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Tocqueville on Sexual Morality

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In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville attacked the aristocratic principle of arranged marriage for fostering the loose sexual morals which endangered French freedom in the 1830s. He defended the democratic principle of marital freedom linking it to America's widespread chastity and political health. At the same time, he showed that under certain circumstances marital freedom also promotes license. Tocqueville suggested that American moralists prevented this by making enlightened self-love the primary support for female chastity, by preventing secularization from destroying Christian sexual morality, and by establishing a limited form of sexual equality. Although Tocqueville failed to foresee the American sexual revolution, he teaches us a great deal about its causes in the *Democracy*. Unfortunately, he teaches us little about its political significance or about the likelihood or desirability of changing its course.

Tocqueville's immediate reason for studying American sexual morality was to address a grievous political problem in postrevolutionary France. Although the French Revolution permanently democratized the country's political life, it failed to establish the mores, or traits of character, necessary to sustain freedom. Tocqueville attributed this failure to confusion and conflict over the proper foundation of virtue in the new era. As French liberals argued for a rational, secular morality based on Enlightenment philosophy, conservative aristocrats sought to restore the prerevolutionary hegemony of the Catholic Church. These groups also clashed over the pace and scope of further democratization. Liberals wanted to destroy all vestiges of the Old Regime quickly, while traditionalists tried to curb the popular will. Finally, France was awash with philosophical theories which denied the possibility of political reform and stifled creative statesmanship. By the time Tocqueville and Beaumont left for America in 1831, these developments had virtually depleted the country's moral resources (pp. 15-18, 287, 305, 312-315; see also Caesar, 1985, pp. 658-662).*

One of the most visible symptoms of France's moral crisis was a high incidence of sexual license, especially among the lower and middle classes. Tocqueville believed this evil posed a serious threat to his country's freedom.

**Democracy in America* (1969) is cited by page number without any title abbreviation. Tocqueville's other texts are cited by abbreviations noted in the reference list.

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In his view, unbridled sensuality magnifies selfishness, distorts judgment and sensibility, and destabilizes personal relationships. After disrupting family life, it inevitably exacts a large political toll. In France it invited tyranny by weakening respect for legitimate authority and concern for the common good. Tocqueville feared the imminent rise of a new form of Caesarism in which nothing would stand between the French people and the unlimited authority of a single man (pp. 291, 599, 312–315).

Tocqueville thought that the only way his country could avert this danger was through moral reform. Unlike most European and American thinkers of his day, he considered good mores of greater value to democratic freedom than either ideal geographical circumstances or excellent laws. In this respect he followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau who believed mores to be the “immovable keystone” of political life (Rousseau, 1978, p. 38). One of Tocqueville’s main objects in writing *Democracy in America* was to show his countrymen how mores contributed to America’s freedom and could, if properly fashioned, contribute to their own. In the *Democracy* he carefully examined the factors which created and sustained American mores. Although he recognized that natural, historical, and political differences divided the two countries, he thought that France, as a newly emerging democracy, could benefit from America’s long democratic experience (pp. 287, 305–308, 315).

Tocqueville was particularly impressed with America’s high level of sexual morality. (See JA, 1959, pp. 21–22, 54–55, 113–114, 222–223.) In contrast to the moral and political chaos plaguing France, American family life was stable, law and government respected, and freedom secure (pp. 291, 292). Tocqueville thought that American women were largely responsible for the country’s chastity and, as a consequence, considered the formative influences on their character to be of great political importance (p. 590). Although he does not explain why he attributes such power to women, we may assume he again followed Rousseau in stressing their ability to control the sexual approaches of men and to establish the legitimacy of children (Rousseau, 1979, pp. 359–361; MEM 1, p. 327).

Despite the importance Tocqueville attributed to female chastity, the portions of *Democracy in America* dealing with sex are among the least discussed and least understood parts of the book. Ever since John Stuart Mill in 1840 dismissed Tocqueville’s views on “democratic morals” as not being “of any considerable value,” scholars have either ignored this material entirely or referred to it only in passing (Mill, 1963, p. 244). This is true of students of women in Western political thought such as Okin (1979) and Elshtain (1981, 1985), sociologists of America’s character such as Robert Bellah (1985), and most Tocquevillians including Lively (1962), Zetterbaum (1967), Schleifer (1980), and Lamberti (1983). Tocqueville’s views on sexual morality are dealt with briefly in Morton (1984), Bloom (1986), and Winthrop (1986).

