

The Power of Conformity

In many respect the 1830s were revolutionary times in the United States. Life as the contemporaries knew it had changed. Changes in transportation and technology affected not just the market and the economy, but also every aspect of life. There are three distinct ways of handling any change. One can accept it and try to find her/his place under the evolving circumstances. Or one can be antagonistic, fight for status quo, and try to keep things as they were. Finally one can attempt to exert influence and be a driving force towards envisioned goals. The women and men who wrote and signed the Declaration of Sentiments in 1848 belonged to this later category, while the authors of Godey's Lady's Book to the first. I believe that the domestic ideology, represented by Godey's Lady's Book, could have been more appealing to white, middle-class women for one simple reason: conformity. The path of least resistance lay in this direction and this required the least mental effort. We all want to conform to our surrounding, albeit to different degrees. Women probably wanted to conform to the new, emerging structures of society and they might have found mental ammunition for it in the aforementioned periodical.

The pervasive ideology of the era was republicanism. One of its main tenets revolved around the concept of virtue, defined in the context of what is beneficial for the public in an individual's behavior. This was an important element of public discourse. Virtually everybody agreed upon its central significance, but its interpretations were different. Domestic ideology defined the role of women as being "daughters, wives, mothers and mistresses of families." (Majewski 10) Women were considered more or less virtuous depending how well they performed these roles. From this we can see that it had

no direct relation, only an indirect one to the “public good”. They believed that virtue, as defined above, is inherently a male trait.

On the other hand, the Declaration of Sentiments focused on (the lack of) women’s rights. Their revolutionary idea was to extend the duties and right that were prescribed exclusively for men, to women. In their view both sexes were entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”(20) and from this they concluded that a virtuous person has to do everything she has in her power to strive for it. The problem was that her “power” was limited. How can one place the public good ahead of her own if she does not have much say in either of these fields? Only in a limited way, therefore they wrote: “We insist that they [women] have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges.” (22)

It was the historical era when men started to leave their homes to work outside, in the manufacturing, banking, educational and other facilities of the cities. This shift brought along the separation of spheres of life. Men became in charge everything else outside the home, while women got confined to (, or if you wish, the rule of) the house. This was the reality of many families, particularly in the North, where urbanization was happening faster than in the South. Most humans are searching for meaning in life. It was natural tendency for women to praise their new, limited sphere, to justify their position and make it acceptable in their own eyes. Domestic ideology helped them to be content in this setting. Therefore I believe it was more appealing to be able to look at themselves as an important part of society by providing “comfort and counsel” (10) for their men, as opposed to the other view, that acknowledged that they were the underdogs, with limited power. Domestic ideology allowed women to have their pride and conform to the (male)

society's standard even in a submissive position. They set women as role models who are "as distinguished for mildness as for any other virtue." (12)

The highest possible praise for a woman went like this in Godey's Lady's Book: "The mother of Washington, by training her son in habits of truth, obedience, temperance, industry, and self-denial, laid the foundations of his greatness in the goodness of character." (11) The list in this quote contains some of the virtues the authors wished to transmit to their readers. It clearly defined that the most important role of a woman in society was to be a good mother. Instead of separating virtues to realms of male and females ones the Resolutions at Seneca Fall proclaimed: "The same amount of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behavior, that is required of women in the social state should also be required of man." (23) I believe however that in 1830s it was easier to "stand by your man" than "stand up for yourself." It was less dangerous for women both physically and in terms of their social standing. Conformity might have paid off for those women who didn't follow Elizabeth Cady Stanton's, the author of the Declaration of Sentiments, lead.

There was one item in the list of virtues above that did not exactly fit the pattern: temperance. This was a direct reference to the temperance movement, which wished to reduce the amount of liquor consumed (mostly) by men. This is a point where white, middle class women's lives were directly affected. Even those who didn't wish to abolish slavery, end coverture, or fight for more civil and legal rights, even those wanted to have a comfortable life, not wrecked by drunken males. So while my thesis is about the power of conformity, I have to acknowledge that the success of the temperance movement—cutting the amount of liquor consumed into half in ten years—proved that they could stand up and fight for something they really wanted. Stanton, expressed her loathing for

drunkards as well when she wrote “the most degraded wretch who staggers in the streets.”(24) This issue cut across virtual frontlines.

The next point I would like to cover is the different approaches towards the issue of independence, another important aspect of republican ideology. Independence was crucial for the republic, because according to popular consent only truly independent citizens should have a voice in politics; those who depended on others could not be independent; they could not think of their own. Domestic ideology states, “most men are commonly destined to some profession.” (10) In other words, they clearly distinguished that women are not to be included in the circle that should be independent. At the other end of the spectrum Stanton wrote: “the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.”(23) To have the right to vote represented one form of independence that was denied to women. Compare this to the paternalistic view of domestic ideology: “Will a good son consent that his mother—that any mother should be wronged or oppressed?” (11) Again, I think that conformity, playing along the rules in a society dominated by males, was a tempting alternative to fighting and ridicule. I assume that there are more people, men or women whose temperament is aligned with living a comfortable, quiet life as opposed to one weighed down with problems arising from being “different.”

Finally I would like to explore how history and religion played a role in the views expressed in the documents examined. The Communist Manifesto was published in the same year as the Declaration of Sentiments, 1848. The former’s first sentence: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” The latter starts with “The history of mankind is a history of...” and then goes on “repeated injuries and

usurpations on the part of man toward woman.” (20) The similarity in wording cannot be a coincidence; I must assume that Stanton read the Manifesto and had an impact on her.

It is also interesting to follow how “protestant ethic”, as defined by Max Weber, is reflected differently in the two ideologies. The founding fathers of the United States were Protestants. Their worldview placed a high value on hard work and they looked down on people seeking excessive luxuries. Republican ideology definitely followed these themes too. Domestic ideology encouraged hard work for both sexes. However its proponents put skills such as “speaking French and Italian ... play[ing] like a professor, ... sing[ing] like a siren. ... danc[ing] like Semphronia herself” to the later. Stanton’s did not draw a circle of what should be included in the category of “hard work”, but she did emphasize that this principle applies to both women and men. At this point both views were based on protestant ethic and from this point of view the majority of women could accept both.

I showed above that virtue, being a central part of the republican ideology, was the basis of the domestic ideology and part of the suffragette movement too. The former was a more mainstream trend and women who wanted to conform to their environment would better have chosen that path. I also outlined the differences in the views of women’s role in society: limited to being a good mother vs. a voting citizen with equal rights to men. Depending on individual character and family circumstances a woman could be a follower of either philosophy, but the former applied to more. Finally I pointed out connections to the temperance movement, the Communist Manifesto and the Protestant religion. These all played some roles in the formulating both positions. In my opinion most women of the age were inclined to conform with the male members of their circles thus to domesticity.

Works cited

Majewski, John. *History of the American Peoples, 1840-1920: A Primary Source*

Reader. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2001.