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Revisiting Tocqueville's American Woman

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Revisiting Tocqueville's American Woman

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Abstract

This paper revisits Tocqueville's famous portrait of the American female, which begins with assertions of her equality to males but ends with her self-cloistering in the domestic sphere. Taking a cue from Tocqueville's extended sketch of the “faded” pioneer wife in “A Fortnight in the Wilderness” and drawing connections to Tocqueville's criticisms of the division of industrial labor, I argue that the American girl's ostensibly free choice to remove herself from public life is not an act of freedom. Rather, it is a manifestation of a particular type of unfreedom that reveals underappreciated connections between the two great dangers about which *Democracy in America* warns: tyrannical majoritarianism and soft despotism. My argument that the girl's choice to withdraw from public life is coerced rather than free thus highlights the nonpolitical sources of oppression that exist within democratic societies. The paper concludes by raising questions about the need for coercion within Tocquevillian democracy and the implications of this for Tocqueville's “new” political science—indeed, for his liberalism more generally.

Keywords

Alexis de Tocqueville, women, soft despotism, tyranny of the majority, liberalism, equality, adaptive preferences

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An early draft of *Democracy in America's* discussions of American women and girls began “Nothing struck me more in America than the condition of women . . .”¹ Realizing he had already made generous use of the phrase “nothing struck me more in America than . . .,” Tocqueville eventually redrafted, but the original wording had not been inaccurate in that the condition of women in America did leave a deep impression on him. Indeed, two of the more vivid tableaux in *Democracy in America* feature women: the spirited young girl from the 1840 *Democracy*, and the “faded” pioneer woman from “A Fortnight in the Wilderness.”² Sketches of opposite ends of the female’s life, they also depict contrasting relationships to freedom. This paper examines the role of women in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, offering a reading of Tocqueville’s account of the high-spirited and independent girl’s transformation into a sad and cloistered wife that emphasizes the constraints under which the young girl’s choice is made.³ Drawing connections to Tocqueville’s criticisms of the division of labor and to the exclusion of free Blacks within the North, I argue that the young girl’s nominally free decision to remove herself from public life and to enter into a “separate spheres” domestic division of labor is not an example of individual autonomy in any robust sense. Rather, it is an example of *unfreedom* on at least two levels: at best, it is an instance of the circumscribed range of individual choice cultivated by the softly despotic regime, and at worst, the young girl is the victim of tyrannical majoritarianism.

By reading Tocqueville’s account of American women against other sections of *Democracy in America*, we are able to see that the American girl does not represent the pinnacle of self-control necessary for democratic freedom; instead, her transformation from a free girl to a cloistered wife provides a case study of both forms of democratic tyranny about which Tocqueville worried. This reassessment of Tocqueville’s American woman thus necessitates a reassessment of the democratic family as the locus of freedom’s preservation. More importantly still, reading Tocqueville against himself pushes

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1. Tocqueville (2010, 1041, note c). All future references to *Democracy and America* will be made parenthetically within the main text, with page numbers corresponding to this edition.
 2. An abbreviated version of this sketch appears within the main text, at the end of the chapter devoted to the American wife.
 3. Tocqueville’s analysis of women and girls in the United States is devoted only to white women. Women of color—Black and Native American—are absent his discussions of the family, though they figure in a remarkable sketch of racial hierarchy in the “Three Races” chapter at the end of volume 1. Pedersen (2019) offers an extensive analysis of this scene, which Welch (2006) describes as an example of “spontaneous feelings of sociability being denatured” (312).

us to interrogate the robustness of choice within democratic societies more broadly. Although the American girl's opting to remove herself from public life is free in that her decision is taken without formal constraint, *Democracy in America* also provides us with the resources to recognize this move not as an example of autonomy but as an instance of unfreedom. In particular, Tocqueville's case study of the American girl reveals how repressive norms come to be internalized and preferences subsequently adapted to a narrowed range of options. This results in the girl's subconscious curtailment of her own autonomy, despite her condition of formal equality within the polity. Reading Tocqueville against himself, then, we are brought to confront the fact that pervasive social structures—including, but not limited to, the patriarchy—can work to preemptively limit individual freedom, even within contexts of legal and political freedom. This is a central matter of concern for democratic theory insofar as neither institutional nor procedural remedies can adequately address these sources of oppression.

This reinterpretation of *Democracy in America*'s portraits of the American girl and woman stands at odds with several interpretative strands of Tocqueville commentary. On the one hand, it rejects the readings by those commentators who have cast Tocqueville as accepting and endorsing French aristocratic norms about females, female education, and gender roles.⁴ It thus agrees with scholars such as Delba Winthrop and Laura Janara, who advance opposite interpretative lines about the nature and significance of gender roles in the democratic family but who both emphasize Tocqueville's commitment to the moral and intellectual equality between the sexes (Janara 2002; Winthrop 1986).⁵

Yet, my reinterpretation also challenges both Winthrop's and Janara's readings. Winthrop argues that the American woman's self-sacrifice must be understood "in context," by which she means in the context of America's commercial democracy. For Winthrop and conservative interpreters of

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4. See, for example, Welch (2001), who reads Tocqueville's thinking about women's confinement as part of a "larger web of cultural apprehension," noting that his inability to sympathize with the plight of women reflects his "particular fears" (191). Others such as May (1988), Wolin (2001), and Matsumodo (1986–1987) emphasize the influence of the French context on Tocqueville's thinking about American women.
 5. Winthrop and Janara are not alone in emphasizing Tocqueville's commitment to the moral and intellectual equality of men and women. Indeed, this is the dominant interpretation among those scholars who discuss American women, including those who endorse the removal of women from the public sphere. Debate, however, pertains to why Tocqueville insists upon women's seclusion and whether the reasons for which their removal is justified are sound.