The reasons for this widespread neglect are not hard to discern. Although

Tocqueville carefully explores the causes of female chastity in America, his case for its political importance is brief, and thus a less obvious subject for study than his extensive treatment of other supports for American freedom, such as religion and political participation. More important, Tocqueville's views on chastity are deeply at odds with contemporary opinion, both popular and academic. Most Americans accept, even if they do not applaud, the sexual revolution and consider sexual behavior between consenting adults a private affair. If the case for chastity is made, it is usually made on religious rather than political grounds. Yet Tocqueville warned that partisans of freedom ignored questions of character at their peril and designed his "new political science" to avert this error (pp. 12, 308). This warning alone demands that we give his argument serious attention.

My primary task, then, is to explore Tocqueville's account of why American women of the 1830s were so chaste. He considered several explanatory factors, including the racial makeup of the population, the climate of the country, its religiosity, its social condition, and the role of statesmanship (p. 595). I shall discuss his views on the relative importance of each of these factors proceeding from the least to the most significant. I shall also consider Tocqueville's brief but important analysis of the sexual behavior of American men. Finally, I shall critically assess Tocqueville's analysis in the hope of shedding some light on both the recent dramatic changes in American sexual behavior and the prospects for chastity in the future.

Understanding Tocqueville's views on sexual morality is a difficult job, partly because of the complexity of the subject and partly because of his cautious mode of writing. Tocqueville prided himself on his "tact and prudence" in allowing his ideas to "unfold themselves by degrees instead of being thrown in a heap at the head of the public" (MEM 1, pp. 381). Further, he was acutely sensitive to the volatile political situation in France and sought to marshal the support of opposing groups to his cause without exacerbating their differences. He therefore addressed different sections of his analysis to different audiences while blurring the apparent contradictions between them. He attempted, for example, to convince French liberals that Christianity was essential to sexual morality while persuading conservatives that chastity required a secular, democratic foundation. In order to resolve these contradictions, we must pay careful attention to the various unfoldings of his text.

Tocqueville's first concern was to refute the currents of thought which held that forces beyond human control—such as race or climate—determined sexual behavior. He considered these explanations unpersuasive and pernicious because they encouraged passivity regarding an important determinant of freedom (pp. 594–595, 705; see also pp. 542–546, letters to Gobineau in ER, 1959b, and Schleifer, 1980, Chapters 3–5). Although he observed considerable license among southern American blacks, he attributed this to their social state rather than to their color. Slavery denied its victims the opportunity for moral devel-

opment, legitimate family life, and even control over their own bodies. These conditions, rather than innate moral inferiority, accounted for the transitory nature of black sexual relations and widespread miscegenation (pp. 317–318, 343–344, 356). Racial theories also failed to account for the different level of sexual morality among Anglo-Americans and their British cousins. Despite their common biological inheritance, Anglo-American women were superior to their British counterparts in all matters pertaining to sexual conduct (p. 595).

Tocqueville also downplayed the significance of geography. Although he admitted that climate affects the intensity of eros, he considered weather less relevant to a country's sexual mores than its religious, social, and political institutions. History teaches that a nation of constant climate can experience sharp changes in its sexual life as a result of regime changes. Such was the case in France after the Revolution. In the last years of the Old Regime, license was prevalent among a corrupt aristocracy while the vast majority of Frenchmen were chaste by habit and conviction. Although the upheaval caused by the Revolution unsettled the sexual morals of the masses, it returned the remnants of the old aristocracy to their once respectable moral standards (pp. 594–595, 599–600).

Initially, Tocqueville suggests that America's high level of sexual morality was attributable to the enormous influence of Christianity of the spiritual lives of American women (p. 291). This influence originated among the Puritans who settled New England in the seventeenth century to live according to their unique perception of God's will. These Christians were noted for their piety and the austerity of their moral and religious principles. Their sexual code required virginity outside of marriage, continence and fidelity within marriage, and the strict avoidance of all forms of license. The Puritans enforced these laws with a zeal which Tocqueville found excessive. Yet, on the whole, he admired their ethos and occasionally suggested that its moral influence continued undiminished from colonial times through the Jacksonian era (pp. 32, 36, 41–43, 279, 432, 592). (A good, short historical treatment of Puritan love and marriage may be found in Morgan [1956], pp. 9–28.)

