Why Study the Early American Women’s Rights Movement?

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Historians have been playing a central part in explaining Trump’s America. From the Muslim travel ban and debates over Confederate monuments, to migrant children being taken away from their families, parallels with past policies and practices such as the separation of enslaved families in the antebellum South and Japanese American internment camps during World War II are drawn in traditional and social media. What has been interpreted as Americans’ inability to come to terms with their past has also made historians’ intervention in the public debate, helped by social media, more visible in recent years for both political and economic reasons.

1 “The past means business,” as British women’s historian Jill Liddington puts it (83). In June 2017, the *Washington Post* launched “Made by History,” a blog co-founded by two historians that aimed at “understand[ing] the history behind the breakneck news” and showing that “many of the debates roiling society today are the same struggles that we’ve had throughout American history” (Rosenwald and Hemmer). In the same way, the increasing popularity of crowdsourced syllabi, i.e. collaborative online syllabi that provide reading lists and historical perspective about current issues to academics and the general public, shows the need for informed analyses rooted in the study of the past.

2 Such public conversations about history and its uses are not specific to the United States but they seem to have become more urgent in the current political context. In 2009, Jill Liddington noted what she called “an audible explosion of popular presentations of the past” in Great Britain (83). This phenomenon also seems familiar from a French perspective. Debates about the legacy and memory of colonization and slavery have pervaded the political sphere for a long time. Controversies surrounding the recognition of French responsibility in the deportation of Jews during World War II have also led to historians’ participation in the public debate. The 2015 creation of the first Master’s program in Public History at a French university (the University of Paris-Est Créteil), shows French academia’s acceptance of a public role for scholars.

3 As a French historian of American feminisms, I have also been puzzled by the resurgence of the early women’s rights movement in recent American debates, when similar references are virtually nonexistent in France today. The parallels drawn in 2008 between the Democratic primaries, during which Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama competed against each other, and the debates over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution right after the Civil War, as well as the references to early feminists by contemporary pro-life groups and the even more recent phenomenon of the Women’s Marches,

reminiscent of the marches organized by American suffragists at the beginning of the twentieth century, are two examples of current conversations that involve references to early feminisms in the United States.

4 The study of early feminisms in relation to contemporary debates in the United States raises several questions pertaining to the relationships between scholarship and activism: Why and how should we study the early American women's rights movement? Is it legitimate and/or relevant to investigate this movement by asking questions *now* that its activists could not ask themselves *then*? Is it possible to see it as more than a movement of people that were less informed than we are today about issues linked to gender, race, and sexuality? How can we consider what Ellen Carol DuBois has called "the intimate relationship between the practice of women's history and the possibilities of modern feminist politics" (DuBois 23)? This essay will address those questions through the analysis of the way early feminisms have been used and sometimes summoned in the national political debate in recent years.

5 My contribution will argue against both excessive distancing and misappropriation —or what French historian François Hartog calls "presentism," defined as the study of the past through questions related to an "omnipresent present" (16)—in favor of a third way that would allow the early women's rights movement to "speak back" to us (Fleissner 48). Studying early American feminisms does not mean taking a step back or distancing oneself from the present; rather, it allows us to realize the continuities and ruptures in the ways issues have been framed throughout time, as well as what American anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin describes as "the presence of the past" in the present (x).

6 The 2008 Democratic primaries were replete with references to early feminisms. The prospect of the historic victory of a female candidate prompted the construction of a narrative that started at the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls in July 1848, where woman suffrage was one of the demands, and was expected to end with the election of the first woman president. When Hillary Rodham Clinton conceded on June 7, 2008, she thus linked her failed campaign to "the suffragists who gathered at Seneca Falls in 1848" and, more generally speaking, to the suffragists' fight in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Clinton). Such a narrative aimed at revisiting what Lisa Tetrault has called "the origins myth" of Seneca Falls, whereas it was not consolidated until after the Civil War (5, 6). Only then, despite historical evidence to the contrary, the 1848 convention began to be seen as the starting point of the fight for woman suffrage.

