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Abstract: This paper discusses the role of women's associations in public life from 1820-1840 in reference to Alexis de Tocqueville's writings about civil society and the role of women in *Democracy in America*. The essay specifically addresses the importance of the nineteenth century notion of "spheres" of activity particular to each sex to understanding Tocqueville's seemingly inconsistent descriptions of the place of American women and explores the similarities between early nineteenth century women's associations and Tocqueville's conceptions of civil and political associations.

#### Every Woman Helps It Along: Tocqueville and Women's Associations 1820-1840

Alexis de Tocqueville was only one of several astute observers of the young American democracy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Many of his contemporaries, such as Harriet Martineau, Frances Trollope, and Fanny Wright also wrote noteworthy works on the laws and customs of the United States. These works, like *Democracy in America*, specifically discuss the position of women in American society. Often, the accounts are in accord with one another, but differing reports of the place of women in American public life draw attention to inconsistencies in Tocqueville's descriptions (Goldstein 523-6). In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville refers to the married woman's home as "almost a cloister,"

despite the fact that many American women of the 1830s were heavily involved in women's organizations (Tocqueville 592). Further, he endorses the social inferiority of American women despite commenting that they are "morally and intellectually" the equals of men, seemingly in contradiction to his own belief in the inevitable equalizing of conditions (Tocqueville 603). An examination of American women's organizations from 1820-1840 helps to reconcile Tocqueville's conflicting commentary and also to illustrate how an application of Tocqueville's own thought about association can be used to explain the gradual movement toward full equality of the sexes in the United States, even if Tocqueville himself did not advocate or foresee it (600-1).

*Democracy in America* addresses the place of women in society in only a few brief passages, but those passages are significant. The chapter on family in the second volume, surprisingly, includes no discussion of women, focusing on sons and fathers. Instead, women are considered primarily in their roles as wives and daughters and are tacitly excluded from any chapters dealing with citizenship. Tocqueville describes American women as being eminently realistic and practical, even going so far as to describe them as having "... as firm an understanding as [men] and a mind as clear" (603). Even as Tocqueville praises the intellect and capability of American women, he is equally firm about the propriety of their exclusion from public life. These contradictory sentiments are best demonstrated in the following passage:

Thus, then, while they have allowed the social inferiority of woman to continue, they have done everything to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man. In this I think they have wonderfully understood the true conception of democratic progress. For my part, I have no hesitation in saying that although the

American woman never leaves her domestic sphere and is in some respects very dependent within it, nowhere does she enjoy a higher station. (603)

Tocqueville draws a parallel to a miniature society which needs a leader. In Tocqueville's conception, men are the "natural" leaders of that society and the subordination of women to them is not only justifiable but innate (601). While Tocqueville never denies the need for hierarchy within a democracy, his reliance on *natural* superiority is better suited to an aristocratic epistemology than a democratic one. In this case, history's leveling tendency would disprove Tocqueville's argument for the natural political superiority of one sex to the other.

In the passage quoted above, Tocqueville reveals the central idea on which his seemingly contradictory description of the position of American women pivots. This is the nineteenth century doctrine of "spheres" of activity prescribed by sex. Tocqueville indirectly defines the idea himself, writing, "... Americans do not think that man and woman have the duty or the right to do the same things, but they show an equal regard for the part played by both and think of them as beings of equal worth, though their fates are different" (603). It is in this idea that the key to understanding the public place of women in the early nineteenth century lies.

Tocqueville's description of the marital "cloister" combined with his claim that American women stayed strictly within the "domestic" sphere are somewhat misleading. In addition, he writes, "You will never find American women... interfering with politics"(601). The language Tocqueville uses in these instances creates the impression that women were invisible, keeping scrupulously to the home and shunning the public world. It is true that American women confined their public activities to what was considered their proper sphere during Tocqueville's time, but it is equally true that this very sphere had seen very significant expansion

in the same period.

For many women the gateway from the home to the public sphere was the church, which was the primary social realm of women during the first two thirds of the nineteenth century (Goldstein 526). While Alexis de Tocqueville traveled the United States in the early 1830s gathering material for *Democracy in America*, a subtle but important social movement was underway. Now referred to as “The Second Great Awakening,” it was characterized by dramatic increases in church membership and a new emphasis on emotion, experience, and good deeds in religious thought (Kleinberg 81). Protestant churches saw enrolment double, with female converts far outpacing their male counterparts (Kleinberg 81).

