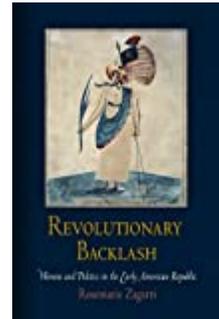




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Reinterpreting Women, Politics, and Culture

“Questions of culture may have come to replace questions of politics,” wrote Ellen DuBois in a now-canonical roundtable in *Feminist Studies* on the state of women’s history in 1980. “It may be time to return to the study of politics from the more sophisticated perspective which the study of culture has afforded us.”[1] At a crucial moment in the study of women in history, DuBois sought to warn scholars of the implications of conducting their research and analysis without primarily attending to the question of politics and thereby to feminism. No matter how much her position was unique to the historical moment in which it was written, we cannot help but see its continuing relevance to the study of women in the postrevolutionary era.

As a historian who came to graduate school in a far different scholarly climate in 1995, I found DuBois’s position somewhat old-fashioned when I read the roundtable as a stereotypically snooty first-year graduate student. At that time, I found the cultural history arguments of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who countered DuBois’s assertions, far more convincing; I felt that women’s history did

not require constant reference to the male-dominated environment of politics. Even in 1980, the nearly simultaneous publication of Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* and Mary Beth Norton’s *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* seemed to confirm the prevailing tendency to examine women’s history through an intellectual and cultural lens (in Kerber’s case) or through a close analysis of their private lives and experiences (in Norton’s case).

Years later, however, on reading Rosemarie Zagarri’s fine new book, I experienced a sense of intellectual excitement about the potential for analyzing women, politics, and culture that I have not felt in a long time. *Revolutionary Backlash* includes a wide array of cultural and intellectual analysis, but argues most convincingly that we need to understand women’s changing position between 1780 and 1830 primarily in the context of the politics of the time—and she has a lot of sparkling evidence to prove it. When was the last time you read a monograph on women’s history in which the War of 1812 and the

Panic of 1819 played central turning points? And does not this fact spark your interest?

Zagarri takes a story that has been approached by many scholars before her: the question of why there was no revolution for women's rights during or after the American Revolution—and why middling and elite women apparently embraced such a restrictive domestic ideal by the 1830s. Most other scholars, including myself, have attributed this process to cultural shifts so nuanced and multivalent as to make the historical causality of those changes appear obscure. In contrast, Zagarri demands that we see this as an overt political backlash against the variety of new opportunities and public roles for white women that opened up in the years immediately after the war. In other words, women's exclusion from politics and voting was an explicit effort to restrict their role, not simply a byproduct of the effort to expand the franchise for white men.

To be sure, many scholars have chipped away at the notion of a restrictive view of politics as consisting of the vote and participation in office, including Catherine Allgor's *Parlor Politics* (2000), which depicted the political brokering of powerful women in early Washington DC, as well as important essays by Jeanne Boydston and Jan Lewis, among others.[2] Not all of these scholars have been historians of women and gender; an important component of the "new new political history" of the early Republic during the past few years consists of analyses—including those by Joanne Freeman, David Waldstreicher, and Seth Cotlar—of the many manifestations of political activity. In this regard, historians of the early Republic have joined their Europeanist colleagues in employing the term "civil society" to encompass a wide range of social action and behavior—activities that might have political meaning, but that blurred the lines between state, family, market, and culture. "Civil society" has allowed scholars to examine a great diversity of historical spaces, actors, and civil institutions that do not fit within a public/private dichotomy, and demonstrate the absence of stable boundaries between political and nonpolitical activities. In the case of historians of women and gender, using civil society as a designator has often resulted in stretching the definition of "politics" quite far. This is not true in Zagarri's case. She promises us early on that she, too, examines American civil society; yet her freshest material and analysis shows us straight-up political conversations about the possibility that women might become equal political actors in the early American Republic.

The first two chapters provide an overview of women's involvement in the Revolution, the postwar attention to women's rights, and the "New Jersey exception" (the right possessed by single or widowed women and free blacks to vote, which remained in place until 1804). This early part of the book maintains a tone similar to parts of Richard Godbeer's *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (2002)—that is, it is a rich synthesis of the research in the field (weaving in analysis from some of Zagarri's own previously published essays) that folds in many new and truly wonderful archival finds. This part of the book appears best designed for advanced undergraduates, for much of it will ring familiar to specialists in the field. The second chapter on Americans' ambivalence toward "female politicians" (women who concerned themselves with politics), in particular, allows her to set the stage for the remainder of the book by illustrating "a widespread, vigorous, and often heated debate on the subject of whether women should vote and hold office" (p. 47). "Although women were not yet demanding political rights, it seemed to be only a matter of time before they would do so," she concludes (p. 81).

