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The Intermingling Spheres of Antebellum Women's Politics

Anyone who picks up Michael Pierson's *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* will quickly appreciate the book's premise. Antebellum Americans developed significant partisan loyalties in response to "the distinctive nature of the parties' positions on family and gender" (p. 7). In light of today's partisan wrangling over "family values" and the meaning of the modern family, this makes sense. Disagreement over abortion rights, teen birth control, gay marriage, and the rights of domestic partners define the partisan boundaries of the early-twenty-first-century. The virtue of Pierson's book is that it shows how evolving and competing visions of gender and family influenced nineteenth-century politics as well. Furthermore, the author claims that such issues had a direct bearing on the greatest political crisis in the country's history: the breakup of the second party system and Civil War.

Free Hearts and Free Homes takes its place in the historiography of the new political history by looking beyond the formal "high politics" of the antebellum period, the platforms, editorials, and speeches of notable politicos, and the legislative issues they dominated. Instead, Pierson wants to explain how the partisan loyalties of ordinary men and women were defined by what we call, these days, the culture wars. Antebellum Americans developed divergent viewpoints on women's labor, companionate marriage, female sexual authority and childbearing, masculinity and patriarchy, and, as an important outgrowth of these issues, the debate over antislavery. Each of these issues, says the author, in turn influenced partisan appeal and the mainstream political debate.

To help explain the cultural and political shifts Pierson references the historical literature of community studies, gender, and the marketplace. Historians have drawn a picture of northern communities involved in the market revolution, and explained how a new ideology of "domestic feminism" characterized the increasingly public expressions of "activist women." Such women were

mostly urban, middle class, white, Protestants, whose families were directly affected by the growing market economy. Pierson sees a connection between these women and the new antislavery political ideologies that emerged in the 1840s. According to the author, political debate over slavery was now "intertwined with issues pertaining to gender roles and the nature of the family" (p. 18). As he writes, "parties did consistently try to exploit the gender beliefs of their constituents as they carefully crafted campaign biographies, newspaper editorials, and the gendered division of labor at rallies to appeal to voters" (p. 23).

The author traces the rise of the new gendered politics and describes the emerging political constituency of "antislavery women" that accompanied it. Just as educated, northern, middle class women established greater authority over their own reproductive decisions, for example, they also asserted a new kind of political authority, which first became palpable with the national appearance of the Liberty Party in 1840. Politically interested women fastened together the issues of family and slavery to form what he calls an "antislavery gender ideology" (p. 21). At the heart of this ideology was a basic distrust of patriarchy which, though not as sharply edged as the radical feminist ideology of the day, drew a connection between the tyrannical authority of the slave owning patriarch and the sexual and physical depredations he committed against powerless slave women and children. From this perspective, families, whether free or slave, suffered from the unchecked authority of the patriarch. Antislavery women stopped short of the more radical calls for free love espoused by other feminists, or even the complete emancipation of women from their husbands' legal authority called for by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, but their version of domestic feminism nevertheless redefined the relationship of husbands and wives on more equitable and mutual terms. It also conformed to the basic material changes that were shaping the North, which in their own way encouraged greater agency on the part of married women. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, accepted the basic tenets of the free labor ideology that defined the economic viewpoint of the Free Soilers and Republicans, and even supported "the idea of women working in the marketplace" (p. 76).

While antislavery women accepted the bourgeois vision of free labor and companionate marriage, the author shows how they projected their gendered view of equality through the prism of antislavery, and staked out a more uncompromising position than their male counterparts. Antislavery women argued that only the abolition of slavery could protect the rights of husbands, wives, and children from the tyranny of the slave owner. In this respect, antislavery women had little patience with the equivocating of their male counterparts in the Free Soil and Republican parties who found supposed constitutional protections for the rights of slave owners. As long as slavery remained in place, argued antislavery women, slave families could never approximate the liberal ideal of domestic feminism, let alone liberal free labor values, which they embraced in their own lives.

