



Rebecca Edwards. *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. xii + 232 pp. \$53.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-511696-0; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511695-3.

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The Gendered World of Nineteenth Century Politics

In the 1840s, political parties sponsored “pole raisings,” tacking party banners to poles which were then installed in prominent locations. According to Rebecca Edwards’s new study of gender in nineteenth century politics, “Men on both sides proudly reported the length of their poles and the quickness with which they raised them. Local partisans accused each other of not being able to raise their poles, or in one case of ‘failure to keep it in an upright position’” (p. 16). The political press pictured victorious parties as crowing roosters, while lampooning their opponents as bedraggled, limp fowl, clearly unable to rule the henhouse.

In *Angels in the Machinery*, Edwards asks us to take seriously the rhetoric of manhood, womanhood, and family values that permeated late-nineteenth-century politics. The result is a book that uses gender as a category of analysis to change the way we look at Gilded Age and Progressive Era politics. While not without flaws, *Angels in the Machinery* is the best kind of good book: one that raises almost as many questions as it answers, both for historians of the nineteenth century and for students of American women’s history.

Edwards’s title is derived from a Democratic politician’s statement that he would as soon see an angel harnessed to a machine as see women in politics. As Edwards points out, the quotation captures the ambivalence of nineteenth century gender politics: while comparing women to angels, the speaker also highlighted the corrupt nature of the machine of politics. Politics was a man’s world, full of deal-making, cussing, smoking, tobacco-spitting guys whose style would be seriously cramped if women joined the club. Yet, as Edwards demonstrates, women had a role in nineteenth century politics, and a public and partisan role at that. Edwards makes it clear that for nineteenth century men and women, politics did not connote the personal or that somewhat vague set of power relations we now label po-

litical culture—politics meant running for elections, getting your party into power and turning the other side out. In this political milieu, parties contended for the loyalties of both sexes by claiming to be defenders of the family, casting economic and social issues in terms relating to their impact on the home. Ultimately, then, elections became contests over which party’s policies fit best the voter’s conception of proper manhood and womanhood.

According to Edwards, the gendered politics of the late nineteenth century originated in the Jacksonian period, when Whigs adopted the family-oriented rhetoric of the rising northern middle class, celebrated domesticity and encouraged women to participate in party politics. Democrats, on the other hand, championed the rights of white men, not the least of which was the right to be a patriarch in control of one’s own home. When the Republican party emerged from the wreckage of the Whigs in the 1850s, they inherited the Whigs’ domestic rhetoric. Republicans celebrated women’s moral influence and the emergence of new men who exemplified bourgeois domestic virtues such as temperance, self-control, and deference to women. Democrats countered by casting aspersions on Republicans’ manhood and charging them with attempting to destroy patriarchy. This insistence that a man’s home was his castle, that “the submission of wives, children and slaves was divinely ordained” (p. 21), united Democrats across regional lines. According to Edwards, “Democrats’ ideology rested on male household mastery” (p. 27).

The Civil War proved false the Democrats’ contention that Republicans lacked the manhood requisite to make soldiers and allowed the post-war GOP to further develop the political rhetoric of domesticity, its candidates shielded by their war records from accusations of effeminacy. In the 1870s and 1880s, grassroots GOP supporters often carried portraits of their presidential candidates’

wives, and campaign literature lauded the influence and guiding hands of “Lemonade Lucy” Hayes and Lucretia Garfield. By the 1880s, Democrats had sufficiently adapted to domesticated politics to focus campaign literature on Frances Folsom Cleveland, Grover Cleveland’s young bride, and later on their daughter, Baby Ruth.

Edwards demonstrates women’s intense involvement in partisan politics. Whigs pioneered women’s campaign clubs, and Republicans in the Gilded Age encouraged women to organize, attend campaign rallies, and write and speak in support of the GOP. The Democrats reluctantly followed suit. The emergence of third parties such as the Prohibitionists further increased opportunities for female political action. In all parties, women’s participation followed gendered lines. Women advanced political claims as wives, mothers, and defenders of the family. However, Edwards notes, most women activists held partisan loyalties that made it hard for them to build coalitions. Southern women remained loyal Democratic daughters of the Confederacy. Northern women found it hard to work outside the party of the Union. Meanwhile, the suffrage movement split over party loyalties and did not reunite until 1890. Edwards effectively makes the point that, even without the vote, most women had deeply felt party loyalties that precluded unity on “women’s issues.”

During the 1880s and 1890s, both parties began to consider women in new terms: not as “angels in the home,” but as consumers and as workers. Democrats appealed to “shopping women” to get their husbands to vote against GOP protectionist tariffs, while GOP activists urged working class women to support protection so that American women would not be degraded to the condition of working class women in Europe.