Her story accelerates by the third and fourth chapters, in which she analyzes the effect of serious partisan conflict between Federalists and Republicans beginning in the 1790s. Because women as well as men had become polarized during these battles—and even more so during the War of 1812 and the Panic of 1837—there arose two important outcomes, both taking place on the cultural front. First, male partisans began to employ highly gendered attacks on one another, characterizing women and effeminacy as dangerous. These attacks "raised troubling questions about the wisdom of women's politicization. Women's political activities exacerbated and intensified the existing tensions between men" (p. 114). This is a nice insight that demonstrates the porous quality of political discourse and civil society when using gender analysis: during the viciousness of partisan battles, gendered epithets came to play such a prominent place that they could not help but damage women's place in those battles.

The second phenomenon is even more interesting and unexpected. Zagarri reinterprets the transition to domesticity as being explicitly related to the political battles between parties. She shows that popular writing by the 1810s and 1820s adopted a new theme—urging women to become nonpartisan patriots who might help resolve the nastiness of that partisan conflict. At first, in fact, this appeared to have a political cast: women might be *better* citizens if they stayed out of partisan bickering. They were now celebrated as mediators and peacemakers

within their families; prescriptive literature referred to women as possessing the unique capability to soften the most virulent political sentiments. “Woman’s influence,” however, gradually transformed into not just a nonpartisan, but also a *nonpolitical* benevolent phenomenon that began within the family and slowly extended outward to charitable activities and perhaps even social reform. These activities remained predicated on their exclusion from politics per se. In other words, Zagarrri shows that women were directed away from politics and toward domesticity as a means of healing the disunion among the populace and attaining a new cultural harmony. Women might play vital roles in the republican order, but only if they acceded to withdraw from party politics. “Historians have usually portrayed separate spheres as a tool used to *prevent* women from entering politics,” Zagarrri writes. “Separate spheres ideology, then, may actually have been a reaction *against* women’s more extensive involvement in politics, a convenient way to explain and justify excluding women from party politics and electoral activities” (p. 135).

The book’s final chapter closely examines the uneven expansion of the franchise for white men as it emerged in successive state conventions to revise their constitutions, especially during the 1820s. Zagarrri uses a fascinating set of newspaper reports of those conventions to identify the numerous times women wrote essays protesting the restrictiveness of those moves. But here the book’s argument begins to lose its sharpness, for it incorporates a more abstract set of evidence. She particularly highlights the growing popularity of biological essentialism that altered Americans’ views of not just sex but also race. This is important material to be sure; we know well to associate together the exclusion of both women and black men as “universal” suffrage expanded. Zagarrri also brings in the analysis of the differences between Lockean and Scottish Enlightenment views of “rights” that she developed so fully in her 1998 *William and Mary Quarterly* article, “The Rights of Man and Woman.”^[3] As important as these components are, her evidence and the chronological muddiness of those themes detract from the sharp narrative and tightly connected nature of her preceding chapters. Still, she concludes the book with a fascinating distinction between the French and American cases of women’s engagement in politics. Whereas

in France elite women lost their public place by political means (which was vividly symbolized with mass executions), “in America the backlash occurred primarily in the realms of culture and society” (p. 185). American political leaders rejected the “full implications of equality and natural rights” but enacted that exclusion through the cultural back door (p. 185).

For those of us who have followed her trenchant essays on this broader subject—most notably her aforementioned “The Rights of Man and Woman”—the book will demonstrate a broader focus and a more approachable voice to benefit student readers. The evidence she marshals is terrific and plentiful; paragraphs sometimes contain as many as four or five separate highly original examples drawn from a broad range of print and archival sources. Advanced undergraduates will find the notion of “backlash” to be a useful and clear framework for understanding changing gender ideals after the Revolution. For graduate students, this book will represent a fascinating reinterpretation of women’s exclusion from politics during the era and a strong participant in the conversation about political history during the early Republic.

Notes

[1]. Ellen DuBois, with Mari Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Politics and Culture in Women’s History: A Symposium,” *Feminist Studies* 6 (1980): 33.

[2]. Jeanne Boydston, “Making Gender in the Early Republic: Judith Sargent Murray and the Revolution of 1800,” in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic*, ed. James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 240-266; and Jan Lewis, “Politics and the Ambivalence of the Private Sphere: Women in Early Washington, D.C.,” in *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early Republic*, ed. Donald R. Kennon (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia for the United States Capitol Historical Society, 1999), 122-151.

[3]. Rosemarie Zagarrri, “The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (1998): 203-230.

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