Lectures: Key Ideas on Women and Antebellum Reform

Lecture 1: Major 19th Century Ideas on Women

1. “Republican Motherhood” (a term coined by the historian Linda Kerber)
   - Ideal of self-government and service for women who otherwise had not public role
   - Women should take republican ideals (freedom, virtue, public morals, citizenship) and instill them in their children (primarily sons) so that these children can grow up to be good citizens
   - Educated women were socially acceptable if they used that education in their family’s service.
   - Lower and working class women were expected to inculcate societal norms into their children so they might be productive members of society, but there was no expectation that these women would produce future leaders (political or economic).
   - This ideal positioned the home and private life as the proper sphere of women, but it also encouraged some political knowledge and education among women.
     1. It created the widespread belief that women were guardians of morality, an idea utilized by the early women’s movement to justify an increasing public role for women (helping to create a more moral society).
     2. It will be these women who become the political/activist base of the women’s movement.
   b. Republican Motherhood develops into the “domestic ideal” (away from Rep. Moth. To Cult of Domesticity)
      - During the antebellum period, women’s activities centered on home and family
      1. Women had a “separate sphere” – a home that is a “haven in a heartless world”
         1. Woman is the moral/emotional centerpiece
         2. Husband can forget the trials of the outside world when inside the home
         3. Kids come there from school
         4. Woman is the “angel” who doesn’t mention the world or discuss negative things: she is pretty, nice and considerate
      iii. Men are responsible for the income and family decisions.
         1. They operate in public (including political) sphere, while women remain in the private sphere of the home.
   c. Women’s “advice” literature
      - Catherine Beecher’s Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841) becomes a bestseller
      iii. Much literature was designed to allow women to run homes as efficiently as their husband’s office.
         1. Beecher included diagrams of how to arrange a kitchen.
         2. Authors glorified homemaking, motherhood, and the female role in marriage.
         3. However, this literature can also be viewed as awakening women to the notion that they are capable of handling responsibilities similar to those of their husbands.
      iii. This Literature was geared toward middle-class, white women. Again, this group will be part of the foundation of the early women’s movement.
   d. Catherine Beecher advocates for the education of girls
      i. Beecher argues that it is scandalous for middle-class women to work in factories or as domestic servants, as this lessens their ability to inculcate republican values into their children.
         1. She proposes converting teaching into a female profession.
            a. Her Argument – Women are natural nurturers
            b. Employers don’t have to pay women as much (no families to support)
            c. Women can be teachers until married.
            d. This allows currently childless middle-class women to be surrogate republican mothers.

Lecture 2: Women’s Political Activism in the Antebellum Period

1. There are broad types of antebellum reform activism:
   a. Moral Reform (ending prostitution, the sexual double standard)
   b. Temperance (alcoholism – threat to family and home – 1830 highest level of alcohol intake in US history)
   c. Antislavery
   d. Women’s Rights
      i. Women, primarily middle-class women from the Northeast (who have increased amounts of time to devote to public activities), will solve the dilemma of getting out of their domain/sphere (the home) by viewing the world as a home, in which women can exercise their maternal abilities without being condemned by society.
      ii. It was okay for women to help others improve their lives. Reform-minded women will argue that the natural role of women is to inculcate proper values, so by becoming active in public life they are serving the same role as they have in the home.