



Louise Michele Newman. *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. vii + 261 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-512466-8; \$98.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-508692-8.



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Feminism and Racial Formations

Louise Newman's *White Women's Rights* offers a systematic analysis of the connections among feminist ideology and politics, evolutionary thought, racial formations, and imperialist and assimilationist projects in the United States during the Progressive era. According to Newman, white women in this period staked their claims to wider public roles and greater equality relative to white men by emphasizing a racial and cultural superiority shared with Protestant white men and by claiming special roles as women "civilizers of racially inferior peoples" (p. 21). While asserting a more modern and emancipated role for themselves on the grounds of white cultural superiority, these white feminists advocated more traditional, domestically-based gender roles for women from "less advanced" groups. They did so because, they alleged, civilization developed only when women nurtured Christian morality and a reverence for a republican order through their influence as mothers and wives in the domestic setting and when men offered support and protection to them through their public roles.

Once social groups had attained civilization, however, they believed it appropriate for women from these

groups to broaden their participation in public life. Although they differed in the content of their ideologies, their strategies for empowerment, and their relations to powerful men and to disempowered social groups, the Progressive era women investigated by Newman all shared in the efforts to reform society and their place in it. They did so, according to Newman, by appropriating scientific discourses drawn from evolutionary biology in order to make claims based on racial superiority. Her investigation of this strategy illuminates the difficulties of seeking power outside the ideological frames dominant in a given historical period.

Newman's analysis of nineteenth century antisuffragists Catherine Beecher and Mary Abigail Dodge demonstrates the continuing commitment of many privileged Victorian women to the gendered separation of morality (understood to be feminine and domestic) and power (understood to be masculine and public) into the Gilded Age. Only by exercising feminine influence, they believed, could women's power for good be retained. But, according to Newman, the growing influence of immigrants in American politics undermined republican ideals

for men and eroded Protestant women's conviction that they could exert a moral influence on the public world without entering it themselves.

Newman's careful examinations of the political thought and activities of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Alice Fletcher offer the strongest support for her thesis, in part because Gilman adopted particularly strong criticisms of domestic roles for white women and Fletcher could see the empowerment that labor on behalf of the community had provided for Indian women. Both used evolutionary thought to support the enforcement of the breadwinner/homemaker division of labor found in most middle class white families among African Americans, American Indians, and others. Gilman's agenda for blacks included enforced labor in "industrial armies" for men who had not demonstrated adequate commitment to the work ethic. Fletcher worked actively to advance and implement the plan for the allotment of Indian lands as private property in order to establish nuclear families under male provision. That, she believed, functioned as an essential first stage in the road to "civilization."

The same domestic arrangements among middle class whites, however, were to Gilman an atavistic vestige of an earlier time. Given industrialization and women's increasing public roles, Gilman believed that the constricted and privatized world of the household held women (and thus the white race) back from their real potential. White women spent too much time on unspecialized and inefficient work for individual households, while men took advantage of cooperation and specialization to advance themselves and society technically and intellectually. Moreover, men chose their mates not for the attributes that would advance the race, but for superficial ones instead. Women, according to Gilman, had to be economically independent in order to take charge of sexual selection and improve the "racial" stock. This would also encourage a related cultural change by freeing women from a narrow socialization designed to enable them to please men and encourage an education focused on preparing women for a wide range of activities in the public world.

Working as an anthropologist, a bureaucrat, and an activist, Alice Fletcher acted to advance her ideas about evolutionary progress among Native Americans. An architect and advocate of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, which divided Indian lands into individual plots and sold the remainder to eager white settlers, Fletcher understood the new law as the "Magna Charta of the Indians of our country"(p. 125). This was especially true for the

Indian man, who would now become a "free man, free from the thralldom of the tribe"(p. 125) and able to claim his dominion over land and family. In order for men to do so, Indian women had to give up the freedom and status they had developed as a consequence of the economically productive labor they had done on behalf of tribes, clans, and families and accept legal marriage, economic dependence, and subordination to men. Change in women's economic roles would enable men to become farmers without suffering the stigma associated with doing "women's work" and would offer incentives for men to assume the role of providers for nuclear families.