7 The contest between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama, who were bound to become either the first female president or the first black president in the history of the United States, had prompted journalists to look at the nineteenth century for precedents of a choice between African Americans' rights and women's rights. On January 13, 2008, at the very early stages of the Democratic primary season, the *New York Times* published an article entitled "Rights v. Rights: An Improbable Collision Course," illuminating what the journalist saw as the continuities between the Hillary Rodham Clinton versus Barack Obama competition and the debates

about universal suffrage that immediately followed the Civil War (Leibovich). The fact that the article was illustrated with the portraits of Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, two iconic figures of the nineteenth-century reform movement who found themselves on either side of the debates in the 1860s, lent credence to the idea that the Democratic primaries might have been a remake, or a sequel, of the post-Civil War divide over universal suffrage.

8 The journalist's argument was that "the civil rights movement and the women's movement have a long, complicated history dating back to abolitionism and the origins of modern feminism," and that the 2008 Democratic contest was one example among many of the "periodic collisions" occurring between the two (Leibovich). A few days earlier, the *New York Times* had published a controversial op-ed entitled "Women Are Never Front-Runners," in which Gloria Steinem, a prominent figure of the 1960s liberal feminist movement, offered a similar interpretation of the Democratic primaries, as an example of what she saw as a competition between women and black men in the race for equal rights. Like the journalist in "Rights v. Rights: An Improbable Collision Course," she reminded the readers that black men had been enfranchised fifty years before women, a reference to the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, respectively ratified in 1870 and 1920. In her opinion, the contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton was just another reminder that gender-based discrimination might still be the more potent obstacle in politics (Steinem).

9 Not only do these two pieces' rendition of the post-Civil War debates over the Fifteenth Amendment simplify the events that actually took place, but this simplification has had important consequences. When slavery was abolished in 1865, the question of freedmen and freedwomen's rights and enfranchisement was inevitably conflated with the issue of woman suffrage, for which some abolitionists had also fought. The relationship between abolitionism and the women's rights movement has been studied in detail. Many historians have highlighted women's rights activism's original reliance on abolitionist "ideology" and "method" (DuBois 1978, 22), eventually leading to a "continual cross-fertilization of antebellum reform movements" (Pierson 387).[1] The Fourteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1868, granted US citizenship to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States," and guaranteed equal protection of the law and equal rights to them. In its section 2, it also defined citizens as men, which caused many debates, as it seemed to exclude women from the rights of citizenship. Ratified a year and a half later, the Fifteenth Amendment banned voting rights restrictions based on "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." It effectively enfranchised all black men, but not women, as it did not include gender-based limitations in its ban. The amendment tore the antebellum reform coalition apart and many female activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony felt that they had been abandoned by the Republican Party and their former antebellum allies, a feeling echoed more than a century later in Gloria Steinem's article.

10 Contrary to Steinem’s argument, however, the post-Civil War divisions cannot be summed up as a fight between women and black men for several reasons. First of all, the split that occurred during the debates over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments did cut across gender and racial lines. Many white and black women eventually supported the Fifteenth Amendment while some men, black and white, opposed it. Also, Gloria Steinem’s argument that women obtained the right to vote 50 years later than black men is problematic, as it fails to mention that it was white women, not all women, who were effectively enfranchised by the Nineteenth Amendment, as black women and men were kept from the polls by the many restrictions that were passed in the South after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment and remained active until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Such a narrative also omits the racist undertones of some of the female activists who rejected the Fifteenth Amendment in the name of white women’s alleged superiority over freedmen. Finally, the reformers who supported the Fifteenth Amendment did not believe that women should remain disenfranchised. Most of them argued that once black men’s vote was secured, it would be both easier and just as important to work for the ratification of a Sixteenth Amendment to enfranchise women. What the history of early feminisms teaches us is not that the disenfranchised have competed for the same rights or that one group has won or should win over the other. Rather, it is the complexity and fragility of social justice coalitions depending on their contexts (Quanquin “Abolition”).

