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Lori D. Ginzberg. *Untidy Origins: A Story of Women's Rights in Antebellum New York*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiv + 222 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2947-9; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5608-6.

Lori D. Ginzberg. *Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman's Rights in Antebellum New York*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiv + 222 pp.

Sherry H. Penney, James D. Livingston. *A Very Dangerous Woman: Martha Wright and Women's Rights*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. 288 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-447-3.

Judith Wellman. *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. xii + 297 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07173-7; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02904-2.

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Reuniting Separate Spheres: Towards a Productive Marriage of Antebellum Gender and Political History

New works by Judith Wellman, Lori Ginzberg, and, jointly, Sherry Penney and James D. Livingston revise—and revitalize—the story of the beginnings of the woman's rights movement; they deserve the attention of all historians of politics and culture in what was once called “the middle period.” Returning to the well-tilled soil of the Burned Over District, these recent publications have unearthed new evidence and reignite now smoldering embers to cast new light on the multiplicity of forces at work in the women's rights conflagrations of the antebellum years. More than this, they suggest ways to synthesize narratives all too often marked off into the separate spheres of women's history and political history.

Nineteenth-century political historians tend to address Seneca Falls in passing, connecting the emergence of women's rights to the incubation of egalitarian ideas within the antislavery movement; once having recognized the emergence of this formation, however, they relegate it to the periphery, to return to a political narrative,

with women's rights reappearing only much later in the nineteenth century, when temperance advocates and reformers push for women's electoral presence. Historians of women celebrate Seneca Falls, but then frequently follow a path that eschews the sectional crisis of the 1850s, pushing through the antebellum conventions to reach the formation of Women's National Loyal League during the Civil War; they only return to political referents to explain the split in the movement in 1869 over questions of the relationship of African-American and women's enfranchisement. Thus political and gender historians follow their own trajectories, with little attention to how they intersect. These new works, however, suggest how heretofore divergent historiographies might be brought together to create a new interpretation, placing questions about gender and political representation centrally within the larger study of political culture for the antebellum period.

This review essay will not so much critique the indi-

vidual works under review—books already perceptively reviewed separately here on H-NET and elsewhere—as it will suggest how they contribute to an understanding of the critical role played by gender dynamics in the sectional tensions that resulted in national upheaval and Civil War. In so doing, I deliberately remove the works from the traditional women’s history narrative in which the antebellum period serves chronologically and teleologically as the time of beginnings, setting the stage for the achievement of women’s enfranchisement and full citizenship in the twentieth century. Instead, I want to resituate them in the “master narrative” of antebellum politics. The volumes under review make clear the centrality of questions of property and representation, and of religious orientation and family networks, not only for their gendered subjects, but also for a more complete understanding of the rising tensions of the 1850s and the collapse of the union that resulted in the Civil War.

Ginzberg and Wellman both position their work as revisions of the canonical origins story promulgated by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her allies through Stanton’s self-conscious biographical writings and the magisterial authoritative *History of Woman Suffrage*.^[1] Neither Ginzberg nor Wellman is satisfied to tell the story as that of the frustrated young matron who, with the help of Lucretia Mott, came to comprehend the assault on their status as women sustained at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, and who deferred her action until she finally found herself driven to a “women’s rights convulsion” eight years later in revolt against the drudgery of small town domesticity.^[2] Each author appreciates that “the ideas expressed at Seneca Falls did not burst full-grown upon the scene”^[3], and that Stanton did not single-handedly will the meeting into existence. Ginzberg expertly explains how six unknown women in the relative isolation of the “North Country” brought together their experiences and the “world of ideas” they encountered in reading newspaper accounts of the debates at the New York State constitutional convention to formulate their demand for woman suffrage in August 1846, nearly two full years before the Seneca Falls gathering. Likewise, Wellman maps the “converging paths” that came together in Stanton and her newly adopted hometown in 1848 to make a local story with national import. For Wellman, five forces came together at the 1848 convention: the market revolution that repositioned the towns and villages along the Erie Canal; the upheavals in the Society of Friends that brought some egalitarian-minded Quakers into worldly reform; the transformations of the abolitionist movement in which gender issues

interplayed forcefully with changing ideas about political engagement; the discussions of legal reform permeated by “rights talk” for both women and African Americans; and the dynamic personality of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Penney and Livingston too want to broaden the narrative, in their case to write into it the significant role of the talented and witty Martha Coffin Wright, long overshadowed by her better-known sister, Lucretia Coffin Mott, the formidable and long-lived Quaker feminist-abolitionist. Their meticulous research provides a long-overdue biography of this “founding mother,” revealing how, in her life, politics, religion, and social change came together to empower this birthright Quaker woman, living in the rapidly transforming region of upstate New York, to nurture and maintain her strong family networks while engaging in abolitionism and women’s rights.

