

Bruce Burgett. *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender and Citizenship in the Early Republic.*
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Sentimental Bodies explores the development of US liberalism and republicanism as advocates of these competing ideologies challenged one another and attempted to deal with the parallel changes in conceptions of the body and its place in domestic and national politics and the emergence of the public sphere. One of the greatest strengths of Burgett's study is the degree to which it resists the temptation to privilege any of these three principal interpretive categories: political ideology, the body, and/or the public sphere. Instead, he persuasively argues for an essential dialectical relationship between these three contested conceptual areas. That is, he shows how people's understanding of such categories was in constant flux as they played off each other and adjusted to the changing arguments deployed by one another. One gets the sense that these terms were also competing rhetorical tropes used to explain social and political truth in such a way as to establish a particular ideology that would empower a specific set of norms and/or individuals. This in an effort to control and maintain the hegemony of

a given conception of the proper shape of US social and political relations.

Sentimental Bodies emphasizes the degree to which the (ongoing) battle between liberalism and republicanism shaped the nation and demonstrates the extent to which these two ideologies permeate US culture, reaching into almost all aspects of our society. However, of the three conceptual categories discussed the area which has been contested most fiercely over the past two centuries is, in Burgett's account, the battleground of the body. The body figures prominently in the dialectic of republicanism and liberalism not just in terms of changing notions of race and gender, but in a concomitant sense of the relationship of the corporeal to the ideal. For example, through an examination of the writings of philosophers such as Rousseau and Kant Burgett explores the relationship of the (gendered) body to the construction of a rational mind and/or a moral sense. Thus, the degree to which individuals are able to abstract themselves from their bodies became an index of their capacity for reason. Nevertheless, and this is perhaps the central strength of his ar-

gument, Burgett makes it clear that that debate took place largely within the argument over the public sphere, whose shape, function, and representativeness was contingent on particular notions of the place of the body, specifically the gendered body, in determining political and social relations.

Through astute readings of George Washington's "Farewell Address," Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, Charles Brockden Brown's *Clara Howard*, and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Burgett traces the dialectic between liberalism and republicanism and their impact on notions of class, gender, and race. At the same time Burgett's thoroughly theorized approach incorporates intelligent and subtle readings of contemporary pop culture, including films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Robo Cop* and cultural critics such as Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, and, of course, Jurgen Habermas. Burgett glides nicely from these twentieth-century texts to the earlier materials, drawing similarities between the tactics of the cultural critics of both eras and illustrating the persistence of these terms throughout US history. The readings of these various literary texts illustrate the convergence of political ideology with cultural notions of the body. Particularly persuasive, is Burgett's brilliant discussion of the often overlooked *Clara Howard*. In his reading of Brown's late novel, Burgett explores the author's engagement with gendered notions of sentimentality wherein masculinity becomes associated with rationality and femininity with sentimentality.

If his easy transition from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts to more contemporary materials is one of Burgett's strengths as a writer, it is also the source of a fundamental problem in the text. By treating these various texts and the arguments they deploy as identical, Burgett's argument is not sensitive to the importance historical change. It is as if the terms themselves remain constant and the social and political culture they

exist in, consequently, is also rendered static. One might ask, for instance, whether the republicanism of *Robo Cop* would be recognizable to Hannah Foster? And, vice versa? So, at the same time that the book suggests an evolution through the dialectic relationship between liberalism and republicanism and their relation to sentimentality, the public sphere, and the body, paradoxically, it also relies on a sense of historical stasis in which the terms themselves and the critics of them remain constant.

Burgett overtly addresses, even embraces, the matter of the (a)historicity of his study in his "Introduction": "Societies and institutions are democratic to the degree that they understand history as a story of the present, told, and debated in relation to its multiple past(s). While this disjointed form of "present-ism" strips history of its metapolitical certainty, it also provides historiography with a relation to a future that is not yet determined" (20). To the extent that it reminds us that history is a contested terrain which shapes our understanding of the present and the possibilities of our future, this is a useful articulation of the nature of history. However, at the moment when it strips the past of its fundamental otherness and serves to gloss over essential changes in social and political context and, perhaps most fundamentally, language, this understanding of the project of history becomes deeply problematic. So, while Burgett offers an insightful account of the dialectical relationship between republicanism and liberalism over the past two centuries I am troubled by the extent to which those terms remain static in his account, an account which seemingly implies that the contrary was the case.

This raises one last point for the reader to consider, which is the chronological orientation of the text. Although the ostensible subject of the text is the early republic and the chapters name key texts from that period as the topic in question, the text often seems far more interested in contemporary theorizing about the body, the public

sphere, and, of course, republicanism and liberalism. So, while this reader found the readings of much of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literary and political texts insightful, I was often left wanting more. Burgett is an astute reader of texts but all too often he seems more interested in engaging other critics than in engaging the texts of, for example, *The Coquette* or Washington's "Farewell Address." Half of the chapter on Hannah Foster's novel, to take one case, is dedicated to a discussion of an episode in the correspondence between Abigail and John Adams and to an analysis of Cathy Davidson's influential thesis about the sentimental novel. Burgett's approach has the advantage of contextualizing his own work within the history of criticism on these texts and ideological debates, but it comes at the cost of a fuller reading of those texts.

So, although this is a provocative study that offers a theoretically sophisticated and rewarding reading of both the key terms in American political history, republicanism and liberalism, and some of the key texts of the early republic, its deeply flawed approach to history creates a fundamental theoretical problem should give us pause.

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