Tocqueville such as Allan Bloom or Diana Schaub, the prosperity of American democracy requires a certain moral education as a counterweight to the inevitable corruption caused by democratic commercial life, and convention has assigned this role of moral educator and reformer to women (Bloom 1992; Schaub 2020; Winthrop 1986). Consequently, Winthrop largely downplays the coercive aspects of the girl's choice to renounce public life: although she acknowledges that public opinion has narrowed the woman's range of choices, Winthrop (1986) also maintains that the self-cloistering woman is acting freely, for "she can appreciate the reasons behind its presuppositions" (244). Like Rousseau's citizen, then, the American woman is free in her submission because she has created (or at least consented to) her chains. Moreover, Winthrop (1986) argues that "women's lack of opportunities" is not a "misfortune for her," because "neither business nor political life is truly fulfilling or liberating" (253–54); as such, Winthrop (1986) views *Democracy in America's* depiction of the American woman as also a "devastating critique of American, or modern democratic, life as a whole," (240), but she does not view the young woman's fate as tragic on an individual level.⁶

This paper offers a different interpretation than Winthrop's of the young girl's freedom in electing to withdraw from the public sphere, as well as the costs to her of that choice. Like Janara's work, my reading of the chapters devoted to the American girl and woman emphasizes the *unfreedoms* of the girl's choice to self-cloister⁷ and the ways in which that choice manifests the pathologies of equality Tocqueville theorizes in other portions of *Democracy in America*. But my analysis differs from Janara's in that Janara asserts that the American girl "captures the paradox at the heart of the democratic psyche about democracy" and that the girl's status of "trapped" between (democratic) autonomy and the certainty of the old world (aristocratic) order represents democracy's "repressed" anxieties "about the fact that it was mothered

6. Winthrop's interpretation of Tocqueville is infused with Rousseau, especially its emphasis on the need to restore mores that are corrupted by engagement with worldly activities such as commerce and politics, and its denigration of economic activity more generally. Yet, this should be contrasted with Tocqueville's own comments about the virtues inculcated by participation in township government and political association, as well as his praise for the American merchant as embodying "a kind of heroism" (641), which is also Tocqueville's only invocation of the heroic in *Democracy in America*.

7. In her "counterintuitive study of the 'family resemblance' between Wollstonecraft and Tocqueville," Botting (2009) also draws attention to constraints under which the young girl's "free" choice is made, but she sees this as evidence of Tocqueville's own conflicted feminism (11, 7).

by a grand, highly ordered authority” (Janara 2002, 169–70). Although I agree that Tocqueville’s depictions of the American female do reveal Tocquevillian anxieties, I do not identify those anxieties as pertaining to disorder, or the excess of democratic freedom. Instead, I argue that Tocqueville’s portrait of female unfreedom casts into relief a different set of his anxieties about the absence of democratic freedom—specifically, his concerns about the loss of freedom from tyrannical majoritarianism and soft despotism. Reading Tocqueville’s depictions of the American girl and woman in light of *Democracy in America*’s expressed fears about the dangers to democratic freedom—that is, reading Tocqueville against himself—highlights underappreciated connections between those two dangers and supplements *Democracy in America*’s theoretical analysis with an unexpected case study that allows us better to understand the extrapolitical sources of oppression within society.

I will begin by looking closely at Tocqueville’s analysis of the “young girl,” focusing on her equal capacity and her education in liberty. Then, I will explore Tocqueville’s account of her transformation as wife/mother and how the sexual division of labor he observes in American life serves as a corrective to some of democracy’s dangers. The next section of this paper will problematize these assertions by drawing attention to Tocqueville’s criticisms of the division of labor in other contexts. From here, Tocqueville’s assertion that women freely choose a life of domestic semi-withdrawal will be called into question by placing his depiction of the American girl’s “choice” into dialogue with his discussions of tyrannical majoritarianism and soft despotism. The paper concludes by raising questions about the need for coercion within Tocquevillian democracy and the implications of this for Tocqueville’s “new” political science—and, indeed, for his liberalism.

Capable Mind, Firm Heart

Democracy in America’s chapter on the family observes that equality “tightens natural bonds” and that the absence of hierarchical prerogatives makes both filial and fraternal relationships more “natural” and authentically affectionate. Yet mothers and daughters make no appearance in this chapter, and “the family” is viewed exclusively through a male-centric lens. Although the most obvious reason for Tocqueville’s offering a separate treatment of women is that two chapters devoted to the American girl/wife that immediately follow the family chapter provide more in-depth treatment than the discussions of fathers and sons, this separation of the status of women from other family members also underscores the fact that the American female stands at least partly outside the “normal” experience of equality and independence within American life.