Middle class white women's political actions in service to civilization and their roles as agents of the state extended to the "protection" of white working class women domestically and to support for white imperial practices abroad. For working class women, middle class reformers advocated laws that limited their hours, established a minimum wage, and offered workplace protections denied to male workers on the assumption that such state regulation undermined their manhood, understood as "freedom from" the state. In a chapter on May French-Sheldon, an American woman who undertook a safari to Africa in 1891 without white male "protectors," Newman demonstrates the possibilities that imperialism could offer to individual women. French-Sheldon was successful in deploying western power and African labor in order to claim her superiority as a *white* woman. She asserted such a claim not only in relation to African men, whose deference to her signified their capacity for civilization, but also with respect to white men, whose recourse to violence in colonial encounters she called into question.

Newman does a good job of locating middle class white women's politics in the context of their relations to the men of their class. In examining the debate over women's access to higher education, Newman cogently analyzes the dilemmas posed for them when men tried to usurp the ideology of sexual difference, used by Victorian women to claim broader public roles and influence, in order to assert men's right to determine its meanings and set limits on women's activities. What was new in this period was men's recourse to "scientific" understandings of sexual difference and their claim that women who engaged in rigorous study and other non-domestic activities would destroy their reproductive systems and cause "race suicide."

Women's defensive position in this debate illuminates the decision by some to try to use "science" on their own behalf and reveals the modern dimensions of their

dilemma. Although social Darwinism has lost its centrality today, biological theories of sexual and racial difference continue to exert substantial influence in American society with the result that critics feel compelled to respond from within the frameworks provided by such biological thinking. At the same time, when Gilman's works are read from a contemporary perspective, her use of evolutionary theory seems tortured and distracting. Read within their intellectual and political context, however, her ideas become explicable. And Newman does a particularly fine job of situating Gilman, who was the foremost feminist theoretician of her time, within the circle of thinkers who influenced her and with whom she communicated.

White Women's Rights is a thoughtful and very important work on the intellectual and political history of Progressive era white women. It makes a significant contribution to a growing body of work on women reformers and racial formations in this period. Moreover, by taking intellectual history seriously, it provides a more systematic understanding of women's positions within and contributions to American social thought in this period. By linking intellectual, social, and political history, it offers a critical perspective on middle class white women's search for power in this period.

Even as it advances our understanding on some issues, it raises other questions. Newman made a conscious decision to use the term "white" to refer to middle class Americans of European descent, thus obscuring the role of class in the politics of this era. This omission also includes her brief discussion of middle class African American women, whose strategy of respectability was, she concludes, "not so much evidence of their class conservatism as it was of their commitment to taking responsibility for racial uplift" (p. 9). Certainly other scholarship, most notably that by Evelyn Higginbotham, Kevin Gaines, and Deborah Gray White, calls this into question.

Newman builds from works by other authors, some of whom are not adequately discussed in the text. These include Gwendolyn Mink and Dolores Janiewski, whose works generally substantiate Newman's analysis but are not mentioned in her book, and Linda Gordon and Peggy Pascoe, whose works offer some qualifications to her thesis. The latter omissions are important, because Newman's work seems to cast working class women and women of color as objects of discourses created by white

women. In Pascoe's *Relations of Rescue*, they are active but unequal participants in their interactions with white women and are able to claim some benefits from their association. Similarly, in Gordon's *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, women clients actively assert their interests and are sometimes able to claim resources or effect changes they desire.

Newman's own evidence occasionally points to the complexities of these interactions. Newman relates the intervention of Alice Fletcher into Indian family lives in the story of a young Indian woman who resisted her family's arranged marriage to her older sister's husband. The young woman ran away and married a young man not of her family's choosing. Fletcher allotted land to them as a married couple. Although Newman reads this episode as a simple matter of Fletcher's ethnocentrism and her commitment to the bourgeois nuclear family, the young woman's rebellion from the customary practices of her people calls into question such a simple reading. It ignores the possibility that gender and intergenerational conflicts, constructed out of inequalities and given new meanings and possibilities by contact with whites, might also be genuinely "Indian." >From the point of view of the young Indian couple, Fletcher was an ally, not an interloper. (p. 127).

Finally, I am not persuaded that all the women discussed in Newman's book fully fit her paradigm. Progressive era reformers varied in their class and race ideologies and politics. The discussion of protective legislation, in particular, is too brief to elucidate fully the assumptions of its advocates. Some who supported it clearly wished to extend protection to men also and used gender in part as a strategy to elude the conservatism of the American judiciary. Moreover, the evidence provided on Margaret Mead's racial "conservatism" is too slim to persuade me that her views are best understood as an extension of the ideologies that Newman ably associates with Gilman and others.

On balance, however, *White Women's Rights* is an innovative and provocative work that provides new interpretations of white women's ideologies and activism at the turn of the century. I recommend it highly.

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