Tocqueville's linking of sexual morality to Christian piety was part of his broader endeavor to stress religion's indispensability to America's political health. He further argued that it was a source of the country's democratic principles, habits of restraint, and instinctive love of freedom. Tocqueville sought to reconcile French liberals to Christianity as a valuable "political institution" if not as a divinely inspired faith. But his concern was more than rhetorical. He did not think freedom could survive in any modern democracy without widespread religious belief (pp. 16–18, 287, 292, 294, 299–301, 439). His most extensive discussion of American sexual morality, however, contains surprisingly few religious references. He also slights religion in his treatment of American family life and education—subjects which traditional churchmen considered exclusively within their domain (pp. 590–603).

What accounts for this anomaly? Tocqueville thought that while Christianity was initially responsible for America's high level of chastity, its influence over sexual behavior had waned considerably since colonial times. (See MEM 1, p. 362; and LET, pp. 48–53.) The Americans he knew were more worldly than their Puritan ancestors and generally “wish[ed] to find the chief arbiter of their beliefs within, and not beyond, the limits of their kind” (p. 435). The source of this transformation was the social condition of equality which, ironically, the Puritans introduced to America for religious reasons (pp. 18, 36, 287, 288). As equality grew in strength, it came to exert a decisive influence on the American character, leaving Christianity to play an important, but secondary role (p. 50). This shift is reflected in Tocqueville's explicit claim in his most extensive treatment of sexual behavior that equality accounted for the great strictness of American mores (p. 595). Ascertaining the precise relationship between equality and chastity, however, is more complicated than he makes it first appear.

Tocqueville begins the bulk of his analysis by criticizing the aristocratic practice of arranged marriage which survived the general democratization of life in nineteenth-century France. According to this custom, fathers reserved the right to choose marriage partners for their daughters or to veto what they considered undesirable matches. The first criterion of suitability was common membership in the same social class. Defenders of arranged marriage argued that paternal judgment was a surer guide to marital happiness than freedom of choice. Tocqueville disagreed, pointing out that the primary goal of most fathers in matchmaking was not to secure their daughters' personal well being, but to further the economic and political goals of their extended families. He also tied this abuse of paternal power to the unjust use of conjugal authority and other infringements on women's freedom. These practices, he believed, were largely responsible for the host of unstable marriages and illicit affairs in France (pp. 595–596, 602, 591; OR, p. 83).

Tocqueville found no trace of aristocratic marriage customs in the United States. By the 1830s equality had weakened the authority of American husbands and fathers, created a classless society, and established the principle that in marriage, “each chooses his companion for himself without any external influence or even prompting” (p. 596; see also pp. 584–589, 600). He considered this type of marriage a sign of democracy's moral superiority to aristocracy. In America, women could strive for personal happiness through marriage and enjoy a conjugal relationship based on mutual love and respect. He also suggests that marital freedom was largely responsible for the country's high level of chastity. Women are only licentious when forced to marry against their will, the argument goes. If no obstacles preclude their freedom of choice, they are likely to be chaste when single and faithful when married (pp. 595–597).

Unfortunately, Tocqueville's comparison of marital freedom and paternal authority in relation to sexual morality is less straightforward than it first appears. His primary purpose in criticizing arranged marriage was to persuade

French aristocrats to abandon one of the last remnants of their doomed social system. He shows the careful reader, though, that aristocratic institutions were quite capable of promoting chastity in predemocratic times (pp. 596n, 599). He also suggests that the sexual disorders of his generation may have been caused more by the immaturity of French democracy than by aristocratic abridgments of freedom. In this case, all that France required was patience to allow the “beneficent influence” equality exerts on sexual behavior to take effect (pp. 599).

