Essays

Collectively, the abolitionists' appeals amounted to one of the most searing social indictments in all U.S. history. And in attacking slavery, the abolitionists also inevitably described what they hoped the nation would become. As the following essays make clear, antislavery and abolitionism very quickly raised enormous questions about gender, labor, autonomy, God, and equality that had no simple answers in the antebellum period—or even today. In the first essay, Julie Roy Jeffrey of Goucher College describes how women, who provided the backbone of the abolitionist movement, quickly moved beyond antislavery efforts that were private or domestic in nature to routinely engage in activities that took them into the public sphere. In the second essay, Eugene Genovese views the opposite side of the coin—proslavery thought—through the lenses of Christianity and economic theory. By the 1840s, he argues, a southern school of moral philosophy emerged to defend slavery on essentially religious, scriptural grounds (as opposed to earlier attempts to use political and economic arguments to buttress the institution). Far from being a new, exotic southern aberration, in 1830 proslavery arguments had a long pedigree in America on both sides of the Mason Dixon line. After 1830, slavery's advocates produced an increasingly coherent secular and religious defense of an entire way of life. Was this proslavery ideology merely a backward, guilt-ridden mania, running against the American grain, as some scholars have argued?

Northern Women and Abolition

Julie Roy Jeffrey

In the early days of organized antislavery, a letter from the London Female Anti-Slavery Society to the recently established Female Anti-Slavery Society in Reading, Massachusetts, appeared in the Liberator. In the letter, the London society encouraged the Reading association to persevere in its work for immediate emancipation, no matter what obstacles it encountered. Warning their American counterparts to ignore "the plausible reasons of any who try to turn you aside," the English women explained that commitment to the antislavery cause did not demand any departures "from that propriety which allots to a sex its peculiar sphere of usefulness." This reassurance implied a restricted role for antislavery women focused on stirring up "the more active efforts of male connection" and reading, conversing, and praying within the family circle.

Initially, Garrison and other men leaders shared similar notions of what women might do to aid the struggle against slavery. As recent scholarship has amply demonstrated, however, most middle-class white and black women abolitionists gradually moved beyond antislavery efforts that were private and domestic in nature (like prayer or support for the free produce movement). Because they believed that abolitionism was not only a moral quest but also a public issue, women routinely engaged in activities that took them into the public arena. As the organizers of the Boston Fair, which attracted large crowds every year, pointed out, their main objective was "to keep the subject [of immediate emancipation] before the public eye, from Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Permeable Boundaries: Abolitionist Women and Separate Spheres," Journal of the Early Republic, 21 (2002), pp. 79–93. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.
and by every innocent expedient to promote perpetual discussion.” Sharing this perception of the necessity of involving themselves in the public sphere, the non-
Garrisonian Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle of Dover, New Hampshire, decided in 1857
to promote public discussion of national questions by organizing “a meeting of the
citizens of Dover in behalf of Kansas.”

Although the records of the Sewing Circle do not reveal whether any Dover resi-
dents questioned the legitimacy of women calling a town meeting, many antislavery
activities attracted furious responses from critics who claimed that women were
out of their sphere. Whether responding to criticism or reflecting on the meaning of
their commitment, abolitionist women proved adept at exploiting, subverting, and
contesting conservative definitions of appropriate female behavior. Even when they
did not agree among themselves, antislavery women blurred distinctions between
private and public, expanded the parameters of “woman’s sphere,” and suggested
alternative meanings for gender norms.

The activities and written records of abolitionist women are a useful reminder
of the nature of social, cultural, and economic changes in the antebellum period.
Just as class divisions were imprecise, and the membership and meaning of the
middle class were not yet set, notions of gender were in the process of construction.
In a fluid society, the meaning of key concepts like propriety and female decorum
were contested. Whether they eventually subscribed to women’s rights or not, many
abolitionist women (and men) found themselves engaged in a definitional struggle
that the notion of distinct spheres obscures.

The struggle was one that took place on a nonverbal as well as verbal level.
James Vernon and others have demonstrated the importance of analyzing politics
from a cultural perspective. This approach broadens the understanding of political
activity and illuminates political culture as an “arena of struggle” between groups,
each with its own definition of politics and participation. In this area, material
objects as well as the use of time and space offer fruitful evidence for understanding
political action. . . .

Antislavery women of all persuasions, [for example,] both black and white, held
antislavery fairs in small and large communities. In 1840, the Bangor (Maine) Female
Anti-Slavery Society, fully aware of the “great responsibility” of such an undertak-
ing, decided to hold its first fair in late August. From the outset, fair organizers
proceeded to make clear their intention of ensuring the fair would be a great public
and commercial event. Because Bangor was a small city and the society wanted to
get as large a crowd as possible, the women selected a date that coincided with special
events at the Bangor Seminary. The Bangor Sewing Circle, formed the previous year
to make money for the society, was hard at work creating items to sell at the fair.
Notices in the Maine antislavery paper, the Advocate of Freedom, invited
women outside of the city to cooperate with the fair. Aware of the tastes of the in-
tended market, the Bangor society called for “articles of substantial utility in the
family, both food and clothing.” Country women were asked to contribute butter
and cheese to the fair as well as a hundred weight of maple syrup.

Although the Reverend Thurston asked for heaven’s blessing for the venture on
the first evening, the fair was an unabashedly commercial venture that was intended
to make money. The women designed a marketplace that put visitors into a visually
arresting environment where consumption was invited. At the center of the hall hung

a vast chandelier illuminated by flowers decorated around the hall’s elegant furnishings.

