of marriage is most respected and where they have conceived the highest and most just idea of conjugal happiness.”¹⁸ The virtues engendered around the hearth are then diffused into the wider world: “[T]he American draws from his home the love of order, which he afterwards brings into affairs of state.”¹⁹ In this way, women and the sanctity of the home are presented as the foundation of the democratic republic.

Even though, in the 1830s, the United States already presented a vast landscape with distinct regions and regional identities, Tocqueville finds that the ethos of New England—with its unique amalgam of family, faith, and freedom—predominates.²⁰ The principles and spirit of Plymouth Rock have “penetrated the entire confederation. They now exert their influence... over the whole American world.”²¹

Family Redefined: Property

In addition to its structuring of sexual passion through the religiously sanctified marital vow of fidelity, the democratic household is also an economic entity. Tocqueville argues that the shift from an aristocratic to an egalitarian society fundamentally altered the very shape and meaning of “family.” Americans still use the same word, but its property basis and moral content have changed.

It is important to remember that Tocqueville’s investigation of the New World is always informed by his acute awareness of this departure from the modes and orders of the *ancien régime*. Aristocracy and democracy are like Old and New Testaments. So profound a reorientation has, in effect, generated “two distinct humanities.”²² Accordingly, Tocqueville can make striking pronouncements like this one: “In America, the family, taking this word in its Roman and aristocratic sense, does not exist.”²³ What he means is that patriarchal power has been uprooted, not through feminist

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. “The civilization of New England has been like those fires lit in the hills that, after having spread heat around them, still tinge the furthest reaches of the horizon with their light.” Ibid., p. 32.

21. Ibid. We can see the continuing force of this observation in the tendency of foreigners to call all Americans “Yanks.” Certainly, until at least the second half of the 20th century, one could speak meaningfully about the WASP ascendancy. A more significant measure of “the Puritan residuum” (a wonderful phrase from Henry James) is the markedly greater religiosity of Americans as compared to Europeans.

22. Ibid., p. 675.

23. Ibid., p. 558.

consciousness-raising, but instead quite literally by changes in estate law that have pulled their domains out from under fathers. Property and hence power have been dispersed.

In the past, the right of primogeniture and the law of entail brought great landed estates into being and preserved them through the generations. “The result,” according to Tocqueville, “is that family spirit is in a way materialized in the land. The family represents the land, the land represents the family; it perpetuates its name, its origin, its glory, its power, its virtues.”²⁴

The aristocratic family reached far back into the past (all those oil portraits of the ancestors) and far forward into the future.²⁵ By contrast, the democratic family lives under a much-compressed time-horizon, barely seeing beyond the moment: “[E]ach concentrates on the comfort of the present; he dreams of the establishment of the generation that is going to follow, and nothing more.”²⁶ Tocqueville is describing the advent of what we now call “the nuclear family”: just parents and children (and increasingly few of those).

The revolution in estate law that establishes “equal partition of the father’s goods among all the children” works both an economic and a moral transformation.²⁷ Without primogeniture, the family as a multigenerational enterprise fades away. The aristocratic family had aimed for a kind of earthly eternity. Think what it means for a first-born son to be known as the 36th Earl of Arundel, dating back to 1138—that is “the spirit of family.” Democracy shatters that spirit; as Tocqueville ominously says, “whenever the spirit of family ends, individual selfishness reenters.”²⁸ Equal siblings are free to pursue their individual choices, no longer subordinated to the honor and destiny of the family name. The family has become “immediate.” Although one is still born into a family in the sense that one has biological or adoptive relations, that immediate family comes to be viewed as a sort of launching pad for individual success (or a landing pad in case of failure to launch).

The economic consequence of this liberation of the individual is the leveling of ranks. There are no longer castes or hereditary distinctions.²⁹ There is still wealth—plenty of it—but wealth is diffused and the number of wealth-seekers

24. Ibid., p. 48.

25. Tellingly, many students today do not know the word “posterity.” When they encounter it in the Preamble of the Constitution, they mistake it for “prosperity.”

26. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 49.

