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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anne M. Boylan. *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 343 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5404-4; $60.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2730-7.

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Published on H-SHEAR (October, 2003)

Re-Organizing Women's Voluntarism in the Early Republic

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Anne Boylan's long-awaited book fulfills its promise: it is the definitive history of the emergence and maturation of women's organizations in the key cities of New York and Boston in the early nineteenth century. Boylan builds upon a long and rich historiography that she synthesizes with skill and clarity to construct her own nuanced and powerful contribution. Boylan brilliantly documents how the institutionalization of female benevolence both reflected and shaped the transformation of women's identity and power in the context of the rise of market-based capitalist social and economic relations. As the defining cultural paradigm for women shifted from individual service as Republican Mothers to a collective identity within a religiously shaped female "separate sphere," women's organizational endeavors became critical tools both for the consolidation of their common gender identity and for the negotiation of class- and race-specific power relations between women. Building on the insights of Nancy Hewitt, Boylan asserts that the path toward women's activism cannot be traced as a single, unilinear pattern; rather, successive generations drew upon a variety of forms of legitmation, deploying diverse strengths in relation to the interconnected social, intellectual, economic, and religious transformations of their eras.[1] Women's organizations all resonated with the gender definitions promulgated in the triumph of True Womanhood, but they ranged from those that fundamentally reproduced this construct to those that positioned themselves as alternatives to it as they brought to the fore questions about race and class.

Boylan builds her case for the multivalence of women's organizational work on the foundation of truly prodigious research. Examining nearly four dozen associations in New York and almost three dozen in Boston, and collecting biographical details for 1,142 women in all, she has meticulously constructed an understanding of the life histories of organizations and their leaders. Her appendices alone would qualify as a signal contribution to the study of women's organizations. Yet her interpretive skills contextualize and make vital her empirical work. In her first chapter, she presents a taxonomy of organizations and a chronological framework in which to understand their emergence. The first phases of women's institution-building, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, "established the tradition of organized female benevolence" (p. 17). Strong and economically secure women extended the authority conferred by their female virtue "primarily over other women and over children" (p. 20). Developing fundraising and financing techniques, these associational founders drew on their revolutionary experience as well as their familiarity with gatherings including women's prayer meetings and the female auxiliaries constituted to assist men in their charitable endeavors. Building on the appreciation for the individual and private contributions of particular women to the public good, fledgling groups legitimated their collective work while deferring to male dominance in politics and society. By the 1810s, the religious fervor of the second Great Awakening reshaped the rhetoric and ambitions of some female activists who restyled secular goals into faith-based initiatives. In the third wave between 1823 and 1840, some female reformers, empowered by evangelical fervor and caught up in market-driven change that altered the relationship of women of all classes and races to the economy, came to identify gender-based perspectives that distinguished their objectives from those of the other sex. Their organizations might become challenges to the gendered order of society.

In her second chapter, Boylan analyzes patterns of associational leadership. Demonstrating the dominance of married women in building voluntary societies, she details how they drew on both the ideology of domesticity and the reality of their domestic experiences to

construct viable associations. Wives, mothers, and widows employed the ethic of female selflessness, whether in the guise of Republican Motherhood or in its version as Christian True Womanhood, to shape their organizational careers around the perceived demands of their life courses. Institutionalization of voluntary societies permitted them to draw coherent distinctions between domestic and associational roles; yet they looked to family networks to support their causes, bringing sisters, daughters, and, in fact, their husbands and sons into the work of benevolence. Women of lesser status–defined variously by race, religion, or economic position–constructed societies similar to those of their more privileged sisters, but devoted instead to self-help and mutual assistance. These emergent groups benefited less from the actual charity of the established organizations than from their work in legitimizing forms of female association. Boylan has a rich array of examples: Roman Catholic laywomen devised organizations that recognized the special roles of women religious in their community; working-class women came together for self-improvement and mutual assistance; and African-American women looked within their racial community, often to work with men on issues salient to their race. Boylan's third chapter, "Portraits of Women Organizers," fleshes out these patterns by focusing in depth on the experiences of five women whose lives and activism exemplify the general contours of her vast research.

