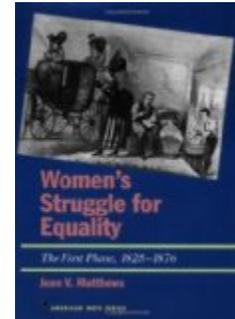


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean V. Matthews. *Women's Struggle for Equality: The First Phase, 1828-1876*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1997. x + 212 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-146-4; \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-145-7.

Reviewed by Debora Halbert (Otterbein College)
Published on H-Teachpol (June, 1998)



Women's Struggle for Equality is a brief historical analysis of the women's movement in the United States from 1828 to 1876. It is an easy-to-read narrative which traces the development of the first wave of the women's movement. Matthews situates her narrative within the context of social movement theory and combines short biographies of key figures with the emerging feminist issues.

I enjoyed reading Matthews' book. While those well versed in the history and actors of first wave feminism may find it fairly basic, it is an excellent book for those who want a clear and interesting introduction to the first years of the American women's movement. This book would be most appropriate for students who need an introduction to the issue of women's rights and could be assigned in introductory women's studies, women's history, and feminist politics courses.

One theme in Matthews' history is that the struggle for women's equality occurs within a framework where virtually all men and women were skeptical of the feminist project. This theme is apparent in the classic topic of the Woman Question and the now familiar "solution" to the Woman Question—the private sphere as the appropriate place for women. As Matthews points out, despite the fact that more women were breaking the barriers to higher education, becoming literate, and discovering a role for themselves outside the home, it did not necessarily follow that they would consider themselves feminists: "Education enabled women to think more consciously about what it meant, or should mean, to be a woman, and to participate articulately in public discussion of the Woman Question—but it did not determine what position they would take in this debate" (p. 21).

Matthews spends considerable time discussing the connections of the women's movement to the abolitionist movement. Women played a significant role in the abolitionist movement, and it was their experience working towards social justice for slaves which led to a heightened awareness of women's oppression as women. These experiences led the more formal beginnings of the women's movement with the convention in Seneca Falls. Matthews tracks the personalities of the leaders, specifically Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. In keeping with her use of social movement theory, Matthews articulates that it is more than the strong leaders of the movement that make it possible. A movement also has many dedicated but unrecognized members, and Matthews attempts to pay tribute to them as well (pp. 60-1).

Matthews also discusses how feminists came to define themselves and how these definitions shifted because of the Civil War and its aftermath. Generally, the women's movement was made up of white and middle class women. Matthews suggests that the type of woman who identified most closely with feminism was one who could understand the wrongs done to other women or those who had their own personal choices thwarted (p. 92). Additionally, while the vast majority of women tended to agree with the division between the public and private sphere, most early feminists did not wish to reproduce this division but to destroy it (p. 94). Thus, women within the women's movement tended to be different from the average woman of the time.

Divisions threatened the women's movement in the post Civil War period. There was a feeling among many feminist leaders that those in the abolitionist movement

had used them and were now ignoring the issue of women's rights in favor of rights for black men. Perhaps one of the most disturbing trends narrated by Matthews is the racism that became part of the post-Civil War women's movement as some of its most famous leaders—Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—began to follow an increasingly racist and elitist path.

The final chapters recount the transformation of the now-organized women's movement into a battle over suffrage. Feminism was deliberately associated by its critics with the free love movement, and attention was shifted by these critics from women's rights to the role women's sexuality played within feminism (p. 162). Additionally, the women's movement was increasingly fragmented by a variety of different movements, such as the temperance movement, many of which were not feminist in orientation but attracted women activists. Feminism, and suffrage, were forced to compete with other issues of the day. Suffrage became a rallying cry for feminism, which helped feminists to avoid the controversial social issues surrounding the roles of women.

Matthews' history provides some interesting points for discussion within the classroom. First, it is instructive to realize that many of the early gains for women's equality were not necessarily made by women who would be considered feminists by today's standards. Women like Catharine Beecher and Sarah Josepha Hale illustrate the contradictions which existed at the time. Both women had careers in the public sphere from which they argued that the proper place for women was in the home. Ultimately, there existed a competition for the identity of American womanhood (p. 24). Given these examples, it is possible to discuss the similarities between the struggles faced by early feminists with those faced by today's feminists.

Second, the women's movement was not a linear march of progress, but far slower and more convoluted. Many reforms that impacted women's equality were not even made with feminist intent. For example, the relaxation of laws governing women's property rights during marriage resulted from a variety of interests, not simply those of feminists (pp. 43-4).

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind the manner in which feminism interacted with both class and race. Matthews' coverage of these issues is brief but can serve as a starting point for a discussion on the manner in which race, class, and gender combine. Matthews helps

clarify these dimensions by highlighting the role many black men played in the women's movement. Additionally, she mentions working class women's movements but never develops this theme. If teaching this book, additional readings on race and class would fit nicely into the brief framework established by Matthews.

Ultimately, Matthews' narrative remains one which highlights the roles of white middle class women as central to the women's movement. While she does not avoid a conversation about racism in the post-Civil War movement, she tends to explain the racism of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony as a result of their connections with the racist George Francis Train and Henry Blackwell and as something which they attempted to check, instead of something inherent in their privileged perspective.

A third important insight, especially appropriate in women's history or sociology courses, is the role of social movements. The social movement theme runs throughout the book. She does not develop it theoretically, but it emerges in enough places to make this text a good starting point for analyzing how social movements operate. It is interesting to note two things that emerge from her social movement analysis. First, it only takes a few dedicated members to create drastic change, and, second, while most people resist change, once it occurs and new "rights" have been assigned, everyone takes these new rights for granted.

Women's Struggle for Equality is a good introductory text, although Matthews' choice of ending the book in 1876 is confusing. While the year is academically important in terms of reconstruction and is the centennial, there is no reason to stop a narrative about the women's movement in 1876. Most texts identify the passage of the nineteenth amendment in 1920 as the end of first wave feminism. Her decision to end in 1876 leaves the remaining years of the suffrage movement to a few pages in the last chapter. This ending is distinctly anticlimactic and ignores an important part of what is traditionally considered the first wave. Thus, for teaching purposes, supplementary readings would be needed to finish the first wave narrative.

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Citation: Debora Halbert. Review of Matthews, Jean V., *Women's Struggle for Equality: The First Phase, 1828-1876*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

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