Tocqueville further indicates, however, that even in a mature democracy the relationship between equality and female chastity is problematic. His precise argument is that equality does not by itself create strict mores, but rather strengthens a preexisting tendency in that direction. In fact, when chastity is deprived of its religious roots, equality can contribute to a climate in which license flourishes (pp. 595, 733). There are several reasons for this. The sexual passions, in Tocqueville’s view, are the “most tyrannical passions of the human heart” (p. 591). When Christianity truly governs a woman’s soul, it suppresses these passions, testifies to their sinfulness, and may even foster a self-forgetting piety which renders license unthinkable. Such was the case in both Puritan America and aristocratic France despite the vast differences in their social systems. As democracy weakens traditional religion, however, it denies chastity its lofty foundation and frees eros to exert its imperious will.

Democracy also grants women great liberty during the period of their lives when they are most impatient, their passions most unstable, and their tastes most unformed (p. 591). At the same time, it focuses their minds on eros by making physical attraction a natural and legitimate basis for marriage (pp. 595–597). Tocqueville believed that this combination of factors could not help but increase the intensity of their sexual desires. “Every passion grows stronger the more attention it gets,” he noted, “and is swollen by every effort to satisfy it” (p. 552n).

Finally, democracy gives rise to a novel form of selfishness with Tocqueville called individualism. This phenomenon causes people to focus almost exclusively on themselves, and, in his view, was one of the strongest and most potentially dangerous forces unleashed by equality. While contributing positively to a concern for individual happiness, individualism also weakens personal loyalties and strengthens the desire for immediate pleasure at the expense of long-range goals. Tocqueville’s critique of individualism focuses primarily on its negative effects on male citizenship (pp. 506–508, 509–510). He also believed, however, that it can undermine a woman’s sense of moral obligation when linked to an excessive love for equality. Such was the danger Tocqueville saw in a European version of sexual equality which gave women the same rights, duties, and functions as men in all areas of life (pp. 601–602).

By showing that mature democracy was hospitable to license as well as to

strict morals, Tocqueville highlights the political challenge facing American statesmen. Their task was to develop a new, secular strategy for promoting chastity which would replace its religious safeguards while preserving women's freedom. The centerpiece of this new method was a doctrine which Tocqueville called "self-interest properly understood." This doctrine, which stressed the links between virtue and private advantage, supplanted Christian altruism as the normative concept in American moral life. Its proper working required individual freedom and sufficient enlightenment to prevent selfishness from becoming coarse and destructive (pp. 525–538). Perhaps because he wished to avoid offending the pious, Tocqueville doesn't explicitly discuss the use of interest in managing sexual desire. Yet a careful reading of his analysis reveals its pervasive presence.

American moralists instilled the principle of enlightened self-love into the souls of American women through an elaborate system of education. Traditional Christian educators regarded women as "seductive, but incomplete beings," whose sexual frailties required severe restrictions on their freedom (p. 602). In Tocqueville's France, where the Church still governed the young, girls received a "timid, withdrawn, almost cloistered" upbringing aimed at keeping them ignorant of the world and repressing their sexual desires (p. 591). This training reinforced the patriarchal structure of French society and created adult women who were fearful, dependent, and self-deprecating (p. 602).

Tocqueville's Americans relied on freedom rather than authority to educate their women. Although he first links this use of freedom to America's Protestant heritage, he later shows that it signifies a virtual break with religious tradition (p. 590). The Puritans enjoyed political freedom, but their moral lives were more tightly constrained than those of the Catholics they despised. Everything Puritan women learned about sexual conduct was "classified, coordinated, foreseen, and decided in advance" (p. 47). Their descendents, however, were taught to make independent moral judgments based on a rational view of the world (pp. 374, 590–592). The source of this orientation was not Christianity, but a philosophical approach to knowledge which dominated American life as a result of the democratic revolution (pp. 429–433).

American moralists hoped that a free view of the world would convince young women of the advantages of being chaste. They clearly recognized that the virtue of their charges would often be in danger and that "incredible efforts" were required to enable them to master themselves (p. 591). Part of their pedagogy consisted of training women to understand the value of chastity as well as the nature of eros. They also taught the young how to preserve their virtue through a combination of will power, self-confidence, and wit. These lessons, of course, required women to learn a considerable amount about men through mixing in society. On the whole, their sophisticated knowledge of human nature "surprised and almost frightened" Tocqueville (p. 591). When all

else failed, American moralists turned to religion for aid. Yet even their anguished appeals to piety were most likely variations on the theme of enlightened self-love (pp. 591–592, 528–530).