27. Ibid., p. 47.

28. Ibid., p. 49.

29. Ibid., p. 50.

infinitely increased: Tocqueville says he knows of no country “where the love of money holds a larger place in the heart of man.”³⁰ The rich, and especially the sons of the rich, focus on “transferable assets.” They pursue commerce and the professions. Social mobility increases. There is a tremendous churn of fortunes, with many rising while others fall. Soon enough, the rungs on the ladder are reversed and then reversed again. However, the range within which this rapid oscillation occurs is fairly narrow; those in the middle predominate to such an extent that Tocqueville can declare that “almost all Americans are comfortable.”³¹

In sum, the democratic household, as presented by Tocqueville, is compounded of two elements: a suprapolitical religious dimension and a subpolitical economic dimension. The family is the locus of both faith and property, shaping citizens who are devotedly otherworldly and intensely this-worldly.

Tocqueville is fascinated by the way Americans, from the Puritans forward, combine a tranquil belief in the soul’s transcendence with a restless quest for material well-being. He explains how in the moral realm, all is fixed and the human mind “bows with respect before truths it accepts without discussion.”³² Meanwhile, in the economic and political realms, all is innovating motion and agitated striving. Tocqueville remarks that “these two tendencies [obedience and independence], apparently so opposed, advance in accord and seem to lend each other a mutual support.”³³ Even 200 years after the Puritan “point of departure,” Tocqueville observes this surprising partnership as Jacksonian-era Americans proceed at a hectic pace through the workweek and then strictly observe the Sabbath.³⁴

Within the Bosom of the Family

In Volume One, Tocqueville views the family from the outside, taking note of prominent features like the fact that the Puritans arrived *en famille* and were, as we still say, “puritanical” or the fact that inheritance law, in equalizing siblings, altered both family and economy. In Volume Two, when he revisits the domestic hearth, Tocqueville tells us that his aim is “to penetrate more deeply and enter into the bosom of the family.”³⁵ This interior

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 51. In recent decades, concerns have arisen about the health of the middle class. Has social mobility lessened? Is there a permanent underclass and, in general, a more fixed stratification of society linked to the phenomenon of “assortative mating”?

32. Ibid., p. 43.

33. Ibid.

34. See especially Volume Two, Part Two, Chapter 15, “How religious beliefs at times turn the souls of Americans toward immaterial enjoyments.”

35. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 558.

exploration produces a memorable set of five chapters that contain his best-known observations, including the following remarkable declaration that closes the inquiry:

As for me, I shall not hesitate to say it: although in the United States the woman scarcely leaves the domestic circle and is in certain respects very dependent within it, nowhere does her position seem higher to me; and now that I approach the end of this book where I have shown so many considerable things done by Americans, if one asked me to what do I think one must principally attribute the singular prosperity and growing force of this people, I would answer that it is to the superiority of its women.³⁶

This statement is something other than the gallantry of a Frenchman, since Tocqueville is in fact critical of the falsity of European seducers whose flattery of women hides intellectual disdain for them.³⁷ To fully understand what Tocqueville means by the superiority of American women and how it could be responsible for national greatness, we need to follow his unfolding argument about equality.

Tocqueville shows himself to be an astute disciple of an earlier French philosopher, the great Baron de Montesquieu. It was Montesquieu who asserted in *The Spirit of the Laws* that each type of regime has a specific passion that serves as its motive force or “spring.” In the case of democracy, that spring is equality.

By equality, Tocqueville means much more than an abstract principle like “equality before the law”; he also means more than the actual equality of conditions that existed in America.³⁸ What Tocqueville instead stresses is the primary passion for equality (an “ardent” and “insatiable” passion) that generates and energizes the democratic way of life. After first sketching how this passion forms the souls of democratic individuals, Tocqueville examines how these equality-loving individuals will comport themselves in various social settings and roles. He is especially interested in seeing what happens to those relationships in which we might expect inequality to be present and perhaps even integral.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 576.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

38. Tocqueville insists that (slavery aside) there was a remarkable degree of tangible economic equality in early America. To get a quick sense of what he means, think of the difference between George Washington’s Mount Vernon (originally six rooms expanded to 21, with pine walls painted to look like mahogany) and Versailles (2,300 rooms of gilded and marble splendor).