The first of Tocqueville's two chapters on American womanhood considers the education of young girls. What impresses Tocqueville most is the young girl's freedom and the effects of this freedom. From childhood, American girls enjoy more independence and experience fewer parental restrictions than their European counterparts. Far from being a case of willful or even benign parental neglect, however, the girl's extensive liberty serves a purpose, with the gradual expansion of her autonomy affording her ever-growing opportunities to develop her powers of reason and judgment. With "the great world scene" "laid bare more and more every day to her sight," the American girl sees the "vices and perils presented by society" (1042). Although her sheltered European counterpart is often overwhelmed by first exposure to "the disorders inseparable from a democratic society" (1043), the American girl's early exposure to the world inures her to this. Not only is she unshocked by the world, but she "has been taught to consider it with a calm and fair eye." Experience enables her to recognize vices clearly, and she "judges them without illusion and without fear; for she is full of confidence in her strength" (1042). Much like the citizens of the New England township, then, the American girl learns responsible liberty through its exercise; both her pragmatic training and moral instruction allow her to successfully combine liberty with equality and morality. The self-governing young girl appears to be the American polity writ small, insofar as her mores and practical education enable her to navigate the boundaries of freedom without falling into anarchy and vice. Tocqueville notes, "she enjoys all permitted pleasures without abandoning herself to any one of them, and her reason never relinquishes the reins, although it often seems to let them hang loosely" (1043).

Striking in these chapters is the presentation of the American girl's powers of reason, as well as her independence, self-command, and judgment; equally noteworthy is the gendered language of masculinity Tocqueville uses to characterize her. She is intrepid, courageous, honest, cold, and firm—possessing "male reason and an entire male energy" (1064). In both moral and intellectual terms, the American female is presented as equal (1063) if not superior (1067) to her male counterpart. Given Tocqueville's expressed high regard for female intelligence and judgment, one might have expected the American woman to play a significant role in American democracy's public life, yet this is famously not the case: while the American woman is vital to the continued health of American democracy, she is "ultimately excluded from the American 'brotherhood'" (Vetter 2009, 157) and consigned an entirely private role—as moral educator, preserver of mores, and, thus, as protector of liberty against those democratic instincts that threaten it.

Although the cloistered condition of the American wife contrasts with the unbridled freedom of the American girl, the Tocquevillian account implies continuity by highlighting the element of choice in the girl's transition to the role of wife. My reading of the chapters on the American girl and woman seeks to problematize the notion of free choice, but first, a closer examination of the condition and role of women in marriage is in order.

The Sexual Contract

Tocqueville's depiction of family life emphasizes that the girl's intellectual equality continues to be recognized after she has assumed her role as wife/mother. Her husband "constantly" exhibits a "full confidence" in her reason and shows "a profound respect" for her liberty. She is "as capable" of discovering and following truth as her husband, and she is viewed by him as a moral equal (1065). Yet, this equality does not extend to political rights or to public life more generally. American men alone engage in outward-facing activities such as business or politics, whereas women remain within the home, charged with domestic management and the education of children.⁸

Although confined to the domestic sphere, women do exert an indirect influence on public life, for it is through women that mores—essential to the preservation of freedom in a democratic age—are maintained and transmitted to the next generation of democratic citizens. Moreover, the domestic hearth provides the order and stability necessary to counterbalance the tumult of democratic public life (474). For Tocqueville, both moral education and a counterbalance to certain aspects of democratic society are vital foundations for political and societal order (820n)⁹; it is for this reason that "everything that influences the condition of women, their habits and their opinions, has a great political interest" (1041).

Yet the contrast between the freedom of the young girl and the wife's confinement is jarring, an effect heightened by Tocqueville's vivid depictions of each stage. That the energetic, high-spirited, and gay young girl could become the creature Tocqueville describes as "faded," "frail," "weakened," "tired,"

8. Tocqueville's assertion of female disengagement from public life is in tension with his observation in the 1835 *Democracy* that "women themselves often go to public assemblies and, by listening to political speeches, relax from household cares" (397). Within the 1840 *Democracy's* discussions, however, women remain absent from public life, and there is no mention of female participation in its discussions of American associative life.

9. Welch (2009) observes that these are second-order virtues.

and profoundly sad (1289, 1318, 1050) seems incongruous at best, unjust at worst.¹⁰ Tocqueville, however, stresses the continuity between the young girl and mature woman, attributing her adult position to rationality and choice. Emphasizing that the gender hierarchies in American homes are the result of women's voluntary "submission" to their husbands' authorities, Tocqueville casts that submission, first, as a microcosm of the democratic governance in which equals agree to be governed by legitimate rulers and, secondly, as an almost beatific self-sacrifice for the glory of something greater than the individual.

Describing with approval the separation of male and female responsibilities within the American family, Tocqueville notes that their distinct roles seemed a natural extension of perceived differences between the "physical and moral constitution" of the sexes¹¹ and that general social agreement exists that "the natural head of the conjugal association was the man" (1064). Although these hierarchical and differentiated divisions within the domestic economy strike many contemporary ears as old-fashioned, Tocqueville surprises by associating American gender roles not with tradition but with modernity and the technological advances of the commercial economy. "The Americans," he writes, "applied to the two sexes the great principle of political economy that dominates industry today. They carefully divided the functions of the man and the woman, in order that the great work of society was better accomplished" (1063). Here, the "great work of society" must be the preservation of liberty in an age of equality. The division of labor can, Tocqueville seems to suggest, be applied to private life with benefits similar to those suggested by Adam Smith in the opening chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*: greater efficiency and skill, resulting in a better "product" and in greater cooperation.

