



Carolyn J. Lawes. *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. x + 265 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2131-4.



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Class Dismissed? The Re-Gendering of Separate Spheres

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In *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860* Carolyn J. Lawes reconsiders the theoretical framework of separate spheres to see if this historical construct truly reflects women's lives and work in the antebellum North. In approaching this study that began as a doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Davis, Lawes surmises that the cultural stereotype of the stay-at-home wife fails to recognize women's involvement in public and institutional life and relegates them to the periphery of antebellum political discourse and action. The goal of *Women and Reform*, then, is to locate women's proper place in early American history, which according to Lawes, now assistant professor at Old Dominion University, is "at the center of community life and leadership" (p. 3).

Women and Reform is an invigorating contribution to the already substantial historiography on women's social activism pioneered by Mary Ryan, Nancy Hewitt, Suzanne Lebsock, and Lori Ginsberg, to name a prominent few. But whereas these earlier studies emphasize

class, Lawes argues that gender played an equally important role in determining the origin, ideology, and goals of women's benevolent and reform activities. As she explains it, both categories of analysis are significant "because, as others have argued, gender differed by class and because, as I hope to illuminate, class differed by gender" (p. 5).

To locate women's place in antebellum political culture and civic life, Lawes surveys various women's groups organized in Worcester, Massachusetts, between 1815 and 1860. She does not attempt to connect these associations to suggest a linear progression from church and benevolent work to feminism and political action. Instead, she presents a series of microstudies to suggest how each organization influenced and was influenced by current social, political, and economic issues. "This is not a study of the inevitable march of progress from darkness into the light," she observes, "it is, rather, a story of individuals making their own order out of chaos" (p. 5).

Although Lawes eschews an evolutionary interpretation of women's activism, she organizes the book's chapters into decade segments—not to show change over time

but to highlight political issues and women's activities characterizing each period. In chapter one, "Keeping the Faith: Women's Leadership in an Orthodox Congregational Church," Lawes uses the controversy that erupted in the early 1820s over the selection of a new minister to explore the extent and character of women's power in antebellum religion. Although tradition, church policy, and legislation prevented women from holding positions of authority in local churches, they developed informal means of influence (i.e., self-determined church affiliation, fund raising, surveillance of fellow church members, etc.) to offset the official power of men. Disestablishment of the Congregational Church further empowered women, as ministers were forced to rely on female volunteer workers to raise funds and advance missionary and charitable projects. In contrast to women's expanding role in antebellum churches, Lawes notes the extent to which men abdicated power by failing to officially join a church, pay taxes, or attend meetings. Thus, women of all classes were able to use their numerical superiority, sense of spiritual equality, and volunteerism to challenge men's dominance and press for a wider sphere of influence.

In chapter two, "Missionaries and More: Women, Sewing, and the Antebellum Sewing Circle," Lawes surveys six representative societies to see how women used this traditional domestic task to further integrate themselves into Worcester's civic life. In a very interesting section, Lawes describes how sewing was a "benchmark of womanhood" (p. 47), where even the wealthiest women devoted considerable time to their needlework. And because sewing was a gendered activity, women of all classes and ages eagerly joined sewing circles to support various charitable and social causes. Sewing circles afforded women companionship, structured activity, and a forum for self-improvement. They also functioned like men's political parties and provided a suitable mechanism for women to formally present their points of view on contemporary debates. "Through the sewing circle," writes Lawes, "women laid claim to the right to participate in the political and social development of the community, the nation, and the world" (p. 47).

Lawes expands on her thesis that gender served as the primary impetus behind women's reform in chapters three and four. Respectively titled "Maternal Politics: Gender and the Formation of the Worcester Children's Friend Society" and "Rachel Weeping for Her Children: Mothers, Children, and the Antebellum Foster Family," these chapters contrast female child-saving activities to male-designed and operated welfare programs. Middle-

class welfare programs emerged from the reality that during the antebellum period all women were economically vulnerable and their class status and social standing unpredictable. As Lawes explains, "Economic instability as well as economic prosperity shaped their lives, and was a crucial aspect of their world over which they, as legally dependent women, had little control. A woman's class standing could thus vary significantly over time, keyed as it was to the luck and skill of her father or husband; rarely was an antebellum woman able to determine her class position through her own efforts" (p. 99).