At first glance, it is difficult to understand why American women considered it so advantageous to be chaste. Indeed, given the temptations they experienced and the general weakness of traditional authority, their self-restraint was quite remarkable. Tocqueville resolves this paradox by showing that the freedom the young enjoyed with regard to sexual matters was more apparent than real. He believed that all societies have to accept an external moral authority for their members to function effectively either alone or in common. For him, the central question in studying social mores was not whether such an authority exists, but where it resides. In democracies, Tocqueville asserted, majority opinion decides what behavior is honorable and dishonorable and restricts freedom more severely than any traditional moral code (pp. 433–436). The moral content of what democracies honor is determined by the real or perceived needs of the majority and may or may not coincide with universally valid ethical principles (pp. 616–617, 625–627).

In the 1830s, American public opinion condemned license with unparalleled severity (pp. 595, 622). Tocqueville attributed part of this harshness to the influence of Christianity which, even in its weakened condition, continued to shape public thinking to a considerable extent (p. 592). Its chief cause, however, was the pervasive hunger for material gain engendered by equality. During Tocqueville's time, America was a trading and industrial community devoted almost exclusively to exploiting the country's vast natural resources. Americans honored chastity most because it fostered commercial habits, kept families productive, and helped maintain the political stability essential for prosperity (pp. 621–622). Tocqueville stresses the importance of these factors in order to emphasize the extent of American chastity's secular support. Even the survival of Christianity, he indicates, was partly due to its accommodations to the national love of wealth. Chastity's status in American religion would be far less secure, he implies, if it hindered rather than served economic growth (pp. 447–448).

The connection Tocqueville draws between chastity and public opinion sheds new light on the freedom enjoyed by young American women. Put simply, it was not intended to allow the unmarried significant moral choices in sexual matters, but rather to show them that chastity was essential to their future happiness. What an apt student quickly learned from her exposure to the world was the very high cost of sexual misbehavior. She could not "for a moment depart from the usages accepted by her contemporaries without immediately putting in danger her peace of mind, her reputation, and her very social existence" (p. 593). Tocqueville was well aware that pressure of this sort made women chaste in conduct rather than disposition and therefore less than truly virtuous

(JA, p. 114). He believed, however, that this type of virtue was all that could be generally hoped for in democratic times (pp. 590–592).

A woman's freedom was clearly intended, however, to prepare her to decide when and whom to marry. Used wisely, it enabled her to find a true companion—a man who would satisfy her various physical and emotional needs as well as father and protect her children. This choice was clearly the most important of her life, entailing serious responsibilities and irrevocably determining her prospects for future happiness (pp. 595–597; see also Bloom, 1986, p. 84). While a significant number of American women did choose to remain single in Tocqueville's America, divorce was not a viable option (see Chambers-Schiller [1984], pp. 1–5 and Degler, pp. 165ff.). Thus, women proceeded cautiously, waiting until their minds were experienced and mature before making a decision. In the end, though, the free nature of their choice gave them the inner strength to endure its consequences without complaint or regret (pp. 592–594).

As Tocqueville describes it, married life suffered from a moral seriousness which sharply curtailed the independence and pleasure women enjoyed when single. Public opinion confined American wives to the “quiet sphere of domestic duties” and forced them to submit to even “stricter obligations” than their European counterparts (pp. 601, 592). Indeed, Tocqueville suggests that a woman's contact with male society virtually ended on her wedding day (but see p. 243). Although moralists defended these restrictions on a variety of grounds, their central purpose was to establish the “regularity” of a married woman's life, or, in other words, to insure that she remain chaste. These new shackles testify to the gravity with which Americans regarded female adultery. In their view, no other crime posed such a grave threat to family stability and to the moral fiber of the country as a whole (p. 592).

Today's readers might well view Tocqueville's claim that such women were genuinely free with a certain skepticism, if not disbelief. Their hard lives and the constraints they suffered elicit both our sympathy and indignation (see pp. 731–733). From Tocqueville's perspective, however, American marriage constituted a revolutionary advance in the relations between the sexes. The reason is fairly straightforward. Despite their various disabilities, married American women occupied a higher station in life than any of their European counterparts (p. 603). Although European men flattered and pampered their wives, they ruled them despotically on the basis of a grossly exaggerated sense of male superiority. The only way women could exert significant influence over their husbands was through the arbitrary use of their sexual power (p. 602).

