

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**S. J. Kleinberg.** *Women in the United States 1830-1945*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999. xii + 368 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2729-1; \$59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2728-4.



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The aim of this work, writes author S. J. Kleinberg, is to provide “a general introduction to the history of women in industrializing America” and demonstrate the “female component of the grand forces shaping American life: the commercialization of agriculture, urbanization, industrialization, the demographic transition, immigration, slavery, and the westward movement” (pp. 4-5). To order such a large history, Kleinberg has chosen to divide this long chronology, from 1830 to 1945, into three parts: “Ante-bellum America,” “The Industrial Era,” and “From the Vote to World War II.” Each part has four separate chapters covering economics, family and demographics, education and culture, and reform and politics. These are the “main threads women wove together to form the fabric of their lives” (p. 5). Within each chapter are distinct subthemes to emphasize the diversity of women’s experiences and highlight individual stories. A short epilogue provides a broad synopsis of the post-World War II era.

Each of the three parts of the book begins with an overview of the economic picture of the United States in the era being covered. A discussion of basic shifts and variations in work patterns and everyday living reveals the gendered patterns of the economy, as does an examination of more complex changes in demography and ideology. Individual life stories lead into brief analyses

of larger societal changes, while introductions to grand transformations lead back to personal histories. Woven into the story that Kleinberg tells are introductions to and short analyses of the arguments of influential individual scholars. These do not overwhelm the flow of the narrative; instead they add substance to the text.

An extensive bibliographical essay divided by chapters rather than endnotes within chapters may have seemed the most logical solution for citing the large literature available for the study of U.S. women’s history. However, this decision gives Kleinberg’s history the feeling of a textbook when it is, in fact, more than that. It is an attempt to create a synthesis of the differing histories of women in the United States, and this is both its shortcoming and achievement. As someone who has been mandated with the job of teaching undergraduates “The History of U.S. Women” in a one-semester course, I understand the problems of selection and emphasis when attempting to create a cohesive and usable narrative of women’s history. If I was to use this book for a class, and it is very appropriate for an undergraduate, or even introductory graduate, class, I would discuss the complexities of historical selection and historical significance. Doing so would help students see the shortcomings of narratives and the achievement of Kleinberg’s book. Kleinberg consistently concentrates on explaining how the enor-

mous economic, societal, and political changes in the United States had a profound impact on the gendered order of the United States and how these factors also had differing consequences for different groups of women.

That Kleinberg's history is driven by an economic picture may be the book's greatest usefulness for teachers, students and scholars, all of whom will find the writing accessible and the use of scholarly sources sound and current. Those looking for an alternative narrative approach that is infused with scholarly analysis might want to examine Karen Anderson's *Changing Woman: A History of Racial Ethnic Women in Modern America*.<sup>[1]</sup> Nancy Woloch's *Women and the American Experience*, now in its third edition, is also a useful text for the classroom with its pairing of an historical episode with a more general

synthesis of the same era.<sup>[2]</sup> I have taught both of these texts and my students have found them engaging and challenging. I expect many more students will have similar responses to Kleinberg's *Women in the United States*.

#### Notes

[1]. Karen Anderson, *Changing Woman: A History of Racial Ethnic Women in Modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

[2]. Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 3rd edition, Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000.

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