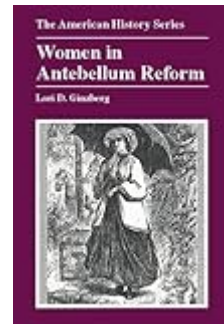




**Lori D. Ginzberg.** *Women in Antebellum Reform.* Wheeling, Ill: Harlan Davidson, 2000. x + 143. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88295-951-1.



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In 1841 Ralph Waldo Emerson, in an essay entitled “Man the Reformer,” wrote “in the history of the world the doctrine of Reform had never such a scope as at the present hour.” What Emerson did not explain, and what his essay ignored, was that many of the people who labored for these reforms were women. Over the past three decades, historians have recovered and explained how American women drove, shaped and often controlled these reform movements. In *Women in Antebellum Reform*, Lori Ginzberg provides an accessible and readable account of these women reformers and the causes they championed. Using primary and secondary sources, she covers the main movements of social reform, tracing the development of the Benevolent Empires efforts to ameliorate poverty, reform morals, and transform the methods of housing and helping the criminal and the insane. Following the broad lines of accepted historiography, she argues for the growing importance of the antislavery movement and the ways that these various reforms led to the struggle to change the place of women in American society. Ginzberg argues that through their reform efforts, American women “articulated a range of concerns about social justice, fashioned new conventions for women’s public activity, and challenged assumptions about gender, class, race, and reform that transformed their own lives as well” (p. ix).

Throughout the text, Ginzberg describes both the large cultural ideas that shaped women’s reform efforts and the experiences of individual reformers. One example of this approach is her presentation of the Second Great Awakening. Religion is a key component of her story, and she boldly states that “[t]he social reform movements of the 1830s and 1840s would not have taken the shape they did without this religious transformation” (p. 8). Ginzberg places great importance on the role of revivalism in invigorating the religious culture of the United States and encouraging a more strenuous effort to improve and change American society. She shows how this invigoration encouraged the growth of religious organizations for social reform as well as profoundly affecting movements like temperance and prison reform. One crucial effect of this new religious mindset was the transformation of the antislavery movement from the gradualist plans and colonization efforts of the 1820s into the more active forms of religiously charged Garrisonian abolition. Ginzberg argues that the abolition movement served to bring women into a more aggressive stance towards social change and encouraged women to challenge their place within social reform movements and American society.

Ginzberg also remains sensitive to the role cultural factors played in determining which reform efforts indi-

vidual women chose to champion. However, although she recognizes that class and race were often key factors in individual women's choice of which reform movement to join, she does not argue that these reform movements were the simple expression of class dominance or the effort to extend a bourgeois hegemony over a rapidly changing society. Instead, she presents these women as individuals who hoped to improve society, even if their vision of a better society was limited by their middle-class values. She also counters social control arguments by giving attention to working-class, African-American and non-Christian reformers. Ginzberg provides a well-balanced account of reform that allows for the influence of powerful cultural factors and the force of the changing market while still giving individual reformers agency in their decisions. Ginzberg avoids easy characterizations and stereotypes in favor of more complex descriptions of conflicting motives and unintended consequences. This complexity of identity and motivation is impressive in such a brief volume.

Along with this attention to large structural factors in American society, Ginzberg presents an intimate account of the ways women's lives were impacted by participating in reform movements. Ginzberg describes both socially conservative and more radical reforms and the dramatic differences between the experiences of women who championed disparate reform efforts. While some reforming women, especially those who concentrated on the genteel and acceptable efforts for temperance or tract societies found their social position enhanced by their social causes, women who spoke out for abolition or women's rights often found themselves exiled from the parlors of their neighbors. These women forged bonds with other reforming women, producing alliances of affection and friendship that tied together generations of reformers. Ginzberg brilliantly draws attention to the ways in which participation in reform organizations often had

negative repercussions for women reformers and their families. One of the most interesting sections is an unfortunately too brief account of the ways that the families of reformers were intertwined and how the children of reformers looked at, and were affected by, the reform activities of their parents. Ginzberg quotes Elizabeth Cady Stanton's bitter lament that the children of reformers "have been ostracised [sic] and ignored for heresies they have never accepted. The humiliation of our children has been the bitterest drop in the cup of reformers" (p. 84).

In *Women in Antebellum Reform*, Ginzberg manages to provide analytical accounts of the reform movements while still highlighting the individual reformers that fought to change society. Although the text cannot fully explore the experiences of any particular reformer, she does manage to put human faces on large movements. She does this while combining an overview of the broad lines of historiography with her own arguments about individual reform efforts. Her historiographical debts are clearly presented in a fine bibliographical essay that concludes the volume. Written in clear prose and organized both thematically and chronologically, the text combines a textbook's sense of generality with the focused arguments of a monograph. This clarity of presentation makes it a wonderful teaching text and probably the best single volume on women's reform that is aimed at undergraduate students; although it could also be used by graduate students as an initial foray into the topic. Perhaps the best estimation of this slim text's value is that it has found a place on the syllabus for my class on American reform in the upcoming Autumn quarter.

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