

H-Net Reviews

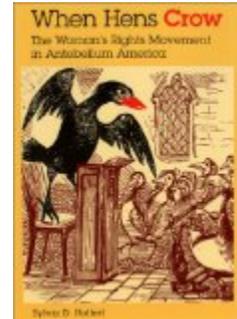
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sylvia D. Hoffert. *When Hens Crow: The Women's Rights Movement in Antebellum America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. x + 153 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-32880-9.

Sylvia D. Hoffert. *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 168 pp.

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On Hens, Crows, and Politics

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The nineteenth-century woman suffrage movement enjoyed twenty years of resurgent interest during the 1970s and 80s. Coinciding with the glory years of the twentieth-century women's rights movement and the search for a usable past for women, historians "remembering through [their] grandmothers" turned first to the women of the nineteenth-century women's rights struggle. Classic works such as Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle*, Ellen Carol DuBois's *Feminism and Suffrage*, Elisabeth Griffith's *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, and Kathleen Barry's *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* are only a few of the dozens of important works that filled our bookshelves to overflowing.[1]

As the 1980s waned, however, so did interest in the woman suffrage movement. So much so that in 1988 Anne Firor Scott noted that the very term "woman suffrage" was "apt to elicit only a yawn." She continued, "Many young historians, raised on the excitement of social history, are convinced that everything that can be said about suffrage has been said and refer somewhat condescendingly to their predecessors whom they mistakenly perceive to have treated the struggle for the vote as the whole of women's history." [2]

The following year editors Patricia G. Holland and Ann D. Gordon released the microfilmed Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony through Scholarly Resources, Inc. The release of collections like these challenged the conventional wisdom that the topic of woman suffrage had nothing further to yield. Instead, the richness of these resources demonstrated how much more there was to know and how many new questions waited for answers in spite of twenty years of dedicated work.

In this new and elegantly argued addition to the historiography of the nineteenth-century woman suffrage movement, Sylvia D. Hoffert's *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* takes advantage of these new collections as well as the classic works of the 1970s and 1980s. She reaches beyond the familiar broad strokes of our understandings of the dozen years of pre-Civil War activism to explore the ideology, language, and strategies of the cadre of twenty-three women and men; persons she identifies as the vanguard of the movement in its earliest years. By doing so, Hoffert explores important new perspectives on how these pioneers used republican individualistic ideology, the Bloomer costume, political metaphors, and the general circulation "penny" press to advance their cause.

Hoffert has chosen these years because of the high degree of public agreement among the women and men in the vanguard of the movement, those who had the “time, energy, money, and commitment” to participate in at least three of the national conventions held before the Civil War (p. 15). She argues that “the ideas of the early feminists and the way in which they chose to express those ideas were of primary importance in directing the early public debate on the subject of woman’s rights” (p. 4). They were, she continues, the “single most important weapons” of this early phase of the movement (p. 4). Hoffert examines each of these weapons in order to argue that conscious choices, the result of sometimes heated debate, informed their strategies.

For example, it has long been noted that no national suffrage organization was formed prior to the Civil War. Hoffert questions why that was the case in order to show that a commitment to individualism and whether women’s experiences in other reform associations, such as temperance and abolition, had convinced them that organizations would have impinged on their ability to make individual choices.

Instead of a national organization, group identity was forged around reform dress. The Bloomer costume became the symbol of a woman’s personal politics and a good deal of pressure was exerted on individual women to adopt it. When, for example Elizabeth Oakes Smith attended the Syracuse convention in 1852 wearing conventional dress, Susan B. Anthony objected to her nomination as president of the convention. Stanton is overheard remarking that a speech by Lydia Fowler would have been more convincing “if she had not appeared before her audience with her ‘waist lined with whale-bones’” (p. 25).

Wearing reform dress was a powerful non-verbal way of announcing one’s individual politics, but it came with a price. As each woman soon discovered, the reform dress gave them freedom of movement that conventional dress denied them, but it also restricted their public movement and privacy. Strangers reacted to it as an invitation to intrude upon, ridicule, and harass anyone brave enough to wear it in public. Reform dress was never widely adopted and the last holdouts had resumed conventional dress by 1855 amid a flurry of debate about its continued worth as a political symbol and visual metaphor. Hoffert’s exploration into this area of early reform activism clearly demonstrates the choices women in the vanguard were willing to make and the price they were willing to pay to make those choices.

Hoffert uses the same great care in explicating the usurpation by women of political language in order to shape the debate on their terms. Political language that had been reserved for men allowed women’s rights advocates to argue outside the realm of home and hearth on their own behalf. Arguing in the tradition of male republican individualism they bridged the gap between the ideals of “Republican Motherhood” and “the cult of true womanhood” into the realm of public political speech to argue their cause on the basis of individual self interest (pp. 8-11, 33-34, 117). By “waging campaigns” and “combating their foes” women removed themselves rhetorically from the home and the language of domesticity (pp. 60, 67). Dramatic and shocking, this approach attracted attention and set the terms of the debate.

The centerpiece of her argument is based on her research into the role of the penny press. With the advent of affordable newspapers in the 1830s, suffrage activists had a ready market by 1848 for news of their conventions and speeches which they determined to manipulate in order to draw attention to women’s rights. Hoffert’s attention focuses on the three most influential New York City newspapers and makes a strong case for their national importance as a conduit to papers far removed from the eastern seaboard.

Suffrage leaders analyzed the editorial positions of the *New York Daily Times*, *Daily Tribune*, and *Herald* in order to cultivate the interest of their powerful editors. They were not above flattering the editors or holding their conventions in New York City to maximize the coverage they received. Controversy over the new reform sold papers and the press was willing to oblige.

Careful analysis of what the press found newsworthy allowed the women to shape their words and actions to guarantee coverage. Because they knew that reprints from articles in New York City papers could appear in places like Chicago and Pittsburgh (in shortened generalized descriptions of their conventions), leaders made sure their resolutions were crafted to include their demands and their most important arguments supporting those demands. The women were aware that newspapers outside of larger markets frequently reprinted articles and commentary from each other’s columns, sometimes acknowledging sources, sometimes not. For these smaller newspapers the reporting done by the larger metropolitan papers provided a steady source of information to fill their papers.

In this argument Hoffert offers surprising testimony from women like Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone,

later closely associated with the most prominent suffrage papers, arguing against establishing an official suffrage newspaper. Although they were not always pleased about the tone of the attention they received, they were content that the press was “perfectly willing to publish all that women wish” (p. 87). Considering existing reform journals already published on their behalf, starting an official suffrage journal would be a costly enterprise, and neither could hope to approach the circulation of the city newspapers. The *New York Tribune* alone had over 800,000 readers. The penny press was clearly a resource they could not ignore.

By examining the early years of the women’s movement through its ideology, language, and strategies, Hoffert has opened new territory in our understandings of a political agenda that was the result of careful considerations and conscious decision making on the part of its participants. Rather than seeing an unorganized movement with little focus content to work through other associations like temperance and abolition, Hoffert argues for a movement fully conscious of its goals, the language in which it would argue those goals, and the strategies it would pursue. That some strategies, such as reform dress

and reliance on the general circulation press, were later abandoned or modified in no way detracts from the argument that these early years were critical in forging a group identity, an agreed upon ideology, the language for expressing that ideology, and the confidence to present their case in the forum of public politics.

Notes

[1]. Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Women’s Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); and, Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

[2]. Anne Prior Scott in her introduction to the University Publications of America release of the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College’s Women’s Studies Manuscripts on microfilm.

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