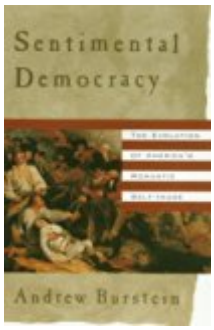
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew Burstein. *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1999. xxi + 406 pp. $28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-8535-4.



Reviewed by Konstantin Dierks

Published on H-SHEAR (November, 1999)

Andrew Burstein traces the rise and fall of sentimental rhetoric in American political discourse between 1750 and 1828. Positioning his book as "an adjunct to political history" (p. xiv), Burstein argues that a masculine culture of "sentimental democracy" comprises an important but heretofore unappreciated component of the American nation-building process. Setting himself apart from literary scholars who have investigated sentimental rhetoric primarily in reference to "sentimental literature" and the "female consciousness," Burstein is concerned instead with how sentimental rhetoric was used by political men to "sustain the enterprise of nation building" (p. 6). At the same time, he also sets himself apart from traditional political historians, asserting that their narrow focus on "political ideology" (p. xiv) has led them to overlook the presence of sentimental rhetoric in male political discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

After introducing English and French literary antecedents of an eighteenth-century language of sentiment, sympathy, and sensibility in Chapter One, Burstein investigates the appearance of such a vocabulary in the setting of American politics in Chapters Two through Eight. He begins his account with the New England minister Jonathan Mayhew, whom he credits with originating an enduring quest for a sentimental "patriotic idiom" in American politics (p. 23). Through each phase of American political history stretching from the French and Indian War to the Age of Jackson, Burstein finds that political men deployed sentimental rhetoric to generate at least an illusion of social harmony in the face of wrenching political turbulence. In contrast to David Waldstreicher's *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (1997), which focuses on patriotism as an instrument of social conflict, Burstein chooses to look at the concealment of such conflict in political texts aiming, instead, to accentuate sympathetic unity (pp. xvi-xvii).

Burstein loosely structures each chapter around a motif that, in his view, characterized the sentimentalized rhetoric favored by men in discrete periods of American political history. Chapter Three emphasizes stirring memorials pub-

lished during the years of imperial crisis preceding the American War of Independence. Chapter Four highlights optimistic dream fantasies evoked in political texts during the pivotal year of 1776. Chapter Five concerns grateful themes of American release from British containment voiced in the perilous era of the War of Independence and its aftermath. After the creation of the new federal government in 1789, however, it seems that political authors were forced to work harder to promote the illusion of national unity as political divisiveness seemed only to intensify. Chapter Six covers gothic nightmares of dissolution that worried political men during the contentious 1790s. Chapter Seven considers both satires against and paeans to the emergence of democratic political practice in the equally contentious years leading up to the War of 1812. Finally, Chapter Eight examines themes of patriotic nostalgia for a heroic past prevalent during the rise of Jacksonian democracy. It was at this point, Burstein argues, that political men rejected sentimental rhetoric in favor of a new vocabulary of competitive vigor. He concurs with other scholars that this transition began as a result of the alarmist politics of the 1790s, but in Chapter Nine Burstein sees the 1820s as the eventual decisive turning point when political men fully relegated sentimentality into a purely feminine trait.

One valuable contribution of Burstein's book, therefore, is to shatter images of republican political discourse as well as of sentimental literature which presume a seamless correlation between masculinity and rationality on the one hand, and femininity and sentimentality on the other hand. Burstein marshals ample evidence to overthrow any such pat gender formulas, as he finds sentimental rhetoric used in male political discourse both considerably earlier in the eighteenth century and also considerably later into the nineteenth century, compared to most other scholars. Because Burstein analyzes only one side of the equation -- the masculine and the sentimental, but neither the feminine nor the rational -- his book generously opens the door for careful scrutiny of, for instance, the sinews of overlap between masculine and feminine gender ideologies.

Burstein's turn from political ideology to sentimental rhetoric does not, however, alter the traditional political narrative in any way. Sentimental rhetoric seems to have had no more than incidental impact, since Burstein treats it as merely reflective of changes happening elsewhere in American culture. If his aim is to explain the formulating of an American national identity, sentimental rhetoric defers to a traditional political narrative of change, and to a traditional political explanation of causation. For instance: "It was the 1765 Stamp Act that established a broadly based political identity for this disparate community, built around the new principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections to which Adams was attesting" (p. 51). The impact of sentimental rhetoric in contributing to the formation of national identity remains an "adjunct" (p. xiv) in Burstein's account, and so we are left with the unsatisfying explanations promulgated by traditional political history, where agent-less political events like the Stamp Act somehow manage to create singular outcomes of human (read male) identity. What precisely creates -- or even constitutes -- national identity remains difficult to decipher from Burstein's account.