The new focus on emotion and service expanded opportunities for civic association available to women, who were able to justify their involvement in public affairs by arguing that as moral beings they had a duty to serve the community in benevolent and moral societies (Boylan in Cott 49). The spread of Evangelical Protestantism across the nation in the 1830s carried with it the “Cult of True Womanhood,” which included not only the reverence of domesticity, but also the belief that because women were the moral guardians of the family, they were obligated to look after the moral concerns of the community (McTighe in Cott 135). This expanded the proper sphere of women to include philanthropy. Tocqueville shares this notion of women as the shapers of morality and recognizes the importance of religion to the women of that era as well (291-2).

Tocqueville writes extensively about the functions of association in democratic states, drawing a distinction between political and civil associations. He describes political associations as being organizations with explicitly political aims which “...have the power to attack existing laws and to formulate... laws which should take the place of the present ones” (190). Civil

associations, by contrast, exist to bring about any of the myriad ends which are not overtly political or under the care of the government (Tocqueville 513). In the first volume of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville writes a great deal about the importance of associations in preparing Americans to be responsible free citizens. In the second volume, he elaborates on this idea, writing that "... the technique of association becomes the mother of every other technique; everyone studies and applies it" (523). Women were no exception. They, too, partook in the American mania for association, forming their own societies to combat the social ills brought to their attention by their frank, unsheltered upbringing.

While women lacked full citizenship and so were formally excluded from political participation, they nonetheless found means of promoting their own political agendas through moral associations. One scholar, Anne Boylan, has advanced the notion of two distinct types of women's organizations existing in the early nineteenth century. First is the benevolent organization, which aimed to improve the conditions of individuals through charitable means, which can be compared to Tocqueville's civic association with its limited and private scope. One example of this type of organization is Boston's Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, active during the 1830s. This organization sought to ameliorate the wretched conditions of individual families, but refrained from seeking social causes for the wretchedness, instead aiming only to solve the problems of each case (Boylan 46-7).

Reform organizations represent the second type. These organizations operated under charitable and moral banners as well, but aimed for broader changes in social policy and were often overtly political in their aims, some even influencing legislation (Boylan in Cott 41-44, 50). The Female Moral Reform Society of Boston and New York, founded in the 1830s, worked to reduce prostitution. It differed from its benevolent brethren in its conception of prostitution as

a social, not individual, moral problem. The Female Moral Reform Society actively campaigned for changes in legislation, eventually succeeding in making seduction a crime in New York state (Boylan in Cott 50).

Both were prominent during the years 1830-1840, when the two volumes of *Democracy in America* were in the making. In organizations such as these, women learned the skills necessary for running organizations, including fund-raising and the management of large non-profit public corporations and the resources that went with them (Boylan 46). More importantly, they served as the “free schools in which... citizens come to be taught the general theory of association” Tocqueville found so necessary to good democratic citizenship (522).

In the following decades, female moral associations would gradually expand their activities from the safely feminine philanthropy of 1830s benevolent societies to include more and more contentious political issues. Temperance societies, founded in the 1820s merged in the 1850s and 1860s with abolitionist organizations, themselves founded in the 1830s (Kleinberg 82-4, 88-92) . Later still both joined with women’s suffrage associations to demand the same rights and duties that Tocqueville found so distasteful when shared between women and men equally (Kleinberg 88-92, Tocqueville 601).

Although Tocqueville himself may find this historical progression unsavory, decrying “...the sort of equality forced on both sexes [that] degrades them both and... could produce nothing but feeble men and unseemly women,” his own political theory predicts it (601). The very women he perceived as being secluded from the dirty public business of politics were, in fact, very much involved in it under the protective shroud of sphere-sanctioned philanthropy. In these “unseemly” associations, women underwent the same education in citizenship that their husbands, fathers, and brothers did, and in so doing joined Tocqueville’s inexorable march

toward equality. “The gradual progress of equality,” Tocqueville writes in his opening chapter, “is something fated... it is universal and permanent, it is daily passing beyond human control, and every event and every man helps it along” (12). In light of the role of women’s organizations in initiating female proto-citizens in the early nineteenth century, he may add to that, “every woman.”

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