Readers of Smith know, however, that the division of labor touted in Book I has a moral cost, and in Book V, Smith comments that the "stultifying" and morally degrading effects of the division of labor can also render the worker "as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become" (Smith 782). Tocqueville, too, has a more complicated assessment of the division of labor than implied by *Democracy in America's* analysis of the domestic economy—or than has generally been appreciated by scholars. Using the

10. Pedersen and Botting also draw attention to the "mood shift" between Tocqueville's descriptions of girl and wife. Both suggest it highlights the tension in Tocqueville's thought about sexual equality or (in Botting's assessment) about the liberal feminist agenda. See Pedersen (2019, 156) and Botting (2009, 121).

11. One wonders at least three things: (1) what those moral differences might be, (2) where superiority lies, and (3) who is doing the observing.

same pin factory example familiar to readers of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Diderot's *Encyclopédie*,¹² Tocqueville comments elsewhere in *Democracy in America* that the division of labor improves the worker's dexterity, but the price is both his intelligence and independence. Although "the art makes progress, the artisan goes backward," becoming "weaker, more limited, and more dependent." The worker "no longer belongs to himself" and his occupation has "made him immobile," despite the lack of obstacles in his path (982). In other words, the division of labor has caused the worker to lose both his independence and his freedom.¹³ How the sexual division of labor would be exempt from these effects is never considered, and Tocqueville's discussions of domestic roles offer no indication that the sexual division of labor is somehow different than the industrial division of labor. That Tocqueville stresses the young woman's moral strength in choosing a cloistered domestic life would suggest a contrast between the domestic division of labor and the weakness resulting from the economic division of labor. Yet, the sketch of the pioneer woman—which describes the domestic division of labor—twice emphasizes her weakness (1289, 1290).¹⁴

Moreover, although Tocqueville had implied that the division of domestic duties within the American family was a microcosm of a democratic society, his own discussions of the division of labor suggest the opposite, insofar as such a division creates and confirms inequality and dependence. Given that loss of the will to be free and of the ability to exercise freedom is precisely the danger about which Tocqueville warns in *Democracy in America*, the division of labor would seem to be something that must be avoided at all costs and in all contexts, public and private.

Tocqueville's own critiques of the economic division of labor thus call into question the merits of the sexual division of labor, for any division of labor yields dependency, inequality, and unfreedom. Because of this, Tocqueville's suggestion that the sexual division of labor reflects the relationship of reciprocal rule and obedience characterizing the healthy democratic polity should also be regarded with greater skepticism on Tocqueville's own terms. Not only does *Democracy in America's* analysis of the economic division of labor suggest that it erodes both equality and freedom, but the draft manuscript's comment that "the art of dividing labor is the art of confiscating the intelligence of the greatest number for the profit of the few" (642)

12. Smith (1982, 14–15); Diderot and d'Alembert (2016, 165–66).

13. See Hurtado Prieto (2019) and Swedberg (2009, 66–67).

14. The mother's weakness is contrasted with her energetic children—intriguingly described as "true sons of the wilderness" (1289).

highlights the division of labor's extortive nature. Rather than reflecting a politics in which the rulers rule for the sake of the ruled, the relationship between parties under the division of labor is not a reciprocal contract between equals. This holds even more strongly in the domestic division of labor. Indeed, unlike the hierarchy between democratic master and servant, which is untroubling from the perspective of equality because it is temporary, the hierarchical position of husbands to wives is permanent and more problematic in itself and for democratic equality.

That feminine submission in the domestic sphere was a microcosm of the democratic governance in which equals agree to be governed by legitimate rulers was the first of two themes in Tocqueville's claims about continuity between the free young girl and the cloistered wife. The second, that the American female makes an almost beatific self-sacrifice for the glory of something greater than the self, assumes individual free choice; this assumption is also problematic but for different reasons.

Nature or (Democratic) Nurture?

Although the independent young woman's renunciation of public life is at odds in *Democracy in America's* general theories about the "'spillover effect,' the notion that the habits and sentiments contracted in one sphere of social life spread into others" and prepare democratic individuals for political life (Welch 2001, 196), Tocqueville wishes to emphasize the naturalness of the girl's transition from the freedom of her father's home to the "cloistered" and "monastic" life of wife, noting that the "courage" to "sacrifice" herself has been cultivated by the "practice of independence" (1048–49).¹⁵

Tocqueville further asserts that "it is by herself and freely that she puts herself under the yoke" and that "she has chosen" her domestic confinement. Yet, the robustness of "choice" in this context is undermined by Tocqueville himself, who calls attention to how public opinion has narrowed the range of "acceptable" options for girls to just one: marriage, motherhood, and confinement within the domestic sphere. His observation that American women "took a kind of glory in the voluntary surrender of their will, and that they located their grandeur in bending to the yoke

15. Tocqueville uses similar language in his analysis of how the tyranny of the majority breeds a courtier spirit among democratic peoples. He notes, "We have seen peoples take a type of pleasure or pride in sacrificing their will to that of the prince and, in this way, give a kind of independence of soul to the very act of obedience. Among these peoples much less degradation than misery is found" (421).

themselves and not escaping it” is immediately undermined by the next line, in which he adds, “That, at least, was the sentiment expressed by the most virtuous; the others kept silent” (1065).¹⁶

