H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rosemarie Zagarri. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 233 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4027-6.

Reviewed by Marie Basile McDaniel (University of California Davis)
Published on H-Women (November, 2009)
Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt

Women and the Early American Republic

In *Revolutionary Backlash*, Rosemarie Zagarri examines the changing perception of women's involvement in the political sphere from immediately after the American Revolution until Andrew Jackson's presidency. The Revolution itself "profoundly changed the popular understanding of women's political status and initiated a widespread, ongoing debate over the meaning of women's rights" (p. 2). Their essential role in securing American victory "created new opportunities for women to participate, at least informally, in party and electoral politics" (p. 2). Many women took advantage of these opportunities and actively engaged in American political culture through the early Federal period, but a conservative backlash developed by 1830 that undermined any political advancement of women. Zagarri uses the writings of political women and wives, their letters, ladies' magazines, July 4th orations, fiction, satire, newspapers, legislative records, and political pamphlets to uncover the elite and popular culture and perceptions of women's involvement in political activities. She leads the reader through an evolution of ideas about women's rights, roles, and responsibilities, which although sequential, are not always chronological as ideas percolated across space and between classes. Starting with the perception of women as having equal capacities to men, drawn from the Enlightenment and proved in the Revolution, Zagarri moves to women's increased political activity and partisanship, resulting in a backlash in the 1820s and 1830s and a rejection of women as political equals to or even participants with men. She poses the question: "Why had just a few short decades produced such a changed perception of women's rights, roles and responsibilities?" (p. 1).

Zagarri argues that the conservative backlash against women's political opportunities was the perceived solution to concerns in the Early Republic: how to avoid the specter of future female politicians, how to avoid partisanship causing civil war, and how to maintain universal male suffrage. In effect, "the era of democratization for men thus produced a narrowing of political possibilities for women" (p. 2). The rhetoric of the Revolution briefly presented political opportunities for women that elite men were not willing to condone once the implications became clear.

Zagarri begins the first two chapters of this logic tour de force by noting that the American Revolution presented both opportunities and rhetoric for female political participation. In response to political necessity and appeals, women boycotted imports, spun cloth, collected donations, encouraged the men in their lives, and maintained the home. Zagarri supports the literature on women's involvement in the Revolution when she notes that women's efforts were recognized and often rewarded. In addition, Zagarri explains that in response to British colonial policies, Americans drew on rhetoric of God-given natural rights to justify their rebellion. As Zagarri argues, the ambiguous nature of the rhetoric allowed its malleability to different walks of life, with far-reaching consequences. This included property owning women gaining the right to vote in New Jersey in 1776–although only for a limited time. Zagarri also observes that other women understood the implications and partook in political activity with fervor: they became political commentators, writers, and partisans. Political women, especially Mary Wollstonecraft, opened the debate on women's rights, which, in accordance with the ideals of the Revolution, was taken seriously. Other women, such as Mercy Otis Warren and Judith Sargent Murray, participated in political scribbling. Wives of politicians (of which there were now more) were often skilled operatives in creating patronage, as intermediaries between their husbands and his constituents, and as political advisors. Termed by Zagarri as "Female Politicians," an increasing number of women not only partici-

pated in politics but also were genuinely interested in political affairs. Although some welcomed increased female politicization, Zagarri argues, many "American women and men feared for the future, a future that might involve a wholesale transformation in women's rights, roles and responsibilities" (p. 78). Accordingly, women might become independent, less subordinate, and a challenge to male power, which would change gender relations and pull apart the fabric of society. In response, Americans had to decide whether they wanted to uphold these ideals and practices of the Revolution as they pertained to women, or ignore them in favor of maintaining social hierarchy. Throughout these chapters, Zagarri successfully presents a shift in ideas and opportunities on women's rights, roles, and responsibilities, but mostly ignores the actual changes for the majority of women in this period, which begs the question was the threat as real as it was imagined to be? Or to put it another way, why were fears of the specter of women's political involvement so effective?

Zagarri argues in the crux chapters that the threat became more salient as Female Politicians became Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican supporters with the rise of party politics. In the third chapter, Zagarri convincingly explains this rise in women's partisan support. Since women could not vote or participate in official parts of party politics, Federalists and Republicans saw their support as nobler and purer (and therefore women as those same attributes). Women's participation provided a moral sanction on party platforms, and both parties vied for women's favor. Zagarri argues that politics suffused the everyday and entered the domestic sphere. Women supported the parties through their presence, cooking for events, wearing colors and symbols of the party, and marrying men of the same party. In both the embargo and the War of 1812, Zagarri notes that partisanship divided women on the most patriotic way to serve the country, and only increased tensions. Americans blamed Female Politicians for the tensions, and despite increased women's political participation or maybe because of it, Zagarri notes a cooling of ebullience toward Female Politicians. To bolster her points, Zagarri examines the political satires that included stereotypes of women in the Early Republic. These satirical attacks did not target women specifically but they did represent women as whores, as well as overly masculine and hapless victims. Although informative on partisan animosity, and ideas toward women, it is not clear that these were *new* representations of women. Did negative representations of women disappear after the Revolution only to reappear in the early nineteenth century? Did women's political involvement change the negative stereotypes of women in any way?