It is equally difficult to determine how sentimental rhetoric leached its way into political discourse. American politicians, in Burstein's account, employed a sentimental rhetoric that seems to have already been fully formed elsewhere in American culture. For instance, when the Continental Congress declared independence in 1776, "they defended their acts amid social turmoil with words that reflected the culture of sentiment and sympathy" (p. 90). Only at the end of the book, however, does Burstein suggest that the culture of sentiment and sympathy originated in "the eighteenth century's long and grievous experience with seemingly unavoidable tragedy ... the

European Enlightenment ... and a growing ideal of refinement" (p. 300). Yet such grand abstractions explain very little, and not whatever differences may have existed between Europe and America (a point to which I will return below). And such abstractions do not elucidate the contingent nature of expressive vocabularies meant to appeal to specific reading communities like political men -- without, it must be emphasized, their appeal being guaranteed beforehand. I would venture that political texts, like the literary and medical texts Burstein alludes to in Chapter One, might themselves have helped to popularize sentimental rhetoric among certain male audiences. Burstein's approach is to annotate the traditional political narrative with instances of sentimental rhetoric, yet he does not fully interrogate the reciprocal links between political discourse and sentimental rhetoric.

A more critical reason why it is impossible to gauge the generative force of sentimentalized political rhetoric is the lack of social specificity in Burstein's book. Most disconcerting is Burstein's cavalier use of the term "Americans" and "America" throughout his book, without making any substantive connections between his textual sources and their readership. Burstein's evidence is limited to the rhetorical content of texts, and extends neither to the marketing nor the reception of such texts (except in purely cursory remarks). While he can sometimes be quite judicious in referring, for instance, strictly to "inspired writers of the founding generation" (p. 22), by the next paragraph he has transmuted and magnified that limited perspective into "American citizens" (p. 23) writ large. Throughout the book Burstein conflates authors of texts and -- not simply a local or limited audience -- but "Americans" as a whole. Yet his chapters are filled with a narrow band of male voices dominated (starkly apparent in the index) by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, and others of the so-called Founding Fathers. Of course, these are exactly the voices that have long been permitted in traditional political history to stand for the mindset of "Americans" and "America." Thus, when Burstein comes to discuss the so-called Era of Good Feelings after the War of 1812, he claims that "the moral identity of Americans ... continued to be the stuff of much public conversation" (p. 267), and yet this conversation is largely restricted to the opinions of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Joseph Story, and Daniel Webster.

While Burstein does pepper in some anonymous voices from a smattering of period newspapers and magazines, he does not analyze the social specificity of the audiences of various forms of print culture or different kinds of books. Instead, he seems to take authors' universalist rhetoric -- whether political or sentimental -- at face value. The result is awkward sentences such as the following: "As George Washington took office, America was intent, no less than before, on obtaining satisfying definitions of individual and national moral progress" (p. 167). "In Americans' composite opinion, along with his admirable masculine sense of honor and fairness, he [Andrew Jackson] was temperamental and bellicose" (p. 252). The momentum of this kind of blanket social terminology grows inexorably over the course of the book, so that Burstein purports to be describing "Americans" and "America" even as his own terminology conceals the narrow confines of his evidence. It will come as no surprise that only a few pages of the book refer either to slavery or to anti-slavery agitation, and only in this passage does Burstein clarify that his texts speak purely for "white Americans" (e.g., p. 32). Women are only slightly more present, barely appearing in either the body or the index to Burstein's book. In one extraordinary moment, Esther Edwards Burr is assigned the role of "speaking for women" (p. 29). This is ironic because Burstein's noble mission was to stretch our historical focus beyond the political ideology of the Founding Fathers. "Without a language of feeling," he asserts compellingly, "the American Revolution would have existed

only in the minds of the most narrowly philosophical" (p. 288).

Ultimately, it becomes just as difficult to unravel from Burstein's account why the language of feeling was ultimately abandoned by political men in the 1820s, as why it had once been adopted in the 1760s. He argues that an ethic of masculine sentimentality "could not subsist in a competitive environment," but here, again, the changes (and their causes) seem to have occurred elsewhere in American culture -- this time, in urbanization, the universal white male franchise, and so forth (p. 310). These macro-level changes somehow managed to produce a single outcome of identity -- now a competitive rather than a sentimentalized one.

In a way, Burstein returns us full circle to the beginning of his time period, when English literary antecedents seem to precede comparable rhetorical shifts in America. In the 1760s it had been Lawrence Sterne who helped formulate an ethic of sentimentality which would be used by American politicians. In the 1820s, however, it would be Walter Scott who helped sanction a new ethic of competitiveness which would soon find favor among American men (pp. 312-313). What made either that sentimental rhetoric or that competitive rhetoric used in America distinctly American -- as opposed to derivative of or parallel to English culture -- remains unanswerable without direct analytical comparisons. For instance, was English political discourse sentimentalized in the same time period? Differently so? In the end, we are left with a repeat of the classic form of American exceptionalism -- eerily oblivious to outside comparisons that might throw American culture into relief.

Burstein has certainly advanced our understanding by demonstrating the sustained use of sentimental rhetoric in male political discourse between the 1750s and the 1820s. While his book is more suggestive than persuasive at its broadest level of ambition, it does succeed in throwing open research paths into comparisons necessary to explain the formation of American national identity with full social specificity and due international context.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/

Citation: Konstantin Dierks. Review of Burstein, Andrew. *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3604