Lawes provides fascinating data on the many ways women's lives could be disrupted and their social standing compromised: family bankruptcy, frequent households moves, taking in boarders and relatives, protracted illness, and high death rates, particularly among children. "No amount of privilege," argues Lawes, "could protect them from the kinds of critical life experiences, such as economic uncertainty, residential instability, family disintegration, illness, suffering, and death, that much less privileged women also endured" (p. 112).

Within this context of women's universal vulnerability, Lawes examines the local Children's Friend Society (CFS) to see if its members, too, experienced this "gendered instability" (p. 93). What she discovers is that although many CFS members were from affluent, upwardly mobile households, more than one in four experienced bankruptcy, one-third lost children, and forty percent either took in boarders or boarded themselves. Many suffered ill health; indeed more than one in five died of tuberculosis. Lawes believes that these negative experiences allowed women reformers to "comprehend and to empathize with the crises confronting those to whom they extended help" (p. 112). As a result, their welfare programs were innovative, flexible and non-punitive, seeking to buttress families in time of need and to keep them intact if at all possible.

In addition to developing a so-called "maternalist" rather than a class-oriented, social-control approach to child-saving programs, CFS women consciously excluded men, most notably ministers and local officials, from decision-making positions. They also refrained from soliciting state subsidization lest they lose control over their finances and the orphan's home they operated. Concludes Lawes, "By adamantly denying men power within the institution and by shrewdly linking the success of the home to a more general commitment to maternalism, the managers of the Worcester Children's Friend Society guaranteed their society's influence and auton-

omy, and to a great extent their own, in a culture generally threatened by female independence" (p.159).

In a rather abbreviated final chapter, Lawes examines the links between organized reform and feminism. Although only a "handful" of Worcester women participated in the city's woman's rights conventions of 1850 and 1851, Lawes argues that organizations like the Children's Friend Society "implicitly and at times explicitly supported the demands the feminists articulated" (p. 161). Reformers and feminists alike understood that women's economic vulnerability was as important an issue as their political disenfranchisement. And both groups affirmed the primacy of woman's maternal roles, using them to justify female public discourse and political action. Thus, the early woman's rights movement was not so much the culmination of women's reform activities of the last thirty years, but an expression of views common among many women activists at that time.

In her survey of Worcester's antebellum women's associations, Lawes reaches several important conclusions. First, she sees these groups and the general history of organized reform as "nonlinear, multifaceted, and constantly evolving." Second, women's gendered experiences united them across class lines and prompted a reform agenda consciously distinct from men's. Finally, although women activists, including feminists, did not explicitly reject separate spheres, they used collective action to broaden its definition so "as to rob the concept of its potentially insidious implications" (p. 169). Thus under the guise of maternalism, women were not tied to their households but enjoyed a prominent place "at center stage in community productions" (p. 183). Concludes Lawes, "gender prescription was not social description and the 'mother at home' often wasn't" (p. 183).

Tapping into government records, court cases, per-

sonal papers, newspapers, and more, Lawes has marshaled an impressive array of evidence to document the personal and economic lives of Worcester women. This is a model social history that amply demonstrates the complex interplay between women's domestic and civic work and the socioeconomic conditions of their time. Because this is such rich social history, the title seems comparatively bland. Perhaps a descriptive-analytical subtitle would have served to enlighten readers to the study's full scope and nature.

The book also provokes some significant questions. For example, did the concept of maternalism transcend class boundaries and unite women into common action, or was maternalism itself a class construct? Indeed, just how relevant were middle-class definitions of women's roles and civic duty to the women from other socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds? Lawes does a marvelous job of showing how middle-class women differentiated their interests and goals from men's. Did they do the same with lower-class and ethnic women? Also, has Lawes overestimated women reformers' access to political power and independent action? Although women clearly voiced political opinions and worked for social change, was their impact limited to venues that had been discarded or ignored by males? These questions aside, *Women and Reform in a New England Community* is a fine study characterized by engaging prose, compelling socioeconomic data, and illuminating personal and institutional narratives. Assuredly, Carolyn Lawes's impressive catechism of the cult of domesticity will spark some interesting debates and infuse new life into this enduring topic.

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