H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sue Davis. *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Women's Rights and the American Political Traditions.* New York: New York University Press, 2008. 304 pp. $49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1998-5.

Reviewed by Holly Kent (Lehigh University)
Published on H-Women (February, 2009)
Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Political Thinker, Political Actor

"Elizabeth Cady Stanton," so one of my students recently declared on a final exam in a course on American women's history, "was an early feminist who started out as an abolitionist, but then became a racist after the Civil War." Despite my best efforts, this student had clearly absorbed a distinctly oversimplified (and remarkably tenacious) version of Cady Stanton's life story. Beginning her public career within abolitionist circles, after the Fifteenth Amendment failed to enfranchise women, an enraged and disillusioned Cady Stanton (so the story goes) wholeheartedly embraced racist ideologies, which worked to empower white, middle-class, native-born women at the expense of all other oppressed groups within American society. It is just such overly simplistic understandings of Cady Stanton's career as an activist and a thinker that Sue Davis's *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* seeks to–and very ably succeeds in–complicating and challenging.

Davis's book is a powerfully argued, sharply written addition to an ever-growing body of scholarship that highlights Cady Stanton's importance as a woman's rights leader, public intellectual, and political theorist over the course of the nineteenth century. In recent years, speeches, pamphlets, and letters written by the relentlessly prolific Cady Stanton have become increasingly available to students and scholars, thanks in large part to the efforts of The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Papers Project, headed by Ann D. Gordon at Rutgers University, which will publish the fifth volume of Cady Stanton and Anthony's collected papers this year. In addition to this vitally important project, both popular and academic volumes reassessing Cady Stanton's life and work by scholars, including Vivian Gornick and Judith Wellman, have recently been published, and new collections of Cady Stanton's writings been prepared for classroom use.[1] *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* is a valuable contribution to this literature, which offers a concise, thoughtful reassessment of Cady Stanton's work as one of the most influential–and controversial–political theorists of the nineteenth century.

In her monograph, Davis argues that "Cady Stanton deserves recognition as a central figure in the political thought of the United States in the nineteenth century" (p. 1). Histories of political thought in the United States, Davis maintains, still do not sufficiently take the significant contributions of such thinkers as Cady Stanton into account, often pushing such female intellectuals to the margins of political histories. Cady Stanton's political thought, in particular, has thus been marginalized, Davis claims, in part because of perceived weaknesses and inconsistencies in her ideas. Cady Stanton, who both made passionate claims for the equal worth and dignity of all people and strongly insisted on the innate superiority of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants–who both fiercely resisted and repeatedly drew on notions of gendered separate spheres–has seemed to some scholars to be problematically contradictory and confused in her political ideologies. Yet, as Davis persuasively contends, "the presence of inconsistencies in an individual's political thought should not be taken as an indication of a weakness in her or his work" (p. 222). The contradictions and inconsistencies in Cady Stanton's ideas, Davis maintains, should be considered not as embarrassing blunders or signs of sloppy reasoning, but rather as the necessary complexities that are a part of any sophisticated political theorist's work. So, too, have previous generations of scholars erred in seeing an innate contradiction in Cady Stanton's dual roles as a woman of ideas and a woman of action–as a brilliant abstract thinker and a dogged, pragmatic activist. Davis skillfully tackles the commonly held misconception that, by making the kinds of strategic compromises and adaptations which all political actors inevitably make in working to achieve their goals,

the purity of their ideas is somehow permanently tainted and invalidated.

Davis takes readers through Cady Stanton's entire career from its beginnings in the 1840s through her death in 1902. This broad chronological sweep is decidedly valuable, as it enables readers to get a clear sense of how Cady Stanton's ideas evolved and changed over the course of her nearly sixty-year career as a political thinker and activist, as she both responded to and challenged the dominant intellectual discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Davis focuses her attention on the four primary strains of thought that ran through Cady Stanton's political writings: liberal, radical, republican, and ascriptive. Throughout her career, Davis maintains, Cady Stanton drew on all of these different types of ideologies as needed, calling on liberal ideas about individuals' natural rights as citizens; republican ideas about women's unique, gender-specific relationship to the state; radical ideas about the need for feminine equality in both private and public life; and ascriptive ideas about the "superiority" of white, middle-class Protestants over other groups. Progressing chronologically through Cady Stanton's career, Davis argues that throughout her work as a political theorist, Cady Stanton blended all four types of thought, strategically highlighting some more than others during different eras, to different audiences, and in different situations.