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In other words, Tocqueville examines how the advent of equality will transform that bastion of inequality: the family. Traditionally, the relations that formed the family were all relations of inequality: Fathers ruled children, husbands ruled wives, and masters ruled servants or slaves (slavery has almost always been a domestic institution). It is worth remembering that the word “despot” (which is now a term of opprobrium) was originally simply the Greek term for the head of the household.

Fathers and Sons

Given all this, it is not a surprise that when Tocqueville makes good on his plan to “enter into the bosom of the family,” he does so initially from the spear side. Remember that the aristocratic family had been defined by “paternal authority.”³⁹ The father had been “the organ of tradition, the interpreter of custom, the arbiter of mores.”⁴⁰ The weakening of that authority and its correlate, filial obedience, was already common knowledge in the early 19th century. Tocqueville presses his observations further, noting that the democratic sloughing off of the cold and formal elements of the father–son relationship actually opens up space for a new tenderness: “[T]he relations of father and son become more intimate and sweeter; rule and authority are met with less; confidence and affection are often greater; and it seems that the natural bond tightens while the social bond is loosened.”⁴¹

During childhood, when the inequality of age is pronounced, fathers retain some “domestic dictatorship,” but it is quickly replaced by the shared

39. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 558.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 560.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 561.

standing of adulthood.⁴² Just as sons attain equality with their fathers, brothers become equals as the prerogatives of the eldest disappear. The stuffiness of the aristocratic family gives way to the familiar warmth of the democratic family. Think of the terms of endearment like “dad,” “daddy,” “poppa,” and “pops” that have replaced the old-fashioned “Father.” Tocqueville frankly regards this liberalization as a gain for individuals who benefit from the new intimacy. Sketching a lovely picture of the “sweetness of these democratic mores,” he observes that even the “fiery enemies of democracy” are susceptible to its charms as they have quickly “gotten used to being addressed familiarly by their children.”⁴³

On the basis of our longer experience with the democratized family, however, we might wonder whether “natural bonds” alone are sufficiently reliable to hold together a societal institution. Interestingly, Tocqueville’s own verdict on this transformation contained a significant reservation. While he stated his belief that “the individual gains by it,” he also said that he did “not know if, all in all, society loses by this change.”⁴⁴ Yes, many modern fathers are wonderfully close to their children, but there may also be more risk of male abandonment when the buttresses of “social bonds” are weakened.

Further, it seems that Tocqueville simply assumed the uncontested continuance of parental authority during childhood. However, that too seems to have waned over time, as evidence the tiny tots who peremptorily declare that “you’re not the boss of me.” A whole genre of reality-television shows has sprung up to instruct clueless and overly tender American parents in how to discipline their children, with the lessons usually doled out by a proper British nanny.⁴⁵

The American Girl

After documenting the scaled-back authority of democratic dads, Tocqueville dramatically shifts to the distaff side with a chapter entitled “Education of Girls in the United States.” At first glance, his treatment of the family is strikingly sex-segregated, perhaps mirroring the sharpness of the gender

42. *Ibid.*, p. 558.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 560 and 562.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 561.

45. Perhaps the most revealing indication of the modern discomfort with domestic authority has been the collapse of dog training. The family dog is pampered and petted but not well socialized.

delineations in that pre-feminist era (before coeducation, androgyny, and gender fluidity). However, that cannot be the full story because, although Tocqueville discusses fathers and sons first, he does so only to trace the erosion of patriarchy.

In effect, the new democratic tenderness between fathers and sons lessens the traditional divide between the treatment of boys and girls and could be said also to assimilate men to women, at least insofar as fathers come to rely more on love than on fear. In the chapter on girls, we learn of a new dimension of this democratic transformation—one that now assimilates girls to boys (and potentially women to men). If the new order of equality brings boys affection, it brings girls freedom. Tocqueville is in fact astonished at the extraordinary freedom they enjoy. The American girl—“full of confidence in her strength”—is a truly new phenomenon in the history of the world.⁴⁶

Explaining her precocious independence brings Tocqueville back to some specifically Anglo-American factors. As we have seen, his analysis often toggles between general lessons about democratization (as they come to sight in America) and acknowledgment of American specifics, whether they be antidemocratic elements like slavery or uniquely prodemocracy elements like the country’s Puritan origins.

