

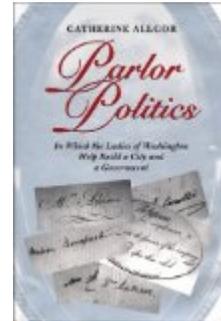
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Catherine Allgor. *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000. 246 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1998-0.

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Gender and Power in the Early Republic

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In *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, Catherine Allgor views the formulation of America's unique brand of democratic republicanism during the early nineteenth century through the eyes of influential ladies: Dolly Madison, Margaret Bayard Smith, Louisa Catherine Adams, and a host of other, less well-known women. The result is a refreshing history that resists the temptation to locate American women into a neat "separate sphere."

For decades, scholarship in women's history advanced the argument that women's lives were inscribed by a strict distinction between two spheres of influence: one public and male, the other private and female. As an analytical tool, this formulation of American life remains enormously useful. But, as scholars of women's history quickly discovered, it also has limitations. The notion of a pure dichotomy between public and private life is misleading; it obscures the significance of factors such as race, class, and ethnicity in coloring women's relationship to civic authority and private morality. Further, by defining the roles played by men and women in terms of a public-private split, a separate spheres analysis can appear to represent "male" and "female" as natural identities rather than as ideologies underlying power relations.

In response to these shortcomings, cultural histori-

ans have sometimes gone too far in the opposite direction – examining gender identities as ideologies at the expense of exploring the way gender operates in everyday life. The best new women's history scholarship strikes a balance. On the one hand, it insists upon recognizing women as individuals and as a group whose experiences may appropriately be used as historical evidence. At the same time, it explores gender as a mechanism of power that influences the ways in which the ideas of "public" and "private" constantly intersect and construct one another. In other words, gender may be best understood as an ideological construct, but it is also constantly created and reinforced by everyday actions and interactions.

Allgor does a wonderful job of striking this balance. Her study of white, upperclass social life in the U.S. capital demonstrates that politics in the early nineteenth century was not strictly a function of the public sphere. The City of Washington – according to contemporary commentators, more a mudhole than a city – was quite literally under construction, as was the very idea of a republican government. American government, with its final form and national symbols incomplete, was not an all-powerful authority, but an idea, hotly debated in every corner of social relations. Allgor pays close attention to the ways in which networks of women articulated, legitimized and stabilized American political relations. She provides us with close readings of diaries and letters, particularly those with minute descriptions of social gatherings that were often edited out of earlier published ver-

sions. She recognizes these details as something more significant than the tedious duties of an isolated wife, mother or sister. Rather, gender emerges as a mechanism for building new avenues of political power.

Allgor demonstrates that typical interpretations of the public sphere as immoral and corrupt threatened to undermine the formation of an American politics of virtue and consensus. In the post-Revolutionary era, men of influence rejected any behavior that might be seen as corrupt. Public displays of partisanship, favoritism, and material displays of authority were taboo. But they were also inherently necessary to the construction of a republican government where consensus can be built only through face-to-face interaction and politicking.

The only way that a new method of government could develop under these contradictory conditions was through an interesting reversal of typical patterns of male and female, public and private. Men wore the mask of moral sobriety and consciously constructed themselves as un-political, while working behind the scenes. Women formed networks, lobbied their husbands, brothers and fathers to reward like-minded men with political positions, and performed authority and power through a myriad of social events, constantly denying that any of this work was “political” in nature. Indeed, as Allgor reads them, constant self-deprecation in women’s letters and diaries was not so much symbolic of the moral demands of the private sphere, but a clever way of dis-

guising women’s influence in the public sphere. Allgor’s recognition of gender as an ideology – one that can be manipulated and shifted to help shift mechanisms of power – allows the reader to see women as the force behind the gradual establishment of an American government based on symbolism, consensus, networking and patronage. Read through the lens of this history, Abigail Adams’ admonition to her husband, “remember the ladies,” appears less a plaintive plea for the easing of separate spheres and more a demand for well-deserved patronage.

Allgor’s book is an important read for anyone interested in American women’s political history. Indeed, its recognition of women’s ways of organizing and influencing politics echoes across two centuries of women’s activism. The women’s rights activists of the 1840s, the suffragists at the turn of the century, and women’s grassroots party work in the decades following the passage of the 19th Amendment all developed techniques which have become hallmarks of mainstream politics. In that way, the Parlor Ladies of the early Capital City are truly the political sisters of activist women on every part of the political spectrum.

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