The silence of “the others”—those women who would prefer something other than submitting to the gender hierarchies of American marriage—recalls various moments in *Democracy in America* in which Tocqueville highlights the power of public opinion as one aspect of the tyrannical majoritarianism he feared. Before public opinion is settled, individual dissent is tolerated; once “the majority has irrevocably decided” and public opinion has formed, however, “everyone is silent and friends as well as enemies then seem to climb on board together.” Democracy requires validation of and conformity to the majority’s opinions; “the people” in a democratic society are thus simultaneously its rulers and its courtiers. Any who disagree are swiftly sanctioned, and the democratic majority’s reach extends to all aspects of society, public and private. The dissenter will “be exposed to all types of distasteful things and to everyday persecutions.” He will retain citizenship but will be “a stranger” within society, losing even his “rights to humanity” (418). Tocqueville describes this as “a fate worse than death.”¹⁷

Fears of ostracization lead to conformist self-censorship that stifles not merely active dissent, but also the very idea of disagreement with the majority. Heterodox thoughts are quashed before they can be fully formed, and individual choice—just as in the softly despotic regime—is free, as long as it falls within a range deemed acceptable by the majority. Characterized as “tyranny that acts on the soul,” Tocqueville attributes to it the lack of “independence of mind and true freedom of discussion” he observes in the United States (419).¹⁸

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16. Although Welch (2001) notes that women’s submission to social norms is a “rather obvious example of tyranny of majority opinion” (201), the comment is made in passing and within a different interpretative context. Reinhart (1997) also comments incisively upon Tocqueville’s lack of attention to the pressures of public opinion in shaping young women’s choices, but he attributes this to Tocqueville’s larger worries about preserving those structures of order he finds necessary for maintaining freedom in the democratic era (71–72).
 17. Tocqueville observes that the majority’s control over all areas of society and its ability to silence dissent is the reason freed blacks in the North “abstain voluntarily” from exercising the franchise (416). Guarantees of rights and equality, in other words, are hollow unless endorsed by majority opinion.
 18. Somewhat surprisingly, the “woman question” is absent from Ikuta’s (2020) analysis of tyrannical majoritarianism.

Although Tocqueville's account of the American girl emphasizes her freedom and agency, when that account is read in the context of his analysis of tyrannical majoritarianism, a different interpretation of the girl's free choice emerges. Tocqueville concedes that it is "acknowledged and regulated by unanimous consent that the woman once married devoted herself entirely to her husband and to her children" (820, emphasis original) and that it is "inexorable public opinion . . . that carefully encloses the woman in the small circle of domestic interests and duties and that forbids her to go beyond it" (1049). Any American girl not wishing to pursue the path of the enclosed wife/mother pays the steep price of opposing a tyrannical majority. This is apparent to the young girl herself, who understands that by flouting these norms, she would be "immediately endangering her tranquility, her honor, and even her social existence" (1049). Given Tocqueville's view that "there is no man so powerful that he is able to struggle successfully for long against the whole of the customs and the opinions of his contemporaries, and reason will never be right against everyone" (1056),¹⁹ the girl's capitulation to social norms is entirely unsurprising.

Thus, whereas Tocqueville's explicit message is that the girl's choice to enter the role of the constrained wife is a free one, reading his account of the American girl's transition to wife against his notes and other passages in *Democracy in America* yields quite a different message. Rather than being based on an unburdened reflection of a set of options open to her, the girl's choice now seems an example of constraint and unfreedom. Most directly, we can see that her choice to conform reveals the extremely high price to be paid for actions differing from those sanctioned by public opinion within the democratic regime. The young girl is aware that exercising her freedom by choosing something other than the socially acceptable roles of stay-at-home wife and mother would lead to her complete ostracization.²⁰ She is indeed, as Tocqueville notes, "able to become the wife of the man she prefers" (1054), but she is *not* free to become the wife of no man and to eschew marriage altogether.²¹

More subtly, we also see the price paid for even forming thoughts that dissent from established views; this, in turn, breeds the self-censoring that

19. Note e, *Rubish*.

20. Boryczka (2009) notes that the exercise of freedom by women is equated with vice: promiscuity, infidelity, etc. (297).

21. Winthrop also acknowledges that the American girl's choices are confined to a socially constructed and limited range, but she finds this unproblematic, for men are similarly constrained in that they cannot choose not to work (Winthrop, 244). Male constraint is Winthrop's extension rather than Tocqueville's.

produces democratic individuals who dare not even form—let alone express or act upon—heterodox views. By this latter reading, if the girl's choice is a free one, it is simply because she has allowed herself to entertain only acceptable options. Her preferences, in other words, have unconsciously adapted in response to the narrowed range of choices available to her.²² The shaping of the contours within which individual choice operates and the resulting preference adaptations are hallmarks of Tocqueville's softly despotic regime, which aims to produce citizens who wish to choose only among the recognized possibilities.