To account for the startling self-reliance of the American girl, Tocqueville once again refers to the interaction of Protestantism, long-standing political liberty, and democratic equality. Just as American boys quickly escape paternal authority, the girls escape “maternal tutelage”—and they do so with the approval of their mothers, who quite deliberately release young women to a different kind of tutelage, the school of experience: “The great picture of the world is constantly exposed before her; far from seeking to conceal the view of it from her, they uncover more and more of it to her regard every day and teach her to consider it with a firm and tranquil eye.”⁴⁷

Instead of the highly protected, “almost cloistered education” still given to young women in Europe, American girls are worldly-wise from a young age.⁴⁸ By fitting them for the intelligent use of their unexampled freedom, their education approximates that given to their brothers. At the same

46. American novelists were well aware of the shift, and none more than Henry James. In his story “Pandora,” he sketches this self-made American girl confidently navigating her home turf. His masterpiece *The Portrait of a Lady* explores the darker side of this newfound freedom. *The Bostonians* is also indispensable for understanding the social landscape of American sexual politics.

47. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 563.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 564.

time, Tocqueville makes clear that there are sex-specific elements to this education. Yes, the reason of women is cultivated, but the main purpose of that reason is to fortify their virtue, which is to say their sexual virtue. Young women need “to arm” their reason to “defend” their chastity from the importunities of men and, maybe more fundamentally, to “combat” the tyranny of their own desires.⁴⁹ As Tocqueville notes, the self-controlled or self-ruling American girl “has pure mores rather than a chaste mind.”⁵⁰

This sexual discipline on the part of young women is presented as a paradigmatic example of self-government. The right kind of democratic education can counteract the perils of democracy—in particular, the tendency for liberty to become license—and thereby actually preserve democracy. Tocqueville’s description is reminiscent of those famous lines from *Federalist* No. 10 where Publius speaks of finding “a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.”⁵¹ For Tocqueville, female education is such a remedy. Although reason is the prime ingredient, religion serves as a kind of moral supplement. Tocqueville explains that Americans (despite being “a very religious people”) “have first made incredible efforts to get individual independence to rule itself, and it is only when they have reached the last limits of human force that they have finally called religion to aid them.”⁵²

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Tocqueville admits that there is a downside to this proto-feminist solution. Making women responsible for themselves means they will have more sense than sensibility; prudence will keep emotional spontaneity in check. As a result, Tocqueville foresees less charm, amiability, and imagination,

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 564–565.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 564.

51. James Madison, *The Federalist* No. 10, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp (accessed March 19, 2020).

52. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 565.

and he does not hesitate to call this new breed “honest and cold.”⁵³ Although he grants that American women remain delicately feminine in manners and dress—gender-bending “bloomers” did not hit the fashion scene until the 1850s, and pant-wearing did not gain full acceptability until the next century—they “sometimes show themselves to be men in mind and heart.”⁵⁴

A word cloud of these chapters would reveal just how manly Tocqueville’s portrait of the American woman is. Among the descriptors are “audacity,” “confidence,” “courage,” “firmness,” “independence,” “indomitable energy,” “internal force,” “manly reason,” “strength of will,” and both “virile energy” and “virile habits.”