As these authors are aware, however, social forces alone do not make for human action. Wellman, like Ginzberg, seeks to answer the question: “what ideas were available in the language of the day” (p.45); and both anchor their inquiries in, as Wellman defines it, “the perspective of families, communities, and the larger context of reform” to reveal why some individuals began to articulate the seemingly radical ideas about women’s rights in property and in political participation (p. 13). Wright’s biographers place her centrally in this context, detailing how she imbibed ideas of antislavery and gendered power from her sister’s Philadelphia Quaker milieu, and transported this knowledge into her life in Auburn. There, it shaped not only her lifelong participation in the women’s rights movement, but also her efforts on behalf of antislavery, including her ongoing work with Harriet Tubman, who settled nearby on land gifted to her by Wright’s friend and neighbor, William Seward. Wellman and Ginzberg analyze as well the economic conditions that shaped women’s attitudes and action. Documenting gender as a factor in the ownership of land and real property, they both explore how its control was mediated by and through family networks on farms and in fledgling commercial centers. Women and legal reformers in antebellum New York, as they make clear, connected questions of gender, rights, citizenship, and suffrage.

Taken together, these authors identify the complex and intertwined social forces and ideas that ignited the struggle for women’s rights. Yet the implications of their work have significance for studies well beyond these individuals and this region, and for periods both before and after the fateful days of July 19 and 20, 1848. Can we, for example, find similar dynamics at work propelling inter-

est in woman's rights in Jane Swisshelm's Pittsburgh? In Jane Elizabeth Jones's Salem, Ohio? In Lucy Stone's West Brookfield, Massachusetts? Can we tease out genealogies and kinship for these locales and for these individuals that reveal the importance of religious communities in shaping ideas and orientation? Can we document the impact of print culture, educational institutions and transportation networks to trace the possible sources for their ideas about race and the revolutionary tradition? Can we find evidence of contact with non-hegemonic alternatives among Native Americans, free thinkers, and communitarians that shaped their preparation for engagement?

The volumes under review here locate and contextualize the multiple origins of women's rights talk as they revise our understanding of where—and with whom—woman suffrage agitation began. But, equally important, Wellman and Ginzberg, along with Penney and Livingston, are part of a discourse that is encouraging historians to rethink the larger question of the relationship of women to the male-defined polis of the antebellum North, a question that weaves through their revisions of the origins story, and one that suggests ways to reunite the histories of women and political culture. Antebellum gender, we now know, was not a simple, private matter. Focusing on state-level discussions of legal reform, Nancy Isenberg has already challenged “the linear progression from benevolence to antislavery” and then to women's rights, exploring longstanding debates over suffrage, citizenship and consent. Anne Boylan has demonstrated how even women's organizations based on notions of “True Womanhood” ultimately contested the exclusion of women from the political public. New studies of abolitionist women, including books by Julie Roy Jeffrey and Deborah Von Broekhoven, have located women in the very center of the abolitionist movement, in both its reform and political variants. Elizabeth Varon uncovered women's participation in electoral campaigns by 1840, and Michael Pierson has argued for the centrality of gender politics in the rise of antislavery third parties. Melanie Gustafson and Rebecca Edwards have situated women as partisan political actors before the Civil War. All argue that antebellum women's history spilled over into the political culture.[4]

The books at hand push this emerging interpretation to a new level, revealing how women themselves understood and translated into their own lives the politics they learned through their interest and participation in third parties and in state-level constitutional issues. As Lori Ginzberg has already argued, theirs was not simply a

gendered politics of moral suasion. When we imaginatively loosen these works from their teleological tethers to the march of women's rights, they speak to us of the signal importance of antebellum women's political engagement. “The school of anti-slavery” not only trained women in the arts of organizing and petitioning, preparing them for later agitation on behalf of woman suffrage and gender equality, it was a venue which sharpened their understandings of rights and citizenship, of property and religion.[5] And, as Wellman, Ginzberg, Penney and Livingston document, antislavery remained central to them. Women were present at the very beginnings of the politicization of antislavery, and they remained within all segments of the movement through its various electoral campaigns. Women brought this political knowledge to their work for woman's rights. As Wellman notes, the majority of participants at the Seneca Falls Convention came from Free Soil family networks. Similarly, Ginzberg's six Depauville women had Liberty party ties even as they wrote their remarkable petition. In documenting how connections to party politics preceded entry into woman's rights work, Wellman and Ginzberg suggest yet another “untidy origin” of the women's rights movement—and the necessity to interrogate women's partisan affiliations as a part of the larger political landscape on which the electoral battles of the antebellum years were fought.