The Tocquevillian account of soft despotism emphasizes the interplay between freedom and control, as well as the shaping of citizen consciousness by the regime. Not overtly oppressive, the softly despotic regime preserves the appearance of citizen choice. Individuals are free to pursue happiness, but the government "wants to be the unique agent . . . and sole arbiter" of that happiness. Choice operates, but its essence is hollowed out by a regime that "bends and directs," "enervates," and "extinguishes" wills, ultimately relieving citizens of "the trouble to think" and so too of the burden of freedom (1251–52).²³ Here, it is worth pointing out that the softly despotic regime is also a democratic one and, thus, the organ of the majority. Relieving the individual of "the trouble to think" thus also includes removing the desire to hold ideas deemed inappropriate by the majority. Hence, volume I's worries about the tyranny of the majority over thought reappear under the guise of the analysis of soft despotism at the end of the second volume. Although soft despotism is frequently viewed as distinct from the tyranny of the majority and understood as arising out of different aspects of democratic society (e.g., democratic individualism, centralization, and fondness for general ideas, etc.), the case of the American girl allows us to see more clearly how these two concerns are connected.

Tocqueville's manuscript notes suggest a further connection between the condition of American women and the preference shaping of a softly despotic

22. There is a vast literature on adaptive preferences, beginning with Elster (1983). Feminists engaging with different aspects of this include Nussbaum (2001), Cudd (2006), and Khader (2011, 2012). See also Kuran's Tocqueville-influenced discussion of the movement from "unthinkable" to "unthought" and its social costs (Kuran 1993).

23. Although there are obvious differences, a connection can be drawn between laws forbidding teaching slaves to read and write (579–80) enacted by Southern (white) legislatures and the softly despotic regime's direction of individual wills. In both cases, the intention is to narrow the range of possibilities of which the individual can conceive, with an eye to ensuring that individual choice does not transgress acceptable boundaries.

government that “encloses the action of the will within a smaller space and little by little steals from each citizen even the use of himself” (1251). Commenting on the incessant efforts of some men to distinguish themselves from their peers and the perpetual agitation resulting from these efforts, Tocqueville observes that “all of man is in the will.” He describes a contrasting mode of life, embodied by women “who put qualities of character before everything, because those qualities provide the tranquility every day.” He further likens these mores-oriented women—the subjects of great praise in the main text—to “those men who prefer the type of social paralysis given by despotism to the agitation and the great emotions of liberty.” (1251, note *m*). If the preference, however formed, for tranquility over freedom’s agitation is characteristic of the despot’s subject when that preference is expressed by a man, why should it be the expression of free agency when expressed by the American woman?

Other Exclusions, Other Removals

My reexamination of Tocqueville’s portrait of the American woman has presented her “choice” to enter marriage and the cloistered life of her husband’s home in a different light from how Tocqueville encourages us to read it and how some of his interpreters have proposed. By reading Tocqueville against himself, we can see that such women are, at best, individuals who do choose “willingly” but whose preferences have adapted in response to the constraints imposed by democracy’s softly despotic regime. At worst, however, the American woman’s choice is simply the product of tyrannical majoritarianism, taking the form of the threat of complete exclusion for dissenters or the more insidious tyranny over thought. Rather than epitomizing noble self-sacrifice made in the name of freedom’s preservation, the American woman’s decision now appears to embody the two great dangers against which *Democracy in America* warns.

This reinterpretation of Tocqueville’s democratic woman returns us to the pioneer woman’s sorrow, which now seems more sinister, in that her isolation suggests not agency, but oppression – whether tacit or more direct. This new perspective necessitates a reassessment of Tocqueville’s casting of the democratic family as the locus of freedom’s preservation, for liberty now appears to depend on the oppression of a minority group. Here, it is tempting to draw comparisons with the plight of free Blacks within American democracy, for the exclusion of both free Blacks and women depends on conformity to society’s unacknowledged and perhaps unrecognized beliefs about social hierarchies. Moreover, in both cases, these beliefs attach to a tangible and permanent

marker of difference, in the form of skin color or gender; because of their attachment to a permanent “reminder,” these beliefs are persistent.²⁴

Yet there is an important distinction between the plight of Blacks and women who have been removed from full participation in democratic public life by the white majority. While physical traits distinguish the included (whites, males) from the excluded (Blacks, women), only in the case of Blacks are the physical traits coupled with a majority-held ideology of natural inferiority. Tocqueville’s observation that “The memory of slavery dishonors the race, and race perpetuates the memory of slavery” (551) recognizes that skin color perpetuates these mores-based exclusions, with blackness serving as a reminder of the color-coded ideologies of inferiority and superiority invoked to justify slavery. Male-female separation, however, is *merely* conventional, and Tocqueville emphasizes that in every sense but physical, women are equals if not superior to men.²⁵ No less importantly, American society recognizes that role differentiation has no natural basis.

That men derive no false sense of superiority from their conventional roles might imply that changing the mores that legitimize sex-based exclusions would be less difficult than transforming the mores that legitimize race-based exclusions. On the other hand, the character of the conformity to dominant mores about gender roles could suggest *greater* difficulty in transforming opinions about them, because those beliefs permeate society, rather than being confined to members of the socially advantaged class. In the case of free Blacks, the conformity to established mores does not extend to the disadvantaged group and remains confined to whites: as Tocqueville’s recounting of his conversation with a (white) Pennsylvanian makes clear, members of the majority who would contest the majoritarian mores barring Blacks from full political and social inclusion fear the ostracism they would face for speaking out.²⁶ These beliefs

24. Tocqueville (2010) also notes the persistent character of the social inequality of women, but he does not link it to his earlier analysis of racial inequalities (1067).