The American Matron

Yet a funny thing happens when the girl marries. The “freedom and pleasure” of her childhood home are exchanged overnight for the strict confinement of the marital dwelling.⁵⁵ This restriction to “the small circle of interests and domestic duties” is enforced, Tocqueville says, by “an inexorable public opinion.”⁵⁶

Aware of the social expectations of domesticity that attach to republican marriage, a young woman “finds the energy to submit to them in the firmness of her reason and in the virile habits her education has given her.”⁵⁷ It helps that these marriages are not arranged, but instead based on a woman’s own consent. Moreover, her enlightenment has taught her to be circumspect about granting that consent. Nonetheless, once committed, the American matron steadfastly abides by the austere requirements of “domestic felicity.”⁵⁸

Tocqueville insists that “beneath the features of the wife”—despite her very different role and habits—the spirit of the strong-willed girl is still present and unchanged.⁵⁹ He illustrates what he means by sketching a picture of the hardiness of young women who might have been raised in refined homes in the East but who withstand the extreme rigors of Western settlement as they accompany their restless husbands in their unpredictable quest

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, p. 574.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 565.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, p. 566.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, p. 565.

for material success. Tocqueville even appends a long footnote in which he shares his impressions of a visit to the one-room log cabin of such a pioneer couple.

Overall, one would have to say that Tocqueville's portrait of American marriage is rather grim. While he admires good mores, he certainly does not sugarcoat this domestic felicity. Repeatedly, he stresses the woman's "self-abnegation" and "sacrifice" in freely placing herself into this "yoke."⁶⁰ But we are also given a beautiful statement of its results—a statement that may simply convey a truth about motherhood—in Tocqueville's vision of the pioneer woman at her hearth:

Her children press around her; they are full of health, turbulence, and energy; they are true sons of the wilderness; from time to time, their mother casts glances full of melancholy and joy at them; to see their strength and her weakness one would say that she has exhausted herself in giving them life and that she does not regret what they have cost her.⁶¹

Tocqueville calls the dwelling within which she presides "the ark of civilization."⁶² It is from such isolated outposts that the continent was peopled and the vast forests vanquished. The contents of the cabin (a rifle, a map of the United States, a Bible, a few volumes of Milton and Shakespeare, and a teapot of English porcelain) reflect the virtues of its inhabitants. Tocqueville highlights the "religious resignation" and "tranquil firmness" with which this pioneer woman "confronts all the evils of life without fearing them or braving them."⁶³ She is resolute.

Comparative Sexual Morality

As he does so often, Tocqueville returns to his comparative method in order to ascertain the source of North America's strict moral code. He rejects the climatological view "that women are more or less severe in their mores according to whether they live more or less far from the equator."⁶⁴ While admitting that hot climates might indeed produce hotter passions, he

60. Ibid., pp. 565 and 566.

61. Ibid., p. 701.

62. Ibid.

63. One is reminded of the frontier novels and female protagonists of Willa Cather (*O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*) or Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series for younger readers.

64. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 567.

attaches more weight to social and political factors, especially the degree to which equality of conditions exists.

According to Tocqueville, aristocratic inequality leads to “passing and clandestine unions”—or, to speak more frankly, it encourages both fornication and adultery. How so? Since the scullery maid could never marry the lord of the manor, her only option (other than abstinence, of course) was a licentious one. In the United States, by contrast, “there is no girl who does not believe she can become the wife of the man who prefers her, which makes disorder in mores before marriage very difficult.”⁶⁵

Tocqueville gives a straightforward statement of how equality of conditions (that is, the absence of fixed ranks in society) empowers women and thereby facilitates good morals: “[T]here is scarcely a means by which a woman may be persuaded that you love her when you are perfectly free to marry her and do not do it.”

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65. *Ibid.*, p. 568.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, p. 569.

This is a world of compensations, and every social order has its costs. Tocqueville points out that the “regularity of mores” in the United States does not do away with all forms of disorderly behavior. In fact, the world’s oldest profession thrives in the New World even though (or maybe because) most women are chaste before marriage and faithful within marriage. The greater prevalence of prostitution in the United States is also linked to the commercial character of American men, who are too busy and too unimaginative for romantic reveries and love affairs. Truth to tell, they are rarely erotic enough to engage in elaborate schemes of seduction and intrigue.

This foray into comparative sexual mores closes with reflections on how France’s revolutionary tumult (which keeps sexual mores unsettled despite increasing democratization) will eventually subside, at which point even the land of dangerous liaisons will become “more regular and more chaste.”⁶⁸

Equality of the Sexes

As he nears the end of his inquiry, Tocqueville expresses concern about the radical direction that equality might take in the future. Although the democratic impulse initially targets social or conventional inequalities, “natural” inequalities can be challenged as well, as the transformation of the family demonstrates.