11 Examples of simplified readings of the history of early American feminisms are not confined to liberals and Democrats, but affect both ends of the political spectrum as shown by the way contemporary American pro-life groups have invoked it. The organization Feminists for Life, which was founded in 1972, has systematically linked its action to that of early feminists. Its mission statement thus argues that “Feminists for Life of America continues the tradition of early American feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, who opposed abortion” (“About Us”). In a section of their website tracing the legacy of their fight, they claim: “Without known exception, our feminist foremothers opposed abortion and (like Susan B. Anthony) sought to address the root causes that drive women to abortion.” They go as far as suggesting that their goal of putting an end to abortion is “the unrealized dream of Susan B. Anthony” (“Feminist Foremothers”). The same rubric gives a list of female writers and activists such as feminists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, progressive reformer Jane Addams, and temperance and socialist activist Frances Willard, who, Feminists for Life claim, were “prolife” (“Feminist Foremothers”). They also offer an e-tutorial about “the feminists whose conviction, bravery and—sometimes—sheer bravado made it possible for women to vote, own property and serve as legal guardians of their own children,” a reference to the fight for woman suffrage as well as the reform of married women’s property laws, two issues that were at the core of the early American women’s rights movement before and after the Civil War.

12 On November 8, 2016, Feminists for Life commemorated Susan B. Anthony’s actions in favor of woman suffrage by posting a quotation from the suffragist —“Whatever I have done has been done because I wanted to see better

conditions, better surroundings, better circumstances for women"—on their Facebook page, accompanied by the following signature: "Susan B. Anthony, suffragist, abolitionist, and pro-life feminist from the start." It was illustrated with a photograph of women gathering to pay tribute to Susan B. Anthony at her grave at Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, New York. The use of the photograph was misleading as most women who went to Mount Hope Cemetery on November 8, 2016 were celebrating a likely female president, Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was by all accounts pro-choice, not pro-life. The rhetoric used by Feminists for Life thus aims at presenting their organization's work as the continuity of early women's rights activists' actions and thus participates in the writing of what Tracy A. Thomas calls "a history of anti-abortion feminists" (2). This allows them to claim that opposing abortion rights is an enduring feminist stance in order to counter the framing of abortion rights advocacy as a quintessential feminist position since the 1960s (Thomas 2).

13 Another pro-life group, the Susan B. Anthony List, was founded in 1993 as a reaction to Emily's List, a political action committee created in 1985 with the goal of helping pro-choice women candidates get elected to public office. The Susan B. Anthony List's very name points to the same desire to reclaim the legacy of early feminists and thus affirm that today's pro-life movement is a mere continuation of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women's rights movement. According to the group's website, its goal is to "[e]lect pro-life women or pro-life men who oppose pro-abortion women to Congress" and "[p]romote positive responses in both traditional and new media to dispel the myths and distortions of the abortion lobby" ("Our Six Point Mission"). In November 2015, the president of the organization, Marjorie Dannenfelser, published an op-ed entitled "The Suffragettes Would Not Agree With Feminists Today" in *Time*, upon the release of the movie *Suffragette*. It was meant to defend the members of her organization, who, she claimed, "reject the idea that feminism requires them to be at war with their own children." She added that, "[i]n so doing, they honor the legacy of the original champions of women's rights." She also explained that, according to her, today's feminists were not true to the principles of feminism and its pioneers, thus appropriating the legacy of early women's rights activists:

14 [W]ould those early pioneers recognize the movement that claims to speak for the rights of women today? On the issue of abortion, they would not. Many of today's feminists see abortion as one of the touchstones of their movement. Yet many of the early leaders of the women's suffrage movement in the US believed that the rights of mother and child are inextricably linked and that the right to life and the right to vote are rooted in the inherent dignity of each human person. (Dannenfelser)

15 A few days later, journalist Lynn Sherr and women's historian Ann D. Gordon, the editor of the Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Papers, published an article, "No, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton Were Not Antiabortionists," in response to Marjorie Dannenfelser's claims. They accused the Susan B. Anthony List of "hijack[ing] Anthony's name and fame to promote their

own cause.” They also corrected the assertion that Stanton and Anthony were opposed to abortion rights, arguing that they never took a public stand on the issue. They finally pointed to Marjorie Dannenfelser’s faulty use of quotations and the need to “separat[e] opinion from history and journalism” (Sherr and Gordon).