25. A note appended to the manuscript after Tocqueville’s well-known comment about “the superiority” of American women clarifies his meaning: “Say clearly somewhere that the women seem to be very superior to the men in America” (1067, note *m*).

26. Tocqueville asks why emancipated Blacks do not exercise the franchise to which they are legally entitled. Eventually, the Pennsylvanian admits that “the law lacks force when the majority will not support it” and that “magistrates do not feel that they have the strength to guarantee to the latter the rights that the legislator has conferred” (414, note 4). Henderson (2022) offers an extended discussion of this, arguing that Tocqueville’s analysis of racial prejudice raises questions about contemporary democratic theory’s ability to address radical forms of exclusions through either institutional safeguards or improved deliberative processes.

do not extend to the marginalized class. Yet in the case of the condition of women, the mores that justify confining women to the domestic sphere appear to be widely shared among members of both the advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Like the white Pennsylvanian who dissents from majority prejudice, men (i.e., members of the advantaged group) who might hold heterodox opinions about traditional American gender roles fear speaking against majority opinion, but unlike the Pennsylvania example, the disadvantaged group itself appears also to have internalized the dominant (and repressive) mores to the point of that it is no longer capable of speaking out.²⁷

This comparison between the preservation of *de facto* segregation and inequality after the removal of *de jure* barriers and the soft coercion under which women “choose” to confine themselves to the domestic sphere and accept a subordinate role in democratic public life asks us to grapple with the morality of the foundations upon which Tocquevillian democratic freedom seems to rest. Given that the family is, as Tocqueville claims, a reflection of democratic equality and the locus of democratic freedom’s preservation, the fact that equality and freedom now appear to rest upon foundations that are at least partially unequal (in terms of equal access to public and political life) and at least partially—if not substantially—unfree forces us to ask uncomfortable questions about the “providential” expansion of liberty and the human cost (in terms of feminine freedom) of the moral education Tocqueville claims is necessary to preserve liberty in a democratic age.

The condition of American women also asks us to confront the implication that Tocqueville considers the removal from public life of one-half of the adult population necessary for the health of a democratic society. This seems irreconcilable with his general approval of public engagement (via associative life, local politics, etc.) as the most effective means of teaching democratic citizens the value of liberty. Moreover, it stands at odds with his condemnation of the individual’s withdrawal from public life as endangering liberty by facilitating the spread of soft despotism.

We might consider this tension—indeed, contradiction—within Tocqueville’s thought by examining the young girl’s removal from public life in light of Tocqueville’s understanding of individualism and his assessment of the individual. Like the young girl’s choice to retreat from the public sphere, the individualist’s decision to withdraw into the “small society” of friends and family is rational and dispassionate, based upon his judgment that

27. In the discussion of free Blacks, Tocqueville passes over a point he emphasizes with regard to slaves: the subjugated race’s internalization of the “ideology” of inferiority. Contemporary social science discussions of this range from Mosca (1939) to Mills (1997).

he has no need for others beyond his small private circle.²⁸ But whereas Tocqueville's assessment of the woman's withdrawal is overwhelmingly positive,²⁹ his appraisal of the individualist's withdrawal is unequivocally negative: as Turner (2012) observes, Tocqueville considers the individualist a "self-deluded moral failure" (16). Tocqueville's own descriptions of the individualist's moral and spiritual impoverishment are equally blunt. Moreover, the individualist's withdrawal from public life and its concerns has disastrous social effects, for that withdrawal produces the vacuum filled by the softly despotic government. In the Tocquevillian analysis, unless the individualist comes to understand the benefits of engagement in democratic life, unless his simple self-interest is transformed into self-interest rightly understood that appreciates the connection between self and society, democratic freedom is gravely endangered.

Tocqueville's condemnation of the personal and social effects of democratic individualism stands in contrast with the praise he heaps upon women who similarly "choose" to withdraw from public life; this contrast raises questions about why his judgment differs in the two cases. Surely, Tocqueville cannot view the withdrawal of women as a kind of homeopathy, in which a small amount of removal from public life creates a healthful reaction. Were that the case, the individualists' cause would be evaluated favorably, insofar that they constitute only a small proportion of American democratic society, whereas women account for almost half of the population. Rather, the difference in Tocqueville's assessments of the withdrawn individualist and the withdrawn woman results from the activities he attributes to each in their retreat from the public sphere: moral instruction in democracy's virtues on the one hand and dangerous selfishness on the other. Both the American woman and the (male) American individualist withdraw in order to serve their family circles, but the individualist also serves himself, whereas the American woman substitutes society for the self entirely.

Not All Nondemocracies Are Created Equal

Given the fact that the American democratic family is said to reflect democratic equality, this reading of the American woman as the victim of tyrannical majoritarianism and soft despotism also invites us to reconsider the nondemocratic interventions upon which Tocquevillian democratic freedom

28. As Vetter (2009) points out, Tocqueville describes both the individualist and the American girl/wife as "cold." The individualist, however, is also characterized as "coarse," whereas the woman is beatific (157–58).