Thus, Tocqueville wonders about the ultimate fate of “the great inequality of man and woman, which until our day has seemed to have its eternal foundation in nature.”⁶⁹ Must men and women become altogether “alike”—indistinguishable in their talents and temperaments, their roles and responsibilities? In the strongest terms, Tocqueville warns against this most extreme version of egalitarian individualism. He seems to fear that the androgynous, nature-denying interpretation of equality will be pursued in Europe where such notions were already being formulated. As he has throughout *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville recommends the better understanding and balanced practices of American equality.

Americans (at least those of Tocqueville’s day) believe the sexes are equal in value but that they are not the same. Among them, equality is grounded in differences—and the complementarity of those differences. The phrase “separate but equal” has acquired a deservedly bad reputation because of its dishonest and illegitimate application to race relations, where it served

68. Ibid., pp. 571–573.

69. Ibid., p. 573.

to justify white supremacy, but in essence, Tocqueville defends the concept with respect to the sexual division of labor. Beginning from a conviction that there are genuine natural differences, both physical and moral, Americans have drawn “cleanly separated lines of action for the two sexes,” with men assigned the economic and political spheres and women the domestic sphere.⁷⁰ Because these separate spheres are equally valued, women in America are “esteemed.”⁷¹

Tocqueville offers evidence for his claim that women are equally valued both as individuals and as women. Although American men are a little tongue-tied and not given to flattery (unlike the continental Lotharios), they do manifest their appreciation in more substantive ways: They “constantly display a full confidence in the reason of their mate and a profound respect for her freedom. They judge that her mind is as capable as a man’s of discovering the naked truth, and her heart firm enough to follow it.”⁷² Tocqueville also cites the law’s harsh treatment of rape as an indicator of regard for women’s honor (which is to say their womanly virtue) and independence. Despite the general mildness of punishments in the United States, rape is a capital crime. Moreover, in “he said, she said” situations, Americans believe the woman, whereas in France, Tocqueville says, “it is often difficult to find a jury that convicts,” despite the lesser penalty for the outrage.⁷³

Tocqueville welcomes this American conception of sexual equality. Indeed, he goes so far as to assert that it embodies “the true notion of democratic progress.”⁷⁴ The situation as described by Tocqueville is one in which women are the intellectual and moral equals of men while remaining socially distinct, largely excluded from economic and political life. Tocqueville frankly acknowledges that men and women in America do not have “the right to do the same things.”⁷⁵ How can he say that this is an admirable scenario? Or that it is sustainable? Will not future progress require the dismantling of that remaining inferiority?

Earlier in *Democracy*, Tocqueville had noted that American women, despite their disfranchisement, were well-informed about politics; they “often go to political assemblies and, by listening to political discourses, take

70. *Ibid.*, p. 574.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, p. 576.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*

a rest from household tedium.”⁷⁶ Everything he subsequently says about women’s intelligence and reason argues for their capacity to succeed in those wider realms, suggesting that he would not have been surprised by women’s professional success in the century that has passed since they gained the vote. Yet he counsels against the homogenizing extension of equality. The most politically incorrect line in *Democracy in America* is his prediction that the attempt to “mix” men and women “in all things—labors, pleasures, affairs” and to make them indistinguishable in their roles and rights will produce “only weak men and disreputable women.”⁷⁷

Superior Women

Yet America’s women are not “disreputable”; they are superior in Tocqueville’s estimation. Moreover, their superiority is said to be the main cause of the nation’s superiority. Look again at that closing encomium:

As for me, I shall not hesitate to say it: although in the United States the woman scarcely leaves the domestic circle and is in certain respects very dependent within it, nowhere does her position seem higher to me; and now that I approach the end of this book where I have shown so many considerable things done by Americans, if one asked me to what do I think one must principally attribute the singular prosperity and growing force of this people, I would answer that it is to the superiority of its women.⁷⁸

Superior to whom, one might ask? Well, superior certainly to Europe’s pampered dolls. American women are serious partners in serious tasks like settling the frontier; they are accorded respect rather than bouquets by their men. More intriguingly, though, Tocqueville may also mean that American women are superior to American men—superior in that they are less democratized. They still have a noble (or aristocratic) streak in them.