In contrast, American wives enjoyed an equality with their spouses that was unprecedented. They entered marriage via a contract which assumed both partners to be free and morally responsible adults (p. 596). Their submission to conjugal authority was based on consent rather than coercion and limited by the

respect generally accorded their judgment and virtue (pp. 601–602). American women also assumed duties considered equal, if not superior, in dignity to those of their husbands. The most important of these were transmitting what remained of the country's Christian heritage to future generations and nourishing their love of freedom (pp. 291, 590; see also MEM 2, p. 349). Tocqueville thought that American wives were more adept at these tasks than their husbands, despite their selfish propensities. This was due partly to their greater natural piety, and partly to the shield their confinement provided against the worst aspects of individualism.

Tocqueville believed that America's decision to grant women a significant role in shaping character was a stroke of political genius. In aristocracies, men were considered the arbiters of mores, thus violating what he considered nature's intention (p. 587). This perversion denied women the opportunity to use constructively their talents and reinforced both domestic and political tyranny. American wives occupied an exalted station, on the other hand, largely because their moral pedagogy effectively complemented their chastity in serving the cause of freedom. Indeed, by stressing the paramount importance of mores, Tocqueville suggests that women contributed more than men to America's freedom despite their lack of formal political power (pp. 590, 600–603).

The high regard with which Americans held their wives and daughters led them to take strict measures against external threats to their virtue. They were more solicitous of women than the French, who treated female vulnerability with considerable contempt (pp. 602–603). In the United States, public opinion tolerated neither language nor literature which an honorable woman would find offensive. While there was no official censorship as in France, no American author was even tempted to write licentious books (p. 256). Americans also rejected the French double standard for adultery. With them, Tocqueville noted "the seducer is as much dishonored as his victim" (p. 602). Finally, while the French treated rapists with a certain tolerance, Americans considered their crime a capital offense. The United States was so safe in the 1830s that young women could "set out on a long journey alone and without fear" (p. 603).

Despite the need for these protective measures, American men posed a relatively minor threat to their country's morals. They generally sought domestic tranquility and shunned romantic adventures of any kind (p. 598). (Tocqueville found no rakes of the type that existed in France in America [Letters, 1985, p. 40].) This docility was due partly to marital freedom, partly to the tight constraints of public opinion, and partly to the tendency of mature democracies to channel male energy almost exclusively toward the acquisition of wealth. Commercial life made our forefathers exceedingly practical, preoccupied, and un-erotic (pp. 598, 532–534). It also made them especially open to the doctrine of enlightened self-love which linked asceticism to the attainment of long-range economic goals (pp. 528–529).

American men did have a weakness for visiting prostitutes, a vice which re-

quired little time, emotional involvement, or imagination. Lawgivers tolerated prostitution because it helped prevent adultery and thus, in an indirect way, kept national morality sound. Tocqueville considered this policy a regrettable but wise concession to the intractability of male lust (p. 598, JA, p. 223).

At this point, a brief summary of our argument is in order. Tocqueville's discussion of American sexual morality was aimed primarily at nineteenth-century France where, despite the advent of political democracy, the relations between the sexes were largely based on the social principles of the Old Regime. He believed that the first of these principles, arranged marriage, contributed significantly to the sexual license which endangered French freedom. His strategy was to enlist reluctant aristocrats on the side of marital freedom and greater freedom for women in general by demonstrating the intrinsic justice of these principles and their beneficial effects on sexual behavior. These could best be seen in America which, in the 1830s, enjoyed a higher level of chastity than any other country in the world.

Tocqueville did not envisage an uncomplicated relationship between women's freedom and strict morals, though, because of the danger posed to chastity by unrestrained sexual desire. In fact, he admired American statesmen for devising strategies which preserved the essence of freedom while preventing its degeneration into license. Their first accomplishment was to institute a system of education which made enlightened self-love rather than religion the primary basis of chastity. This reform became necessary when interest replaced piety as the driving force behind most American behavior. They managed to preserve a residual influence for Christian sexual morality, however, by trimming Christianity to make it compatible with majority opinion.

