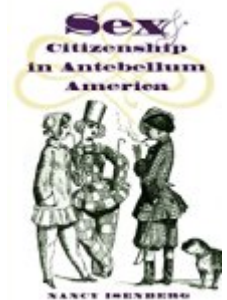


**Nancy Isenberg.** *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xviii + 319 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2442-9.



**Reviewed by** Stacey M. Robertson

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The antebellum women's rights movement has received its fair share of attention from scholars of women's history. This latest addition by Nancy Isenberg, however, offers a refreshing perspective on the origins and evolution of feminist thought in the decades preceding the Civil War. While earlier studies have focused on such issues as the movement's connections to antislavery and other reform efforts, its ideological development, and its relationship to the "woman's sphere," Isenberg firmly places antebellum women's rights in the context of religion, politics, and the law [1]—exploring, as she states, "the many ways in which women's rights advocates encountered antebellum political culture" (p. xiii). Employing original research as well as provocative political and legal theory, Isenberg argues that antebellum feminists illuminated the contradictions in both popular understandings of democracy and "constitutional principles of protection and due process" (p. xviii). Early women's rights activists, she continues, applied this critique of American egalitarianism to the family, the church, and the state. They also moved beyond dismantling to offer an alternative vision of men and women as equally capable and

"simultaneously the same and different," a notion then of "co-equality," as Isenberg puts it (p. xviii).

Isenberg begins her analysis by successfully destabilizing both an accepted wisdom and a sacred text of feminist activism and women's history. Scholars, she asserts, have relied on Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *History of Woman Suffrage* to reconstruct the origins of the women's rights movement without questioning its "internal logic." [2] She rightly points out the problems with seeing the *History* as anything but a partial view of the movement. Isenberg goes on to problematize the widely accepted notion that Stanton's 1848 Seneca Falls women's rights convention was the source of the movement and her "Declaration of Sentiments" the articulation of its central ideas. Even nineteenth-century activists, such as Paulina Wright Davis, questioned this privileging of Seneca Falls. By complicating the origins of the movement Isenberg forces us to rethink both what came before and what came after. Her book offers a sophisticated and nuanced history of what came before.

In particular, Isenberg grapples with a variety of major institutions and issues impacting women's lives, only some of which I will address—including women's rights conventions, sexuality, the church, national political issues, and marriage.

One of the clear sources of feminist thought in the antebellum U.S. was the national women's rights conventions. These annual gatherings occurred in a variety of Northern states between 1848 and 1860, and they resulted in "ingenious arguments for women's full entitlement as citizens" (p. 20). In the process of revealing the importance of these conventions as national forums for political debate about the social standing of women, Isenberg rescues forgotten feminist thinkers and intellectual battlegrounds from historical obscurity. We learn about Betsey Mix Cowles, a feminist teacher, school principal, and the president of the Salem, Ohio women's rights convention, and Harriot Hunt, the outspoken Bostonian who demanded equal educational opportunities. More importantly, Isenberg reconstructs the evolution of antebellum feminist legal thought—particularly the pursuit of entitlement, national citizenship, and equality under the law. Feminists, avers Isenberg, "developed a rich theoretical tradition that contributed in significant ways to a national discourse on constitutional practices in a democracy" (p. 6).

Isenberg also offers an insightful exploration of the "visual politics" underlying rights discourses in the antebellum period. Rejecting the public/private dichotomy which has informed so much of the scholarship of this period, she argues that feminists battled for a spot in the visual arena of the public sphere despite their legal and cultural exclusion. Beginning with Harriet Martineau, feminists countered the notion that women's bodies—that is, the uncontrolled sexual nature of their bodies—threatened the nation's morals if they moved into public roles. Recognizing that this fear of women's sexuality represented a deeper fear of female independence, activists employed such

arenas as dress reform and the literary sphere to articulate a vision of "publicity" which included both men and women "co-equally."