Perhaps it is not a matter of figuring out *to whom* they are superior but *to what* they are superior. As presented by Tocqueville, American women are superior to the siren call of individualism. Despite being the

76. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 574.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 576. For a gently satiric version of this claim, think back to Garrison Keillor’s *A Prairie Home Companion*. The parting refrain summed up the fictional Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon: “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”

intellectual and moral equals of men, American women accept (or, better, knowingly choose) economic and political inequality. They are willing to insist on their difference, their separate status, even at the cost of “equal rights.” For the sake of the domestic happiness of all concerned—their children, their husbands, the nation, and themselves—women remain in the domestic realm.

Tocqueville does not hide the fact that this feminine denial of the thoroughgoing application of equality involves a significant measure of self-sacrifice; indeed, he highlights the sacrifice as part of the American woman’s pride.

Tocqueville does not hide the fact that this feminine denial of the thoroughgoing application of equality involves a significant measure of self-sacrifice; indeed, he highlights the sacrifice as part of the American woman’s pride. Yet there are certain advantages to what seems a relinquishment. From their privileged position within their domestic confinement, women govern the mores of the nation, and Tocqueville is emphatic that mores maintain the constitution and laws.⁷⁹

Although the democratic principle of equality renders wives equal to husbands, Americans nonetheless avoid the disintegrative effects of radical equality by a special understanding of sexual equality that enshrines sexual differences. Instead of a fully individualistic ideal (which yields “weak men and disreputable women”), they opt for complementary roles and complementary virtues in a common enterprise, thereby acknowledging human limits to self-sufficiency. Heterogeneity is the foundation for strong families and, in turn, strong communities.

Obviously, over time, many American women decided they preferred democratic justice—in the form of the vote, economic independence, and sexual liberation—more than the consolations of nobility. The suffragist movement was already in its earliest phases when Tocqueville visited. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792;

79. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 295.

the Seneca Falls convention would take place in 1848. It almost seems as if Tocqueville's high (maybe inordinately high) praise of American women was an attempt to forestall such rumblings.

Like Rousseau before him, Tocqueville was in quest of a domestic model that could resist the atomizing pressures of individualism—pressures that threaten to erode the bonds of human affection, splitting apart even the nucleus of the family, leaving individuals as free-floating, unencumbered selves. Whereas Rousseau tried to romanticize and idealize marriage, by contrast, Tocqueville appeals less to the tender sentiments and more to spiritedness. His reliance on an internalized *thumos* rather than other-directed *eros* can be felt in his claim that women in America not only do not contest male hegemony, but also “made a sort of glory for themselves out of the voluntary abandonment of their will” and “found their greatness in submitting on their own to the [domestic] yoke.”⁸⁰ Yet he also qualifies that statement. Not all women are so self-abnegating: This brave attitude is what “the most virtuous women express: the others are silent.”⁸¹

Tocqueville Today

That silent portion—initially a minority but eventually a majority—would soon enough find its own voice and a different kind of courage, culminating in the chant “I am woman, hear me roar.”⁸² More than a century of successive waves of feminist protest would force public opinion into a new mold supportive of new practices and laws. Remember, according to Tocqueville, that public opinion is always what governs in a democracy: “[F]aith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority.”⁸³ Even religion is subordinated to the power of public opinion: “[R]eligion itself reigns there much less as revealed doctrine than as common opinion.”⁸⁴ Perhaps it is not so surprising that many religious denominations in America have adjusted to the new definitions of marriage and family.

Contemporary readers of *Democracy in America* usually find much of what Tocqueville describes to be still recognizable. With respect to women, however, that is emphatically not the case. Is there any reason, other than historical curiosity, to take seriously Tocqueville's account of domestic life in 19th century America?

80. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

81. *Ibid.*

82. This 1972 Helen Reddy song became the anthem of women's liberation.

83. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 410.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 409.

Having taught this material for the past quarter-century, I can report that college students, men and women alike, still take these chapters seriously. Some are angered, some captivated; all are intrigued. This suggests that despite the dramatic social changes since Tocqueville's visit, Americans have not entirely abandoned the model of marital bliss that he recommends. Nor have they stopped wondering whether all of the changes have been for the better. In their loneliness and uncertainties about who they are and how they are supposed to connect with others, young people are quite ready to acknowledge the detrimental effects of the sexual revolution. Many also express a preference for elements of the traditional arrangement (now called being a stay-at-home mom).

Regrettably, the law no longer supports this choice. A woman would be unwise not to prepare herself to be economically independent now that the protection of lifetime alimony has been stripped away by the operation of no-fault divorce. 1970s-era feminists were quite explicit about the need to revoke alimony in order to force all women into paid labor, thus making it impossible for women to choose homemaking as a career. Changes in tax law and divorce law could do much to restore this Tocquevillean option for those eager to follow it.⁸⁵ But even if return (at least on a large scale) is impossible, Tocqueville's reflections on the family are important. It is in exploring "the female drama" that Tocqueville raises the most difficult questions about the future, such as whether the modern dynamic of equality can coexist with nature and its essentialism. How significant is the bifurcation of nature into male and female? Do those distinctions, rooted in the biology of the body, extend to the soul as well? What construction of society could answer the demands for both justice and happiness? Or for equal rights and community?

Like many political philosophers before him, Tocqueville hints that a woman's nature is, by nature, more conflicted, ambiguous, and burdened than a man's. Her very body is both hers and not fully hers, since through the womb she can experience the strongest natural tie: that of mother and child.

For thoroughgoing individualism to be established, that voice of nature, that whispering of self-sacrifice, must be silenced. Women must become nothing other or more than equal individuals; hence, the feminist reconception of pregnancy as exclusively about a woman's control of her body with no say-so given to the father or the larger society or the prenatal life at stake.

85. For a good summary of this argument, see F. Carolyn Graglia, "The Breaking of the 'Women's Pact,'" *The Weekly Standard*, November 10, 1996, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/the-breaking-of-the-quotwomens-pact> (accessed March 19, 2020).

The continuing unease over abortion-on-demand is evidence that the most murderous form of the assault on nature has not triumphed decisively over the common-sense view that a mother is bearing a child and that she thus bears moral obligations as a result.

Tocqueville's insight into the insatiable character of the demand for equality can also help us understand other ongoing campaigns on the gender front. We saw how quickly greater social tolerance of homosexuality turned into the demand for "marriage equality."⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the transgender movement offers several new twists on individuality with accompanying demands for equality. For some, such as the gender dysphoric, gender remains highly significant, whereas other individuals, also sheltering under the rapidly expanding acronym LGBTQIA, seek to deconstruct gender altogether.⁸⁷ One suspects that the only available next frontier in the quest for autonomy would be transhumanism: breaking the boundaries of human being itself.

As we contemplate our proliferating choices (and the choices we have lost), we would do well to keep Tocqueville's admonitions and recommendations in mind. *Democracy in America* helps us to think about the proper meaning and scope of both equality and freedom and how those goods might be preserved and combined with others such as family and community.

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86. If each is an equal individual and marriage is only about affectional choice and not about securing the human future through procreation, then it was to be expected that the difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality would become irrelevant. Gender still matters in the sense that some prefer a same-sex intimate partner and others prefer an opposite-sex partner, but neither preference is to be given legal preference.
87. By declaring themselves nonbinary or "genderqueer," they seek to replace polarity with an infinitely populated spectrum along which one either finds or creates oneself. Deconstruction, however, may eventually come up against the hard wall of nature. Despite the experiments with outward presentation (and mandates that others defer to one's choice of pronoun), if "ze" or "they" decides to bring children into the world, "ze" or "they" will do so as either a mother or a father.