29. His description of the pioneer woman as "sad" notwithstanding.

can now be seen to rest. For Tocqueville, not being democratic is unproblematic, and indeed, the purpose of *Democracy in America* is to analyze how America has managed to preserve liberty in an age of equality. Liberty, not democracy, is Tocqueville's primary value, and the goal of his "new political science" (16) is to rescue liberty from democracy by tempering some of democracy's worst instincts. It is with this in mind that *Democracy in America* repeatedly highlights elements in American society that are not democratic but nonetheless work for a democratic society's health. Many of these—such as lawyers, the jury, the idea of rights, and a variety of constitutional arrangements—endeavor to break up the "irresistible" effects of popular sovereignty by curtailing the effects of majoritarianism. Some operate formally, via institutions, whereas others work more informally, shaping and strengthening ideas about what should lie beyond the majority's reach. Some are the products of human art, whereas others have arisen accidentally, fortuitously, or in more Tocquevillian language, "providentially." Many are associated by Tocqueville with aristocracy and are viewed favorably for their balancing function.

The question before us is whether to follow Tocqueville in treating the condition of women as one such salutary but nondemocratic element in American life, and my re-interpretation suggests otherwise. When we read Tocqueville's chapters on American girls and women against his own discussion of the two tyrannies to which democratic societies are prone, the non-institutional dimensions of coercion and oppression become clear, and we can no longer see the American sexual division of labor as a helpful corrective to democratic flux or democratic corruption. Just as his indictments of the economic division of labor and democratic individualism cast into doubt the American domestic division of labor and sequestration of labor, his analyses of tyrannical majoritarianism and soft despotism enable us to recognize the hollowness of what is presented as "choice." Read through the lenses of tyrannical majoritarianism and soft despotism, the girl's "choice" represents either her disempowered capitulation to the norms of a repressive, patriarchal majority or her own internalization of those norms and subsequent preference adaptation. In the former case, she is aware of the cost to her own freedom but lacks other options; in the latter case, she is unaware of the costs. Both cases, however, underscore the fact that oppression has social as well as institutional faces and that formal solutions such as rights guarantees are insufficient safeguards for individual liberty.

With this revised understanding of oppressive forces constraining the girl's choice to remove herself from public life, we can no longer see the

condition of the American woman as a nondemocratic but salutary aspect of American life. Rather, the hollowness of female choice forces us to recognize that even if the goal of preserving liberty in a democratic age is laudable,³⁰ if the cost of achieving that goal is the unfreedom of half of the population, this is, perhaps, too high a price to pay. Given that price in terms of individual liberty, the (self-) cloistering of American wives and mothers seems categorically different from the benign yet antidemocratic elements that are preservative of democratic freedom. If we wish to find in the domestic division of labor any resemblance to America's aristocratic remnants, perhaps we should look to that quasi-aristocratic element condemned by Tocqueville: white Southerners. Although their domination of Blacks rests upon a legal basis rather than a merely conventional one, it otherwise shares much with the sequestration of American women in that both cases depend upon the internalization of repressive norms by the marginalized group itself.³¹

Whither Tocquevillian Liberalism?

If Tocqueville does indeed consider the soft oppression of women to be necessary for the preservation of freedom in the democratic age, we need to ask some broader questions. We might begin by inquiring into the supposedly "providential" character of equality's spread, for it is an odd providence—presented as a theodicy of freedom—that requires the removal from public life of one-half of a population of equals so that the freedom of the other half is preserved. Rereading the American woman also forces us to ask some pointed questions about Tocqueville's "new political science," which is aimed at maintaining liberty in a democratic age but which now seems to rest on significantly unfree foundations.

Indeed, how does this reassessment of the status of women in *Democracy in America* lead us now to regard both Tocqueville's project and, thus, his status as a theorist of liberalism? Let me suggest two options. On the one

30. Although all Tocqueville scholars would surely agree that preserving liberty is a worthy goal, considerable disagreement arises in response to the question of "saving liberty from what?"

31. See previous section, "Other Exclusions, Other Removals." Recent work connecting Tocqueville to current issues of race includes Tillery (2009), Henderson (2022), and Ikuta and Latimer (2021).

hand, if Tocqueville's theory of democratic liberty requires the oppression of a considerable portion of the population, this is a very steep price to pay and, surely, too high for us to accept from any theorist of liberty. We must, then, reject his theory and remove him from the liberal canon. Such a displacement might clear the way for a new canon, built on less dubious (and more inclusive) foundations.

On the other hand, my reassessment of Tocqueville's American women need not require us to jettison his overall theory. Rather, the more complete view of the status of women within American democracy that is gained by considering the condition of American women in light of other aspects of *Democracy in America* yields a more subtle and more complete theory of the dangers to liberty in a democratic age. Because this reassessment of the American woman as a victim of soft despotism as well as the tyranny of the majority—something Tocqueville himself did not see—is consistent with Tocqueville's overall theorizing about the dangers to which democratic liberty is prone, we can preserve Tocqueville's theory itself, but the inclusion of women as victims of those dangers gives it greater overall complexity and subtlety. This new perspective on Tocqueville's American woman, derived from *Democracy in America* itself, allows us to see more clearly how social structures can facilitate oppression as well as liberty and how repressive norms and mores can become internalized by both privileged and marginalized groups. If liberalism has been criticized for its inattention to the social inequalities that exist outside of legal and political contexts, my rereading of Tocqueville's American woman challenges those critics by highlighting his recognition of nonpolitical sources of oppression that exist within democratic societies. We thus discover a richer version of his liberalism, one more aware of the many sources of unfreedom.

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