Since they were formally excluded from the political process as voters and officeholders, antislavery women influenced politics in other ways, as participants in rallies, petition signers, newspaper editors, and novelists. The most successful and influential expression of the new ideology came in 1852 with the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to Pierson, Stowe's novel represents only the best known work in a class he calls Free Soil women's writings. Women's voices were welcomed within the partisan circles of Free Soil and Republican campaign politics in the decade before the Civil War. Though the author does not clarify the exact working relationship between male party leaders and antislavery women, he offers examples of women's voices speaking directly to the interests of antislavery gender ideology. In addition to the prominent Stowe, he cites the writings of women who supported the mainstream antislavery candidates of the Free Soil and Republican parties, including longtime antislavery advocate Lydia Maria Child, as well as influential local newspaper editors Jane Grey Swisshelm, of Pittsburgh, and Clarina Nichols of Brattleboro, Vermont. Taken together their writings defined the political core of women's antislavery politics and, according to the author, influenced the mainstream appeal of Free Soil and Republican Party politics. Perhaps the most fascinating example he offers is the inaugural 1856 Republican campaign of John C. Fremont. Much of the political hubbub surrounding Fremont's candidacy centered on the idealized picture of his wife, Jesse Benton Fremont, and their elopement years earlier. Pierson frames the issue as a triumph of domestic feminism in the evolving political mainstream.

Fremont's defeat in 1856 may have tempered the Republicans' enthusiasm for domestic feminism, but according to the author, it did not necessarily lessen its influence. Abraham Lincoln's candidacy four years later appeared less vigorous in its celebration of the "new" woman. Yet, as the author points out, southerners reacted with hostility to Lincoln's candidacy just the same, since in their minds the Republicans were by then in-

delibly marked with the twin evils of abolition and domestic feminism. This judgment seems well supported by the campaign propaganda issued by southerners and Democrats alike, which pigeonholed Republicans as radical reformers akin to free love advocates and other "lunatics" on the political fringe (p. 128). Ironically, it was two male politicians, Congressman Owen Lovejoy of Illinois and Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, who provoked the greatest ire of southerners by employing a sexual critique of slavery in their congressional speeches, using material drawn from the pages of domestic feminism authored by such antislavery women as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child.

The episodes involving Lovejoy and Sumner beg the question of women's political influence. Pierson tends to conflate what he calls "gender ideology" with the "Republican ideology of free hearts and free homes" (p. 4). The foremost student of antebellum Republican Party ideology, Eric Foner, pretty convincingly defined free soil and free labor as the ideological heart of the Republican Party. The free hearts and free homes rhetoric that Pierson identifies was certainly present in the partisan writings, speeches, and campaigns, but it is not clear from the evidence he provides that domestic feminism equates with a "Republican ideology." Lovejoy and Sumner represent but two rather liberal voices in the Republican ranks. Since the author himself acknowledges the more conservative character of the 1860 campaign, it remains to be seen how much influence gender ideology wielded in the partisan political culture of the Civil War years and beyond.

The question of influence is an admittedly difficult one to pin down, and it is hard to judge how much influence antislavery women exerted over the political process. "In the years after 1848," Michael Pierson writes, "antislavery politics, based in the North where social and familial changes were most marked, incorporated domestic feminism into their political culture. By doing so, they staked out a political position that appealed to the increasingly large number of northerners who sought to ideologically validate the changes they were making in their lives" (p. 96). Unlike other historians of the second party system, Pierson does not attempt to quantify or correlate changes in electoral behavior, the point at which partisanship translates into formal political power and office holding. Instead, he draws inferences of political support, from selected literary sources, including partisan newspapers, pamphlets, correspondence, and other published writings. In this respect, he does a commendable job of inferring the political influence of antislavery women, who were after all a disenfranchised class of political actors.

It remains for others to continue the spadework of quantification and correlation, turning over newspaper subscription lists, petition signatures, poll books, census records, and the like to form a more empirical view of how many, how often, and with what result, women participated in antislavery politics. Recent studies by antislavery scholars such as Debra Bingham Van Broekhoven, Julie Roy Jeffrey, and Susan Zaeske serve to complement the work done by Michael Pierson, as they illuminate the grassroots populations of antislavery women.

Together these studies present a picture of antebellum America that refines the meaning of antislavery and considerably broadens the definition of politics, including its social and cultural underpinnings. By examining how gender influenced political style, rhetoric, and partisan appeal, Michael Person also helps to contextualize the ongoing conflicts over family, marriage, and gender that shape American democracy to the present day.

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