American moralists also raised the status of married women by treating them as the moral and intellectual equals of men. At the same time they prevented adultery by denying them social and political rights. Tocqueville considered this form of sexual equality a "true conception of democratic progress" (p. 603). It both protected the integrity of the family and gave women a unique opportunity to shape America's character in ways that promoted freedom. It also held American men more fully accountable for their moral failings than their counterparts in France and other European countries.

Despite the obvious depth and subtlety of Tocqueville's analysis, his account of American sexual morality is open to serious criticism. Tocqueville is most widely admired for the light he sheds on contemporary American life and problems, and for his almost uncanny ability to predict future political events. Yet he failed to foresee the sexual revolution which has transformed the moral landscape of our time. Indeed, Tocqueville never seriously doubted the long-term effectiveness of America's solution to the problem of license. Within the past generation, however, we have witnessed an unprecedented increase in promiscuity, adultery, rape, and other forms of sexual behavior relatively rare in Tocqueville's day. Although a slight resurgence of traditional morality has

accompanied the AIDS epidemic and the recent rise of religious fundamentalism, the prevailing sexual ethic is one of almost complete relativism (see Carlson, 1980, pp. 68–71, 76–79 and Bell, 1985, pp. 47–53).

Although Tocqueville's optimism regarding America's future ability to control license was unfounded, *Democracy in America* remains an excellent source for understanding why our sexual mores ultimately changed. Ironically, the American sexual revolution resulted from the radicalization of the democratic principles which Tocqueville identified as promoting chastity during his time. A brief sketch of how these principles came to foster license will show the extent to which he misjudged their efficacy.

Tocqueville's first mistake was to assume that the democratic forces which liberated American women from traditional shackles could be confined within their then established limits. Although he knew that the democratic passion for equality was "ardent, insatiable, eternal, and invincible," he predicted it would respect the various inequalities which then acted as barriers to desire (p. 506). "You will never find American women . . . managing a business, . . . interfering in politics," or "regarding conjugal authority as a . . . usurpation of their rights," he asserted (pp. 601–602). Since he wrote, however, the United States has established political equality for women and eliminated most forms of economic and social discrimination against them. Also, most Americans now consider marriage a relationship of shared decision-making rather than of obedience and command. These changes have brought America close to the radical European version of sexual equality which Tocqueville opposed.

This transformation was aided by certain developments in American science which Tocqueville identified and analyzed, but failed to relate to the growth of women's freedom. He predicted that in an expanding commercial democracy, most scientists would seek to promote material well-being rather than to engage in abstract theoretical studies (pp. 454–465). In such a milieu, he argued, every machine which lessens work or diminishes the cost of economic production seems the "most magnificent accomplishment of the human mind" (p. 462). By the beginning of the twentieth century, labor-saving devices emancipated women from the time-consuming household chores which were partially responsible for their domestic confinement. Technology also enabled large numbers of women to enter the work force, engage in social and political activity, and expand their intellectual horizons.

The most important scientific inventions bearing on the relations between the sexes, however, were contraceptive devices which first appeared in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century (Degler, 1981, pp. 218–219). Birth control dissociated sex from the duties of parenthood and shielded extramarital affairs from public reproach. Scientific theories such as psychoanalysis enhanced this measure of freedom in later years by celebrating the virtues of sexual pleasure. Finally, science, taken as a whole, greatly eroded the modest religious support for chastity which existed during Tocqueville's time by call-

ing into question its theological premises. Many Americans who consider themselves Christians now ignore church doctrine regarding sexual behavior while clergymen tolerate or even condone their once forbidden activities (Carlson, 1980, p. 74).

Tocqueville believed that the principle of “self-interest properly understood” would replace Christianity as the mainstay of American chastity. The long-term efficacy of this principle, however, required that both sexes continue to reap tangible benefits from being chaste. In contemporary America the connection between chastity and self-interest, at least as Tocqueville understood it, is tenuous at best. Although acquiring wealth still demands a certain single-mindedness, it no longer forecloses possibilities for extramarital sexual encounters. Indeed, these possibilities have multiplied exponentially as the social and economic barriers separating men and women have crumbled and sex has become increasingly independent of love. The old equation of sexual morality and national economic prosperity also no longer holds as the sexual revolution now fuels a significant part of the American economy (Carlson, 1980, p. 74; Bell, 1985, p. 48).