Boylan then turns to look at how, in their careful efforts to separate their home lives from their organizational labor, middle-class women compounded the ambiguity of their relationship to the emergent urban world in which they lived and worked. Eschewing overt political participation, these women nonetheless constructed public identities. They made expert use of the emergent world of print to take their causes to a broader audience, but they avoided associating these efforts with any trespass beyond the boundaries of private life. By 1840, their interventions on behalf of public policy began to draw some associations into the nexus of the state, providing education and poor relief, often with funds supplied from state and local governments. Some societies continued to insist on their subordination to the male political order and, perhaps inadvertently, strengthened class and racial boundaries; others, as Lori Ginzberg has shown, renounced the notion of limiting moral suasion to a "separate sphere" and instead sought to announce themselves as political subjects.[2] Thus, under the guise of the ascendant ideology of True Womanhood, gender-consciousness could support increasingly autonomous organizations that might challenge the asymmetry of the ideology of separate spheres. In these crucibles, collective concerns about the efficacy of female power could become confrontational, as evidenced in the case of moral reform societies. The deployment of compelling, but theoretically "private," female influence hovered on the boundaries of the larger public world in which democratizing politics increasingly empowered individual men. A few female reformers began to explore the claims for the rights of individual women within and beyond their gendered communal endeavors.

Intimately intertwined with questions about the role of women's organizations–and their individual members–in the public sphere of politics were the contradictory economic implications of female associational work in the early-nineteenth-century city. Boylan's final chapter chronicles the relationship between gendered labor and charity in the economy of the early republic. By investigating how individual benevolence remained outside the market economy at the same time that separate spheres ideologies masked the value of women's domestic work, Boylan teases out the fundamental contradictions of charity in capitalist society, pointing towards their gendered origins. Even when gathered together in charitable and benevolent organizations, women's labors were "pastoralized" (p. 186) in the dynamic economy of the early republic and, like housework, removed from the realm of labor by virtue of their association with woman's nature.

This is brilliant and path-breaking work. Recognizing the economic significance of women's associational labors, in ways to which contemporaries remained blind, provides a new approach to understanding the reciprocity of "the lady and the mill girl," long ago suggested by Gerda Lerner.[3] So long as the economy of benevolence was relegated to a nonmarket sphere at the same time that a dynamic, profit-driven economy sought new ways to create the wealth from manufacturing, real estate, and banking, no amount of female skill in astute investment or in elegant bookkeeping could reconcile the imbalance between public and private economies. As Boylan points out, the efforts of benevolent women to provide an alternative to "a world in which money was the primary measure of value … provided cold comfort" to their clients. Yet the benefactors, too, suffered its consequences, for their autonomy remained insecure within a world of asymmetrical dependence. We have inherited this nineteenth-century confusion, and its failure to account for both commodified and nonmarket labor still fuels calls for "a thousand points of light" that, in their brilliance, obscure how benefactors are themselves implicated in the inequalities they perpetuate.

Boylan's book is important, intense, and dense. Some chapters are slow going, but the patient reader is rewarded by the depth of analysis. Reconnecting ideology to economy, gender, class, and race through the mediation of women's organizations, Boylan has created a dynamic picture of the transitions in gender and experience in the early republic. In her conclusion, she suggests that the 1830s were the critical era in the shift from Republican Motherhood to True Womanhood. Yet, as she also recognizes, just at the moment it was enshrined, the ideology of the domestic, devout, and retiring female became contested. New organizations mapped divergent paths that challenged the boundaries of behavior for both individual women and collective womanhood. Here, Boylan points the way for the work of the next generation of scholars: if the 1830s can be seen as the pivotal decade in the making of what might be called gender modernity, how are we to locate the relationship between women's activism and the reshaping of the political world of antebellum America? Boylan has demonstrated how market relations, in interaction with religion, limned the outlines of a recognizably contemporary system of gender and, in her closing remarks, she suggests the impact of that configuration on later politics, especially the maternalization of the state in the Progressive Era. But among historians of women in the early republic, debate currently rages about how to evaluate the relationship of women, both individually and collectively, to the concept of citizenship and to the democratization of suffrage, the Second Party System, and the rise of partisan political display in the four decades before the Civil War.

Boylan is restrained in her exploration of the relationship of female organizational culture to the larger antebellum political world. She seems to suggest that women established a presence within a Habermasian "public sphere," even while formally excluded from direct political participation. But what, then, are the implications for our understanding of the role of women and their organizations in a political culture based upon universal white manhood suffrage? How do we understand women's faith-based and class-aligned activism in the context of the rise of evangelical politics? Boylan's excellent book positions us well to push towards a deeper consideration of the need for dialogue between political historians and historians of gender. In combination, we may look together to the early republic to see the outlines of controversies we still find familiar today in the guise of the culture wars with their battlefields in areas of race, social justice, and, of course, definitions of male and female. Future scholars will appreciate the firm foundation Boylan has built as they push yet further into this complex, important, and fascinating question.

Notes

[1]. Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

[2]. Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[3]. Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *MidContinent American Studies Journal* 10 (1969): pp. 5-15.

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Citation: Carol Lasser. Review of Boylan, Anne M., *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. October, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8300

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