While most accounts of Cady Stanton's work have traced a clear progression in her thought, as the nineteenth century progressed, toward ever increasingly ascriptive discourses, Davis indicates that the evolution of Cady Stanton's political ideas is not quite so simple. "It should be clear that her ideas did not simply change from liberal egalitarian to inegalitarian ascriptivist but rather that the preexisting inegalitarian elements of her thought became more prominent in her work" (p. 129). The story of Cady Stanton's political thought is thus not one of a liberal, egalitarian thinker's descent into unrelenting nativism and racism, but rather a more complex narrative, in which ascriptivist ideas about gender and race were present from the beginning of her career, and gradually became more and more dominant as the intellectual climate in the United States changed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even after ideas about scientific racism and Social Darwinism came to play a more and more prominent role in Cady Stanton's political writings, she nonetheless never entirely abandoned radical, republican, or liberal arguments about women's role in American society, and the need for them to have a truly equal place, and equal rights, within it.

The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton offers numerous valuable insights and fresh perspectives on Cady Stanton's much-studied and frequently examined career. Davis's highlighting of Cady Stanton as a significant radical feminist thinker is particularly useful, as this facet of Cady Stanton's thought is often underemphasized. By stressing the need for the empowerment of women not only in their "public" lives as citizens, but also in their "private" lives as sexual and spiritual beings, in their relationships with their husbands, families, and the male-dominated Christian church, Cady Stanton, Davis demonstrates, helped to lay the groundwork for subsequent generations of radical feminist theorists. Davis also offers admirably concise and insightful readings of Cady Stanton's work in the woman's rights movement of the 1840s and 1850s, including her involvement in the Seneca Falls Convention, and her shift toward individualist, antiestablishment thought toward the end of her career, as she published "The Solitude of Self"(1892) and *The Woman's Bible* (1895) and broke with the organized woman's suffrage movement. Davis also offers an intriguing consideration of what Cady Stanton's political thought has to offer twenty-first-century feminists, noting that Cady Stanton's refusal to be entrapped by the false "equality vs. difference" binary, which still plagues contemporary feminists, might be a useful model for modern-day activists to follow.

Particularly useful, too, is Davis's revisiting of the spilt between the woman's suffrage movement in the wake of the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Davis's clear and thoughtful consideration both takes into account Cady Stanton's anger at suffrage allies and Republican Party members who privileged African American male suffrage over woman's suffrage during these years, and compellingly argues that shifts in Cady Stanton's thinking after the Civil War were not entirely due to a sense of disappointment with, and alienation from, supporters of the Fifteenth Amendment. Cady Stanton's thought became increasingly ascriptivist and racist after the Civil War and Reconstruction, Davis maintains, in part because of distrust of the Republican establishment, but also because of broader intellectual shifts taking place within American culture, toward scientific racism.[2] One of the numerous strengths of *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* is its unequivocal candor regarding its subject's views on race. "Was she a racist?" Davis asks of Cady Stanton, answering the question with a resounding "Yes" (p. 225). While it is vital for scholars to fully acknowledge and thoroughly discuss the undeniable racism present within Cady Stanton's political thought, Davis notes, it is also important to contextualize

this racism, and not to let the presence of racist ideologies within her political thought invalidate its significance. By offering a sweeping, comprehensive, and clear-eyed assessment of this complex thinker's writings about gender, empowerment, and politics over the course of the nineteenth century, Davis has made an important contribution to existing scholarship both about Cady Stanton specifically and the history of feminist thought in the United States generally.

Notes

[1]. For examples of this scholarship, see Ellen Carol DuBois and Richard Cándida Smith, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist As Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Ann D. Gordon, ed., *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Vivian Gornick, *The Solitude of Self: Thinking about Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005); and Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[2]. In this respect, Davis's work helps to complicate arguments about the impact that the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, and the subsequent splintering of the suffrage movement, had on the political thought of Cady Stanton and Anthony advanced in Ellen Carol DuBois's iconic work, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Holly Kent. Review of Davis, Sue, *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Women's Rights and the American Political Traditions.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22949

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.