16 At the same time that they criticized the Susan B. Anthony List’s claim of carrying out the legacy of early feminism, Sherr and Gordon offered a counter-narrative by linking anti-suffrage activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with anti-abortion actions today: “Muddying the record about suffragists’ alleged stance on abortion rights is as harmful as the tactics that kept women from getting the vote in the first place,” they wrote (Sherr and Gordon). What they were alluding to here is the large presence of affluent white women in the American anti-suffrage movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Susan E. Marshall’s study has shown that these women were in fact the main force behind anti-suffrage activities and that they “engaged in the protection of gendered class interests—that is, they were not merely conduits for the concerns of wealthy men, but fought suffrage as a threat to their own positions of privilege” (5).

17 The debate over early women’s rights activists’ diverging stances on abortion raises the question of what these women really thought about abortion, a query which is difficult to answer. Although largely debated in the second half of the nineteenth century, abortion was not then framed as a feminist issue (Mohr). Women’s rights activists were concerned with suffrage and marriage, but they did not address abortion directly for several reasons. Firstly, they were intent on dissociating themselves from moral controversies in order to further their goal, and the abortion question raised issues of sexuality and intimacy that were bound to create scandals. Before the Civil War, for example, many activists such as Lucy Stone shunned accusations that they were supporters of free love. And when, in the early 1870s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other feminists became the allies of notorious free love advocate and first woman to run for president of the United States, Victoria Woodhull, they were criticized both in the press and within their own movement.

18 Secondly, after the Civil War, women’s rights activists’ discourse increasingly tended to frame women as the victims of men and of a male-dominated society through the treatment of infanticide cases (Quanquin “Murderesses”). Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony argued that American society, dominated as it was by men and based on double standards, was unable to protect women from men and deprived them of their independence. Their views on abortion, when the subject was discussed in their newspaper *The Revolution*, were similar to the way they saw infanticide, putting the blame on men and exonerating women. Therefore, even though they did not fight for abortion rights, they did not explicitly campaign against it *per se* either.

19 But, one could ask, what if early feminists did oppose abortion? Should their view on abortion—or absence thereof—be of importance when we deal with contemporary debates pertaining to reproductive rights and, more generally speaking, women’s place in society? How significant are the appropriation or

misappropriation of early feminisms in today's political debates? It is clear that references to early feminism often allow those who make them to claim the feminist label while at the same time bypassing the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, whose advocacy of reproductive rights and insistence on the importance of sexual privacy are politically more controversial than earlier mobilizations. Even on the liberal side, Clinton's allusions to the Seneca Falls Convention and women's fight for the right to vote, as relevant as they might have seemed given the electoral context, were probably safer than allusions to more recent, more controversial feminist movements. At the opposite end of the spectrum, invoking the legacy of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton allows pro-life groups to present themselves as pro-women's rights while aggressively pursuing an anti-abortion rights agenda and thus flying in the face of what contemporary feminisms stand for.

The Diversity of Early Feminisms

20 Early feminisms were in fact both more diverse and more radical than is usually believed. As noted by historian Lori D. Ginzberg, "nineteenth-century feminist movements, peopled by activists from a wide variety of racial, class, religious, and national backgrounds, sometimes offered a radical critique of the very culture from which they emerged" (433). While the early feminist movements are often described as less radical than twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist mobilizations, historical scholarship has established that some of its activists were involved in interracial cooperation through their abolitionist work, as well as in a critique of the institutions of marriage and patriarchy.x For many activists, the right to vote was thus one issue among others.