In America of the 1830s, women could not violate traditional sexual mores without risking public disgrace. Despite appearances to the contrary, Tocqueville thought that democratic public opinion regarding deeply held moral principles would be highly conservative (p. 640). His assessment of American attitudes toward sexual behavior was correct for several generations after he wrote. Until the 1960s, these attitudes were relatively stable and, as a consequence, women continued to regard chastity as a “point of honor” (p. 622). By the early 1970s, however, the American public came to tolerate broad deviations from chastity as a result of the weakening of its traditional supports (Carlson, 1980, pp. 69–71). At the present time, the forces which shape American values—the universities, the media, and the arts—encourage license with far more vigor than they ever promoted restraint.

In today’s America, sexual freedom has merged with a swollen individualism to seriously endanger traditional family life. Tocqueville thought our ancestors had secured marriage against individualism by making it a voluntary association whose end was private happiness. This strategy certainly succeeded for many generations after he wrote. But the current high incidence of divorce attests to the ultimate fragility of marriage when grounded solely on subjective assessments of well-being (Shorter, 1975, pp. 7, 277–279). Domestic instability has contributed to a large number of ills including crime, suicide, drug abuse, welfare dependency, and illegitimacy (Carlson, 1980, pp. 62–63; Wilson, 1985, pp. 7–9, 12–14). The social cost to future generations is still to be reckoned.

Tocqueville thought that the chief tasks of statemanship in any epoch were to strengthen those elements of a nation’s character which support political freedom and to curb those elements which undermine it (p. 543). In addressing

these tasks in the 1990s, we must ask whether Tocqueville's warnings regarding license and tyranny still have relevance. Specifically, does a disregard for traditional sexual morality pose a serious threat to America's freedom? A careful consideration of the sexual revolution also requires an examination of the relationship between eros and individual happiness. Has the recent loosening of morals enriched our private lives, or has it deepened the restlessness and melancholy Tocqueville believed intrinsic to our character (pp. 535–538)?

Unfortunately, Tocqueville's analysis of sexual morality is of limited help in answering these questions. His primary reason for advocating chastity was to check the political instability in France which presaged the arbitrary rule of a single man. But as he later pointed out, anarchy and traditional tyranny are less to be feared in mature democracies like our own than democratic despotism, a novel condition in which people lose their freedom while retaining its outward forms. Tocqueville discussed the causes of democratic despotism and the ways to avert it, but did not explore the links between sexual behavior and this evil (pp. 543, 667–702).

Tocqueville also fails to examine the value of chastity apart from its political utility. Although he believed in the existence of moral laws based on the "universal and permanent needs of mankind," he never placed eros under their jurisdiction (pp. 616–617, 625–627). Nor did he publicly argue for chastity on religious grounds despite the fact that he was a practicing Catholic (p. 295). Thus, we never learn whether he regarded chastity as an important, but nonetheless conventional virtue, or as an essential component of a well-ordered soul.

If careful study should prove that greater chastity in America is politically desirable, it remains highly questionable whether our sexual mores can be tightened in significant ways. Tocqueville once compared statesmen to navigators whose realm of action is strictly limited by forces beyond their control (p. 163). This metaphor seems aptly to describe the plight of would-be reformers today. The changes wrought by modern American democracy in science, commerce, the relations between the sexes, religion, education, and, above all, public opinion, seem to have made the sexual revolution a permanent part of our national life.

Tocqueville denied, however, that irresistible forces could prevent democratic statesmen from fostering the essential prerequisites of freedom. In fact, he wrote *Democracy in America* to convince the best of them that the fate of freedom was in their hands (p. 705). Yet Tocqueville also knew that statesmen had to modify their strategies for promoting freedom according to changing conditions. "Different times," he wrote, "make different demands" (p. 543, see also p. 12). He did not, therefore, intend his reflections on sexual morality to be rigid prescriptions for the future, but rather, starting points for discussion and thought. If promoting greater chastity is no longer feasible, we may have to focus on different aspects of Tocqueville's multifaceted plan for preserving

freedom or to consult the writings of other political philosophers. We must learn from the great thinkers of the past, but always with an eye toward the unique requirements of our own age.

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