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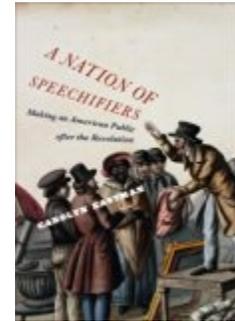
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carolyn Eastman. *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xi + 290 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-18019-9.

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The Public as Project

How did Americans constitute themselves into a viable political and cultural community in the decades following the Revolution? Who or what did the complicated work of devising a cohesive public out of an ethnically diverse and far-flung population with a penchant for localism? The promise as well as the burden of Carolyn Eastman's book is to approach these perennial questions of political and constitutional history without doing political or constitutional history as traditionally understood. Her work testifies to the success that cultural and social historians have had in making the most mainstream and established subjects their own. One might even see a unifying dynamic at work in the field of early national history, a convergence between "new" cultural inquiries and older ways of making sense of the Republic's formative years.

The "establishment of new governments and institutions in the United States was only one part of a larger project to foster unification and civic engagement by men and women," Eastman notes. "They had to *learn* to be American" (p. 2). Her first three chapters show that "project" at work in milieus and contexts that are generally overlooked or undervalued. At the many new schools and academies founded across the new nation, young men and women encountered an elocutionary and pedagogical culture that required them to participate in public settings. That this public often amounted to classmates and teachers, and sometimes to the audiences at end-of-term exhibitions, matters less than the fact that

young people were both listeners and speakers, both consumers and performers. Across a nation otherwise lacking in shared institutions and memories, these schools taught common standards for public decorum and evaluation. Regardless of where they had grown up, thousands of "nonelite" Americans, as Eastman categorizes them, learned to judge themselves and others public actors in broadly similar ways. Their speech acts together formed a shared currency of knowledge for early national Americans.

Against the image of an all-male and all-white public on the grow in post-Revolutionary society, Eastman calls attention to a vitally important philosophical framework that supported a diverse and vibrant public culture. Scottish theorists including Lord Kames, she notes, "imagined domestic relations as organically linked to the political realm and saw the condition of women as a marker of any given society's civilized nature" (p. 58). In this context, it was perfectly expected that girls would learn, in Mary Kelley's apt phrase, "to speak and stand" along with the boys. Some of them took the opportunity to criticize their society for insufficiently appreciating educated, civic-minded women. What stands out about their speeches and essays is not only their boldness but also their normalcy. Young women giving public addresses did not seem scandalous or threatening; they did not illicit gasps or howls of outrage during the 1790s and early 1800s.[1]

More striking, to me, is Eastman's chapter on native people's eloquence and its uses by various media and readerships. Here she weaves solid empirical findings into her insightful analysis: nearly one-third of the more than two hundred schoolbooks she studied contained at least one example of Indian oratory, which schoolchildren were expected to learn and admire. Far from simple-minded cant about noble savages or just plain savages, these lessons conveyed Indian eloquence as both rational and stirring. Here again, the presentation of native models for emulation was "unremarkable," a product of a cultural template rather than a deviation from social custom (p. 89). The most famous of these speeches was "Logan's Lament," given by a Mingo chief who had suffered at the hands of white vigilantes and then Virginia and Pennsylvania militiamen during 1774 and 1775. Logan acknowledged that he had found ample vengeance by killing many whites. Yet his speech clearly generated sympathy among white readers for the destruction of Logan's own family and way of life.

Eastman's first-rate scholarship on this post-Revolutionary civil society naturally provokes the question: where did that public go? How did the various spaces for public expression and performance begin to close down for noncitizens—that is, for everyone except white males? For those who would dispute that overall trajectory, Eastman's book offers a subtle but telling addition to a large and convincing body of scholarship that finds considerable irony in the still-prevailing narrative of "democratization" during the 1820s and 1830s. Her work also points to the 1810s as an extended turning point, a sea change toward a more exclusively nationalistic politics and a more "passively patriotic" public (p. 82). Instead of associating the American Republic with a larger project of western civilization, this new cultural order set the United States apart from the rest of the world; rather than incorporating Indian speech acts into the nation's oral culture and cultural patrimony, it imagined the people of the rising Republic as the polar opposite of a weaker, dwindling race.[2]

The second half of *A Nation of Speechifiers* turns to specific case studies of the American public in the making, showing how its participants reflected and shaped the class, gender, and generational divisions in early American society. As members of urban debating societies during the 1790s, young bachelors honed the elocutionary skills they had learned in school while also jousting over the great geopolitical issues of the day—and seeking peer support and surrogate patrons for their entry into full manhood. They often referred to themselves as

the gentlemen they hoped to become, imagining an outcome and then referring back from it. (We see a parallel tendency in the numerous laments over the eventual disappearance of Indians then living east of the Mississippi.) Eastman's final last two chapters look ahead to a Jacksonian world of democratic populism, industrial capitalism, western expansion, and "separate spheres" ideology. Especially in her final chapter, on the much-maligned 1829 tour of the English radical Fanny Wright, Eastman captures the demise of the more fluid public of the previous decades. Newspaper editors variously attacked Wright as a monstrous non-woman and studiously ignored her in hopes of reducing the crowds that continued to flock to her events. "Wright's tour played an important role in making coherent a far more restrictive ideology about female oratory that profoundly affected ordinary women's lives" (p. 210).

It is a mark of this book's strength that it simultaneously contributes to the fields of women's history, intellectual history, and educational history, among others. I wonder, though, if it might have carried greater cumulative force if Eastman had more fully explored the turn in public life that she locates in the 1810s. For example, she notes that only a small handful of school books had specifically described American civics before the War of 1812, after which "the swing toward nationalism was decisive" (p. 41). Yet the war itself, and the realignment of national symbols, goals, and memories that it caused or catalyzed, receives no further attention. Eastman is wise to avoid the narrative fallacy that would find a single transformation after which an American public was "made," insisting instead that we recognize an ongoing and often incoherent process of public composition and recomposition (p. 6). Since her own sources point to a discernible period of coherent changes, though, more attention to it seems warranted.

The only other weakness in this unfailingly insightful and elegantly written book concerns the nature of participation in early national public making. As noted, Eastman often refers to her subjects as "nonelite" Americans, in that they were not members of any entrenched upper class and did not hold formal political and legal power. The term itself has its virtues; how else to describe such a diverse set of people? But by defining them more against a distant, vague foil—elites, that is—than alongside their parents, neighbors, and siblings, she sometimes elides important conflicts *among* the nonelites. After all, the practice of giving young men and women a much-expanded curriculum in schools and of encouraging them to seek acclaim in public ran counter to strong

and vibrant sensibilities oriented around the well-being of working households. Large numbers of early republicans objected not only to a new and contrived understanding of the public but also to the private behaviors and motives necessary to build it. Especially in the early chapters, such cultural ferment is sometimes lost in descriptions of the project at hand.

A Nation of Speechifiers is a deeply intelligent and instructive book. Even as it focuses tightly on particular subjects, it opens a comprehensive way of approaching and understanding the roots of national identity. In reading the book, moreover, I could not help but wonder what Eastman would have to say about contemporary struggles over the meaning and membership of the national public. With new technologies of communication playing havoc with established mediums of information, every blogger, MySpace member, and Facebook user can claim to participate in or even shape a public of his or

her choice, if only to broadcast private, singular, and often militantly ill-informed views. Whether this ends up constructing a new, if virtual sense of public life or instead speeds its decline is a question of high importance, and one Eastman is uniquely positioned to consider.

Notes

[1]. Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[2]. Two recent examples include Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Terry S. Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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