

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael D. Pierson. *Free Hearts, Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xiii + 250 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-2782-6; ISBN 978-0-8078-5455-6.

Reviewed by Phyllis Field (History Department, Ohio University)
Published on H-CivWar (September, 2004)



Gender and Civil War Political Culture

In the aftermath of the recall of California's governor and his replacement by a body-builder and movie star, several political commentators were quick to lament the triumph of image over substance in modern politics. Michael D. Pierson's new book, however, demonstrates that long before television and movies, image-making was vital to how voters perceived both parties and candidates, and that these images were, in fact, related to substantive issues. Carefully examining the fictional stories appearing in partisan papers as well as campaign biographies, political parades and festivals, broadsides, and partisan pamphlets and speeches, he "argues that antebellum Republicans and Democrats articulated cogent, diverse stands on gender roles and family practices, and that many people who assumed a partisan identity did so in part because they understood the party's gender culture and identified themselves with that worldview" (p. 3). Thus he joins those who have added beliefs about family and marriage to notions of ethnicity, race, and religion as cultural dividers between nineteenth-century political parties.

Pierson first demonstrates that the Market Revolution produced gender disagreements in six areas: women's wage labor, their role outside the home generally, the basis for successful marriages, the proper size of families (and the methods for family limitation), the relative importance of male self-control as opposed to self-expression, and the extent to which slavery was consistent with proper gender relations. He then traces how the Liberty Party, Free Soil Party, and Republican Party

addressed these issues, contrasting their views to that of the "patriarchal" Democrats as seen in that party's campaign literature in 1856.

Pierson notes that the Liberty Party was initially conservative on gender as befitted its roots in less developed areas as well as its origins in the split with William Lloyd Garrison over women's participation in abolition. As the party grew, however, it incorporated more commercially-oriented followers with more advanced notions of gender. Thus, its party press offered diverse, but increasingly progressive, images of the ideal family. To win greater electoral support, its successor, the Free Soil Party, changed the timetable for ending slavery. The peculiar institution would be strangled by preventing its spread rather than ended at once. Pierson argues that, to maintain the interest of immediatists, the party publicized the writings of women such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Jane G. Swisshelm, who morally condemned slavery, thus demonstrating, by indirection, the need for its immediate ending. To satisfy those more attuned to gradualist, constitutionalist means, the party portrayed such immediatist positions as simply flowing from woman's nature. Women, unlike men, were concerned about the suffering of women and children under slavery, but were untutored in the intricacies of constitutional law. Thus, adopting the idea of separate spheres and domestic feminism enabled the party to downplay its inherent differences.

The Republicans also embraced domestic feminism,

celebrating a more egalitarian family exemplified in 1856 by John and Jessie Benton Fremont. Jessie was the daughter of a prominent senator but defied his wishes by marrying John. Republicans contrasted themselves with Democrats, who placed the needs of patriarchal slaveholders over those of helpless slave women and children and the egalitarian white families settling western territories. But as they neared gaining power, Republicans became more cautious. Abraham Lincoln appeared in his campaign biography as the father of a thoroughly middle-class family, not the spouse in an egalitarian marriage. Yet Pierson still asserts “the election of Lincoln in 1860 constituted a victory for a new set of gender ideologies, and it signaled a transfer of power from one constituency’s worldview to another’s for the South, it was one more reason to regard adherence to the United States as a threat to their conservative society” (p. 7).

Pierson’s reading of campaign literature is nuanced. He samples newspapers from all factions and diverse geographical locations and contextualizes his sources. He qualifies generalizations and is careful to point out that none of these parties would have satisfied the desires of advanced feminists. His analyses of fiction in party newspapers demonstrate the value of such sources, in addition to more traditional sources, to understanding politics.

Where Pierson is most likely to face questioning is the relative importance of the Republicans’ gender views

to understanding antebellum politics and particularly the Civil War. What contribution did domestic feminism make to white southerners’ willingness to secede? All partisans used exaggerated rhetoric. Did Democrats really think that male power was endangered, that domestic feminism was a comparable issue to slavery? Were there other cultural lenses at work here? For example, did southern Democrats alone see male honor outraged by domestic feminism or did northern ones as well? If so, how does this complicate our understanding of “southern” honor? These questions deserve further elaboration.

Pierson does not discuss evangelical religion, although this has frequently been linked to immediatism by both men and women and cited as a justification for women’s involvement with caring for slaves and the unfortunate. If women took more advanced positions than men in the Free Soil Party, how did men justify placing constitutional considerations before their religious obligations? Or perhaps, was evangelicalism not important in creating the Republican world view? Further clarification would be in order.

Pierson has written an exciting monograph that enriches our understanding of political culture and shows that the public and private worlds of the nineteenth century were far from distinct. If it leaves the reader with yet more questions, that is precisely what the best research should do.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Phyllis Field. Review of Pierson, Michael D., *Free Hearts, Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9833>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.