21 Consequently, references to early feminisms in the national political debate today also allow us to think about feminism in relation to the question of generations and waves. Though convenient, the waves metaphor has tended to obscure the diversity within the movement. According to this terminology, the only possible way of reading American feminisms would be in terms of generational differences and inexorable progress, viewing the first wave as a less successful version of feminism than the second, itself less evolved than the current third wave. In her book *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, Nancy A. Hewitt underlines that this reading tends to confine first-wave feminism to the fight for the right to vote and its white, sometimes racist, activists (3). She has since proposed another terminology, that of "frequencies," to account for the diversity of American feminisms over times and places ("Feminist Frequencies").

22 The early women's rights movement was a diverse movement. Disagreements were thus frequent at the women's rights conventions that were organized in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the beginning of a women's rights meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1853, its chair Frances D. Gage, for example, reaffirmed that "there is perfect liberty given to speak upon the subject under discussion, both for and against; and that we urge all to do so" (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 124). She encouraged opponents to speak up instead of "reserv[ing]

their hard words of opposition to our movement only to go away and vent them through the newspapers, amounting, frequently, to gross misrepresentation” (125). As chair of the Seventh National Woman’s Rights Convention in 1856, feminist and abolitionist Lucy Stone opened the meeting by “welcom[ing] to this platform, men and women irrespective of creed, country or color; those who dissent from us as freely as those who agree with us” (*Proceedings of the Seventh National Woman’s Rights Convention* 6). In May 1860, another activist, Martha C. Wright, concluded that “it is the comparison of opinions, that gives life to a Convention.” These references show that tensions did exist within the movement and it was far from being monolithic. “Historians have not paid close attention to the deeply political meaning of conventions,” Nancy Isenberg has noted, adding that “[b]y classifying women’s rights conventions as social events, scholars generally have ignored the structure, language, and theatrical form of the conventions” (16).

Dialogues Across Times and Spaces

23 In opposition to the teleological understanding conveyed by the waves metaphor, there is a need for another narrative allowing us to reframe the way the history of American feminisms is told. Right from its inception, feminists were aware that the memory of the movement was an important issue and they worked to control the way the history of the movement was going to be told (Tetrault). Historians of early American feminisms have thus sometimes been influenced by a narrative that was constructed at the end of the nineteenth century and offered a vision of inexorable progress in the fight for women’s rights. Jennifer Purvis has another perspective on the question of feminist waves and generations in her work on second- and third-wave activists:

> I recognize how generational thinking exacerbates tension and inhibits the conceptualization of change as anything other than oppositional and reactive. It prevents us from seeing feminist movements as multicausal and multidirectional, as it fosters an understanding of an intellectual and political narrative based on a unidirectional, linear (masculinist) logic of cause and effect and an arborescent model of knowledge formation. (110)

24 What Jennifer Purvis suggests is that both historians of feminisms and feminist activists themselves should promote another model of “knowledge formation,” not based on a linear narrative, but rather on dialogues across times and spaces. She thus advocates an increased complexity in the way we analyze the interactions between past and present.

25 The contemporary debates that make use of references to early feminisms are inevitably influenced by the interactions between different, sometimes contradictory, narratives developed by different actors—early feminists, convinced of the necessity to write the history of the movement as unified and consistent, contemporary activists and politicians, as well as American historians. The study of such discussions in the United States is likely to provide object lessons for American and non-American scholars as it allows us to rethink the diversity of the

early movements as well as the influence, not necessarily of past events, but of past narratives.
Read Claire Delahaye's Response to "Why Study the Early American Women's Rights Movement?"

Notes

[1] Some women's rights activists who had fought in the abolitionist movement, such as Lucretia Mott, believed in interracial collaboration among women (Faulkner 82). Martha Jones has however shown that, in the nineteenth century, Black women often worked in associations of their own (Jones).

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