Even as feminists tried to create a public space for themselves, they also rejected the notion of the apolitical private sphere. They exposed the political nature of the supposedly "private" institution of the church and they bemoaned its negative impact on women. Indeed, as Isenberg argues, "the alliance between church and state contributed significantly to cultural perceptions of women's civil status" (p. 75). Much like the anti-Sabbath movement, which sought to free individuals from the tyranny of the church/state combination, feminists challenged the "moral authority" of the church (and state) through a politics of dissent (p. 88). Rhoda Bement, for example, found herself on trial before the Presbyterian church because she defied her minister through public disagreement. Bement defended herself by arguing that her minister sought to "'bind [my] conscience & deprive me of christian liberty'" (p. 91). Isenberg shows how Bement's public rebellion catalyzed other women to acts of defiance against their churches and "fueled the women's rights movement" (p. 91).

National political issues and events also offered activists the opportunity to challenge their civil and political disempowerment. Even though fugitive slave laws, capital punishment, prostitution, and the Mexican War all reinforced women's "civil death," according to Isenberg, feminists astutely used these areas to address their lack of constitutional protection. For example, activists employed the debate over fugitive slave laws to illuminate "the connection between self-protection and personal liberty" (p. 117). Much like fugitives, women lacked the constitutional right to self-protection and therefore were subject to the whims of their husbands, fathers, and sons. Unable to choose their own residence, speak without constraint, and freely pursue employment, women

were denied personal liberty and thus lacked a civil life.

Isenberg also explores the institution of marriage in the decades before the Civil War, arguing that feminists exploded the "legal fiction" of coverture--"the common-law rule that placed the wife under the 'wing, protection and cover' of her husband" (p. 7)--and exposed the "economic and sexual conditions of the family" (p. 157). Recognizing that the family, much like the church, was a political institution rife with gendered assumptions, feminists developed a sophisticated defense of divorce and a strong case for women's financial and custodial rights (p. 157). They sought to recreate marriage so that it acknowledged women's independent rights and their "mutual consideration and equal interests in the marriage" (p. 189).

As should be clear from this cursory description of some of the central ideas in *Sex and Citizenship*, Isenberg offers historians a richer and broader perspective on women's rights in the antebellum period. She persuasively contends that our limited scholarly focus on Seneca Falls, the antislavery movement, and suffrage has circumscribed our understanding of the multifaceted women's rights movement.

I only have a few caveats for readers as they delve into this dense array of complicated arguments. While Isenberg's employment of political and legal theory--including the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas-- is necessary to advance her thesis, those not accustomed to the language of these theorists may get bogged down. I often found myself reading and rereading complex passages and paragraphs, trying to work through Isenberg's difficult theoretical ideas. More contextualization, perhaps even more reference to the activities and personal histories of feminists themselves, would have been helpful in grounding her legal and political arguments.

Moreover, in this intellectual history Isenberg necessarily privileges ideas over actions--and it is important to recognize the implications of this ap-

proach. Part of what was radicalizing for many of the feminists Isenberg discusses was not just ideas--their actions and experiences often led them to their revolutionary positions. My own work on abolitionist and feminist Parker Pillsbury suggests that individual experience and personal philosophy are intimately linked. Pillsbury's radical convictions emerged directly out of the context of his antislavery travels and lectures. His commitment to feminism and his understanding of the need for a transformation of gender roles cannot be fully understood without some reference to the experiences that influenced those ideas.

Finally, Isenberg states in her introduction that she reexamines the contention that the antislavery movement was the central influence behind the women's rights movement. While she does broaden our understanding of feminist thought in the antebellum period, she does not fully debunk this argument. Indeed, her frequent references to abolitionist-related issues and events, such as fugitive slave laws and the Mexican war, suggests that antislavery influenced women's rights in ways we have yet to understand. A more direct engagement of the relationship between these two movements would interest scholars of abolition.

Ultimately, these minor criticisms pale in comparison to the important contribution *Sex and Citizenship* makes to the history of women's rights in the United States.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Sylvia D. Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Keith Melder, *The Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York: Schocken, 1977).

[2]. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds. *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (New York, 1881; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1985).

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