Unfortunately, historians focusing on traditional politics may be put off by the ways in which these volumes tell their stories. Ginzberg, for example, compares her work to a “mystery story” (p. 11), and unabashedly confesses in the end that “so much of this conversation must be left to our imagination” (p. 161), while Wellman opens her volume with “an imaginative re-creation” (p. 1) of Stanton's walk to the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on July 19, 1848, later attempting to enter into Stanton's mind as she approached the tea-party at which the idea for a convention was hatched (p. 186), and her mental state as she presented the Declaration of Sentiments (p. 195). Penney and Livingston make use of the prerogative of the biographer to think for and through their subject, speculating on how Wright interwove family concerns with her activism. General readers, especially those of us who are fans of Miriam Grace Monfredo's Seneca Falls detective novels, may take pleasure in attention to the material culture and terrain of the daily lives in Ginzberg's and Wellman's accounts, but political historians may see such attention to context as gratuitous distraction.[6] Yet, as Ginzberg reminds us, interpolations and substantiated inventive leaps are necessary for both scholars and gen-

eral readers who seek to comprehend context, and to hear the “unspeakable.” Women’s history sources, after all, remain different in kind and in number than those available in other fields.

If they persist, historians of political culture will find much that should lead them to re-evaluate their own stories. Creating dialogue between political historians and historians of women need not mean relegating the history of women’s rights to an epiphenomenon in the general political upheavals of the antebellum years. Rather, it suggests the need for synthesis. We need to look again at the evidence of women’s rights struggles within the political narrative. The conventions of the American Anti-Slavery Society from 1837 to 1840 were riven with controversy that demonstrates the “thinkability” of woman’s rights even before the London Convention of 1840. The splintering of the antislavery movement into “old” and “new” organizations hardly removed the question of women’s political identity from issues confronting Liberty party leaders who pushed abolitionists from moral suasion to electoral engagement. Partisans in various antebellum political battles, particularly at the state level, continued to see gender—and women themselves—as critical to the development of both local strategies and larger issues. Women within antislavery family networks did not remain merely symbolic presences, but became participants themselves, acting on their understandings not only of suffrage rights, but rights to property and social representation as well.

Wellman, Ginzberg, Penny and Livingston demonstrate that the women at Seneca Falls, those up in Jefferson County and the indomitable Martha Wright did not compartmentalize their causes. Schooled in both antislavery and women’s rights, women were embedded in the networks that challenged religious bodies; they engaged in legal and political struggles, and they joined men in the partisanship of politics in Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican parties. Elizabeth Cady Stanton is but perhaps the most notable example; on September 11, 1860, twelve years after the Seneca Falls Convention, and the day after delivering a banner to the local Wide Awakes, she stood beside her husband Henry on their porch to receive the young Republican party men who had marched to their home and cheered, first for her, then for her husband, and finally for the seven “little Stantons.”[7] Even while immersed in women’s rights work, Elizabeth Cady Stanton never forsook her engagement in antislavery politics, a commitment she shared with her family. We are only beginning to learn more about how petitioners and partners, spouses and siblings, pressured

electoral politics in the era in which sectional controversy took shape in local and national contests. Perhaps, therefore, it is time to suggest an end to the separate historiographic spheres of the antebellum era—one addressing the origins of women’s rights and the other interrogating the coming of the Civil War. Historians of antebellum gender and politics might consider forming a broader kinship network based on mutual interest, or even a marriage uniting those too often seen as different by nature. To do so is not to suggest that the rights talk of women was some sideshow to the emergence of politicized sectional controversy; nor is it to argue that gender issues obsessed senators and congressmen as they debated the question of Kansas. It is instead to propose that political culture encompasses a terrain which women understood, and in which they participated, as mobilized citizens making deliberative demands on the public, shaping not only their own separate sphere, but the openly public one as well.

Notes

[1]. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (Rochester, 1887-1892).

[2]. Stanton’s use of this phrase actually came several years later in a letter to Susan B. Anthony, April 2, 1852, as published in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, As Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1922), 2: p. 38.

[3]. On page 9, Ginzberg quotes Wellman’s article, “Women’s Rights, Republicanism, and Revolutionary Rhetoric in Antebellum New York State,” *New York History* 69 (July 1988): pp. 354-355.

[4]. Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2002); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Deborah Bingham van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Melanie

Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); and Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[5]. This is the term used by Ann D. Gordon to refer to the years 1840-66. See *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, vol. 1: *In the School of Anti-Slavery, 1840-1866* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

[6]. Monfredo has written at least five popular mystery novels based in antebellum Seneca Falls including: *Seneca Falls Inheritance* (1992); *North Star Conspiracy* (1994); *Blackwater Spirits* (1995); *Through a Golden Eagle* (1996); and *The Stalking Horse* (1998). More recently, her novels have moved into the Civil War period.

[7]. Gustafson begins her *Women and the Republican Party* with this anecdote; Stanton's letter to her sons about this event appears in Gordon, ed., *Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, 1: pp. 441-444.

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