Zagarri continues her logic in chapter 4 to argue that, according to popular perception, women's involvement in partisan politics destroyed sensibility and raised the specter of civil war. Americans refused to accept the validity of opposition parties. Zagarri astutely compares parties in the Early Republic to religions–each party held monopoly on the true legacy of the Revolution, whose beliefs were the only path to political salvation. By the 1820s and 1830s, partisanship threatened to divide the nation, violence penetrated Congress and the home, and parties spoke of secession unless they could mitigate tensions. The solution, Zagarri explains, was the removal of women for partisan politics. Nineteenth-century Americans' somewhat warped logic was that men were too passionate about politics, and that only women's more rational and calm nature could sway the men toward a more liberal attitude about politics, encourage discussion and debate, pacify political passions, and create domestic refuges from politics. Although this seemed a departure from women's political roles, Zagarri argues that it was not a total loss. Women forged into a new kind of political activity, one that in many ways barricaded their return to electoral politics until the twentieth century, but created an acceptable political sphere for women only. Women turned toward social reform and benevolent societies to express their commitment to the common good. Although a seeming step backward, Zagarri argues that it allowed women to choose their own political world, even as they rejected the political label of their actions.

By the fifth chapter, Zagarri clearly laid out the logic by which women were excluded from the electoral political process and relegated to a domestic political sphere. What is less clear is whether this exclusion was a result of fortuitous events or conscious efforts. Either way, by the 1840s, Americans purposefully created a language to justify the political exclusion of women, even though the desire, Zagarri argues, began in the 1790s. This rhetoric relied on the idea of universal suffrage laid out in the Revolution. Republicans believed that the Revolution was a struggle to transform social order, while Federalists saw it as a struggle with Britain over home rule. In the aftermath of the Revolution, Republicans could gain the high moral ground and claim voting as a natural right for all, with the consequence of extending votes to women. However, Republicans did not want to extend suffrage to women. To them, universal male suffrage could only be maintained if women remained as a permanent non-voting class. Voting became a privilege, not a right, and women were excluded from voting by law as well as cus-

tom for the first time. However, as Zagarri makes clear, by making voting a privilege, all exclusions had to be justified repeatedly over time, thereby opening suffrage for debate, rather than closing it.

Opening suffrage for debate also highlighted its rhetorical hypocrisy. Zagarri notes that Americans increasingly turned toward essentialism to justify women's subordinate position. Essentialism, only fully developed in the mid-nineteenth century, naturalized sex differences. That is, physiological differences created social differences. According to essentialism, women were more emotional, more sensitive, and less rational because of their reproductive systems. Women were therefore inferior and lacked men's capacity for reason and understanding, making them less politically capable than men. Zagarri notes that this specious argument on the part of nineteenth-century Americans was a political move to keep women out of politics and maintain universal male suffrage. Certainly it was not an entirely new idea–medieval scholars believed women were inferior for similar reasons. So, were nineteenth-century Americans cynical and opportunistic or did they believe in essentialism? How much agency can historians give possible motive?

Further, did Americans believe that women, as naturally inferior, deserved any rights? Zagarri argues that rights became sex differentiated. For men, rights were open ended, but for women, rights were synonymous with duties–women had the *right* to take care of their husbands, teach their children, and promote moral virtues. Zagarri argues that "rather than accidental, the choice of the duty-bound version of rights for women seems deliberate and self-conscious" (p. 177). Zagarri implies that these ideas arose out of the logical process of political activity that developed over the five decades of the Early Republic. However, the idea of women's rights as duties was in place by the late eighteenth and very early nineteenth centuries. Zagarri's clear explanation of the logical machinations of Americans on women's political activities in the Early Republic loses force in the last chapter simply because the history of ideas does not always follow a logical sequence. If essentialism and the restriction of women's rights as a justification for excluding women from political activity was part of a "backlash" to women's political activity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, why did they first emerge when parties were still courting female politicians? Perhaps these ideas did not gain force until later when their usefulness had more political leverage.

Either way, by the 1820s, American women were either pushed or voluntarily descended into "political invisibility" and "collective amnesia" on their past political roles (p. 181). In comparison to women in other countries, American women believed that they were fortunate. Although Zagarri does not pursue this interesting perception, it suggests that nineteenth-century American women recognized that their satisfaction was debatable. It also raises the question of comparison of women's political chronology in America to those in other countries. Who were they comparing themselves to? How was the situation for political women in England, Canada, and France, for instance, different from American women's position and why?

Although not explicitly stated in *Revolutionary Backlash*, the debate over American women's rights, roles, and responsibilities foreshadows feminist debates in the present day. Should women who choose lives as mothers and homemakers be lauded or maligned? What about women who choose not to have children? Are women limited in the political world by virtue of being women? Was the Equal Rights Amendment a good idea, or did it remove labor protections from women who needed them? These are all questions that hearken to the debate in the Early Republic–could women participate as equals in the political sphere? Zagarri successfully avoids the pitfalls of debating issues in modern feminism; however, the book leaves the reader wondering: which was better for women, being a part of the mainstream political sphere or creating their own political sphere? And to a certain degree, did Zagarri impose her ideas on feminist issues, or did I impose my own?

Zagarri's work raises new questions on the history of ideas, men's self-interested reactions to women's actions, parallels between white women and African American men on suffrage, and comparative feminisms. Zagarri's argument is very well conceived and executed; *Revolutionary Backlash* is not only informative and engaging but also convincing in its logical process. Any contradictions in logic are inherent in creating narrative from a mismatch collection of individuals with different attitudes and perceptions of political women. Zagarri is immensely successful in creating order across parties, geographies, and classes into an informative, insightful, and enjoyable work.

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: Marie Basile McDaniel. Review of Zagarri, Rosemarie, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24669

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