Holding a fair and soliciting the public funds were important ways of recruiting women to
the cause. Holding a fair allowed the society to make money and build an audience for
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a vast chandelier of evergreens, covered with lamps. In the evening, the “completely illuminated” hall was dazzlingly brilliant, a dramatic contrast to the dimly lit interior spaces with which visitors were familiar. Festoons of pungent greens and colorful flowers decorated the hall. Beautiful embroideries, curtains, and paintings created a rich and sensuous atmosphere quite different from the everyday world and its considerations. The laden refreshment table and the “great variety” of goods displayed around the hall tempted the visitor to eat, drink, and purchase what the fair so attractively offered. Despite the “splendid . . . scene,” however, fair organizers shrewdly had decided to offer only those goods that were both affordable and appealing to Maine buyers. Unlike the big Boston Fair, “scarcely an article of mere fancy” was “to be seen.” Rather items combining “taste” with “utility” were offered at “a fair value,” (or what one woman working for an 1857 fair called “a price to suit the times”).

The carefully planned venture resulted in a financial success that exceeded expectations. Given the “scarcity of money” in Maine and the “unpopularity” of antislavery, the total receipts of $500 were “unparalleled.” But the fair was not just a public fundraiser but a complex event with many purposes and levels of meaning. Holding a fair, for example, allowed the Bangor Female Anti-Slavery Society to recruit women to antislavery and to solidify the ties of both newcomers and old hands to the movement. This early appeal for donated goods helped to secure the necessary articles to sell but also was a way of providing women with antislavery sympathies a purpose and perhaps, if they worked in groups, to heighten their zeal and give some basic instruction on abolitionism. As the Bangor Sewing Society explained when it established itself, “By more frequent meeting together a deeper interest has been awakened and sustained,—and it has brought many in contact with Anti-Slavery principles who might not otherwise have become interested.”

The fair also provided a way for the women to spread the antislavery message and to stimulate the discussion of a political question in a public setting. Vernon suggests that we “cannot underestimate the scale and intensity of the politics of sight, or the power these forms of communication afforded to the individuals who used them.” Descriptions of the fair make clear that it was an example of the politics of sight. Its careful visual construction was designed to impress visitors whether they were abolitionists or casual shoppers. The first image assaulted the emotions. As soon as visitors ventured into the hall, they confronted a print of a kneeling slave. His imploring stance cried out for help. When visitors lifted their eyes to the capacious arch over the slave’s head they saw the fundamental demand spelled out in large letters made from evergreen branches: “LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE.” Elsewhere in the hall other mottoes made from evergreen boughs stated essential abolitionists goals. “EMANCIPATION” proclaimed one arrangement of greens while another reminded those attending the fair that immediate emancipation was not just a political goal but one that God himself demanded: “Let my people go.”

If there was any uncertainty about these women’s claim to a political voice, articles appearing in the Advocate for Freedom after the fair revealed their commitment to use that voice. The women donated $200 to the state society and sent $30 to schools for escaped slaves in Canada. The remaining $270 was reserved for the society’s own projects. Several months after the fair, the Bangor Female Antislavery Society issued a letter to all the Ladies of the State outlining its ambitious plan for a massive petition drive. While paying lip service to the notion that women were happy
to avoid the "turmoil and strife" involved in legislation, the society announced that its members could not "tameably submit" to the "oppressive law" that tabled petitions sent to Congress. The society intended to secure the signatures of every woman in the state over the age of fourteen on its petition for the repeal of the nefarious law. The decision to mobilize all the state's women was both an effort to engage in pressure politics and to do grassroots political education on a large scale. As the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, the organization representing the evangelical (and often labeled conservative) wing of the antislavery movement in the 1840s and 1850s explained, petitioning kept abolitionism alive. A successful petition drive demanded that the collectors of signatures speak with every person in his or her district. He or she "answers objections, removes prejudices, awakens an interest, and perhaps leaves a tract or newspaper which will be as seed sown." . . .

The foundation for women's intellectual efforts to carve out their own understanding of gender was rooted in their understanding of sin and female duty. It is important to remember that around these words a contentious debate raged. Was slavery a sin against God? Was a woman who took up the abolitionist cause sinning, especially if her clergyman told her to desist? Did the goal of immediate emancipation have anything to do with female duty at all? If female duty was a moral duty, was it limited to worldly involvement in some causes but not others?

Even though such questions might elicit a wide range of responses, abolitionist women's conviction that slavery was a "giant sin" and "the cause of God" shaped their definition of duty. No matter what anyone might say, as Mary Clark insisted, "There is One that is higher than the highest human authority—in obedience to Him we shall be safe." If a woman listened to her conscience and "Divine Truth" rather than false voices, she would discover that truth and abolitionism were one and the same thing. The distinction the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society made between full duty and partial duty made it clear that full duty carried with it the obligation of action rather than attention to any boundaries set by flawed public opinion. The real sins, women insisted, were passivity and indifference.

The Proslavery Argument
EUGENE D. GENOVESE

The slaveholders found themselves enmeshed in a world market at the center of which lay a system of free labor, a developing liberal polity, and a system of moral values based upon the principle of each man's property in himself. In the South the need to defend slavery drove the intellectuals from attempts at accommodation with this transatlantic world view to a desperate effort to project an alternative world view at once reactionary and new. . . .

Southern political economists foresaw the demise of slavery. Thus, even the most theoretically advanced—Thomas R. Dew, Jacob Cardozo, and especially George Tucker—had increasing difficulty in applying their work to the specific conditions of their own time. . . .