Edwards presents the Populist revolt of the 1890s as a crisis in gender roles. The Populist party did more than encourage women to participate in politics. Women actually became party leaders. Conservative Republicans and Democrats regarded Populist women like Mary E. Lease as unsexed monsters, and considered their male counterparts to be the political equivalent of castrati. In Western states with woman suffrage, conservatives watched aghast as women campaigned for office and played politics in smoke-filled rooms. To conservatives of all parties, such scenes presaged gender anarchy. Edwards contends that the GOP victory of 1896, combined with the triumph of conservative Democrats over Populists in the South, reestablished masculine supremacy in American politics, a triumph for conservative values she labels “Redemption.”

Edwards suggests that women’s historians should consider the Progressive Era less open to women’s political participation than the Gilded Age had been. First, the third parties that had enlivened the Gilded Age had been destroyed or absorbed into the two major parties, leaving women with fewer opportunities for political activism. Second, she notes that Progressive Era politicians like Theodore Roosevelt brought a rampant masculine style back into politics, making women’s place even more problematic. Roosevelt exemplified the new manhood of the early twentieth century: aggressive, virile, but still protective of women and the home. Edwards says, “In its stress on physical aggression this ideal drew on old Democratic themes, but it combined them with overt middle-class respectability” (p. 155). Insisting that America needed manly men and womanly women, T.R. encouraged white women to have more babies. Meanwhile, Progressive era state legislatures enacted legislation—everything from Jim Crow laws to mothers’ pensions—ostensibly to protect white women and the home. Third, middle class women withdrew from partisan politics to form “non-partisan” reform movements. These movements advanced bourgeois interests while allowing participants to preserve their gendered status as ladies. However, as Edwards notes, women reformers seem to have consciously adopted non-partisan strategies even in states where women voted, because non-partisan movements had a better chance of success. Women reformers couched women’s issues in terms drawn from nineteenth century gender roles: women were “mothers and wives, good Christians, urban shoppers, and industrial workers who deserved ‘protection’” (p. 163). Suffragists demanded not so much votes for women as votes for “Mother.” Young suffrage leaders like Alice Paul had no party loyalties at all.

Edwards’s fast tour of the gendered politics of Gilded Age and Progressive Era America will join works by Glenda Gilmore and Stephanie McCurry on a short shelf of books that most effectively use gender as a category of analysis to study nineteenth century America. Like Gilmore and McCurry, Edwards forces historians to reexamine familiar material and to take seriously the rhetoric used by historical figures. However, Gilmore and McCurry wrote state case studies, whereas Edwards attempts to analyze national politics over an eighty-year period, all in less than three hundred pages. The resulting book, while fresh, insightful and brilliantly written, lacks depth, and often raises as many questions as it answers.

Edwards convincingly demonstrates the gendered nature of nineteenth century political rhetoric: Republi-

cans and Democrats, to say nothing of Populists, talked a lot about manhood, womanhood, and the family. But did nineteenth century men vote according to their concept of gender? Was gender a determining factor, or was gender talk rhetorical decoration? Edwards makes a strong argument for the former, but offers no clear evidence.

With her overwhelming focus on gender, Edwards sometimes slights the other members of the analytical ruling triumvirate, class and race, not to mention other factors such as region or religion. Although she attempts to incorporate African-Americans and working class whites into her narrative, this book remains strongest when focused on middle-class Protestant white folks, primarily Republicans. This emphasis surely reflects the nature of the sources. The nineteenth century Republican party was a new thing, and Republicans had to articulate positions that differentiated them from their rivals. Republicans also drew largely from the nation's most articulate people, the northeastern middle class, then in the conscious process of creating new values to match their new status in life, and writing about that process at every opportunity. All that acknowledged, Edwards's explication of Democratic gender values is thin. Edwards's Democrats are usually Southern, and highly, even outrageously, quotable. But south-

ern attitudes about gender do not explain the popularity of the Democratic party among northern working men. What was the working class concept of manhood and the home? What impact, if any, did Catholicism have on forming gender roles among working class men and women in the North? Did class-based parties, such as the Socialists, reflect class-based gendered politics?

Finally, a terminological complaint. Edwards labels the triumph of conservative gender roles in 1896 "Redemption." For generations, historians have used "Redemption" to describe the return of conservative Democrats to power in the South after the end of Reconstruction in 1877. Edwards's appropriation of this term is apt, but confusing.

Having raised all these issues, I want to close by saying that Edwards has written a fine book, one that should be read by all students of the late nineteenth century. Edwards's signal contribution is not in her answers, but in how she requires us to rethink the questions. This book should be argued about for years to come.

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