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# Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History

Linda K. Kerber

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In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways that are always different.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835

The Sphere of Woman and Man as moral beings [is] the same.

—Angelina Grimké, 1838

Too much has already been said and written about woman's sphere.

—Lucy Stone, 1855

A century and a half after the publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's account of his visit to the United States, a mode of behavior that he may have been the first systematic social critic to identify has undergone extraordinary waves of analysis and attack. In four brief chapters in the third book of the second volume of *Democracy in America*, published in 1840, Tocqueville addressed the situation of women. His observations display Tocqueville's habitual charm, his fearlessness in making broad generalizations, his mastery of language. When *Democracy in America* was rediscovered and widely reprinted in the years after World War II, his chapters were among the few—perhaps the only—classic texts read by students of American history that seriously examined the situation of women in American society. When historians—whether inspired by Simone de Beauvoir or Eleanor Flexner or Betty Friedan—began again to study women's history, they could point to Tocqueville for evidence that at least one classic, Great Author had conceded the significance of their subject.

Tocqueville restricted his observations on women to a section entitled "Influence of Democracy on Manners Properly So Called." He alluded to the separation of male and female spheres in the course of his contrasting and impressionistic portraits of

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young middle-class American women. The breakdown of aristocratic government, he argued, had important implications for family life in that patriarchal authority was impaired, leaving young women with a high degree of independence, which encouraged a high degree of self-confidence. Yet when one of those same young women married, Tocqueville reported, "the inexorable opinion of the public carefully circumscribes [her] within the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties and forbids her to step beyond it." In this sentence he provided the physical image (the circle) and the interpretation (that it was a limiting boundary on choices) that would continue to characterize the metaphor. He ended by contrasting American women with European feminists who, he thought, wished to erase the boundaries between the spheres of women and of men, thus "degrading" both. Tocqueville concluded with what he thought was a compliment: "As for myself, I do not hesitate to avow that although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen women occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of the [American] people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women."<sup>1</sup>

When, more than a hundred years later, another generation began to search for explanations of women's lives, no concept seemed more promising than Tocqueville's. He had urged that the "circle of domestic life" be searched for the distinguishing characteristics of American women, and once we looked, the separation of spheres seemed everywhere underfoot, from crocheted pillows reading Woman's Place Is in the Home to justifications for the exclusion of women from higher education, to arguments against birth control and abortion. Women were said to live in a distinct "world," engaged in nurturant activities, focused on children, husbands, and family dependents.

The metaphor of the "sphere" was the figure of speech, the trope, on which historians came to rely when they described women's part in American culture. Exploring the traditions of historical discourse, historians found that notions of women's sphere permeated the language; they in turn used the metaphor in their

<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols., New York, 1945), II, bk. 3, ch. 9–12, esp. 201, 211, 214. Just as Edward Pessen has taught us to distrust Tocqueville's observations on social mobility, it is now long past time to dispose of Tocqueville's observations on the condition of American women. Edward Pessen, "The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality: Wealth, Mobility, and Equality in the 'Era of the Common Man,'" *American Historical Review*, 76 (Oct. 1971), 989–1034. George Wilson Pierson's careful list of Tocqueville's encounters with Americans includes few women and none as primary informants. George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York, 1938), 782–86. Tocqueville's women are stereotypes. Tocqueville claims, for example, "American women never manage the outward concerns of the family or conduct a business or take a part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand, ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields or to make any of those laborious efforts which demand the exertion of physical strength." Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, 212. In *Democracy* we meet no adult single women, no widows. We learn nothing of women's relations with each other or of the revolutions in child nurture, women's education, and women's organizational life occurring at the very time of Tocqueville's visit. Although his companion Beaumont wrote a whole novel about the situation of a white woman who loves a black man, Tocqueville made no comment about women who sought to cross the barrier between the races. Gustave Auguste de Beaumont de la Bonnière, *Marie; or, Slavery in the United States: A Novel of Jacksonian America*, trans. Barbara Chapman (Stanford, 1958).

own descriptions. Thus the relationship between the name—sphere—and the perception of what it named was reciprocal; widespread usage in the nineteenth century directed the choices made by twentieth-century historians about what to study and how to tell the stories that they reconstructed. The trope had an effect on readers as well, predisposing them to find arguments that made use of familiar language persuasive. “Common sense,” writes Clifford Geertz, “is not what the mind cleared of cant spontaneously apprehends; it is what the mind filled with presuppositions . . . concludes.” One of our culture’s presuppositions has been that men and women live in separate spheres. The power of presupposition may have been at work in the formulations of Erik H. Erikson, which gave the trope of separate spheres a psychological foundation. In 1964, reporting on play patterns of children, Erikson observed that little girls used blocks to construct bounded, interior spaces, while little boys used blocks to construct exterior scenes. He concluded that the differences between “Inner and Outer Space” “correspond to the male and female principles in body construction,” to psychological identity, and to social behavior. For their part, historians were not immune to tropic pressures; the metaphor of separate spheres helped historians select what to study and how to report what they found.<sup>2</sup>

Writing in the mid-1960s, three historians substantially reinforced the centrality of the metaphor of separate spheres. Barbara Welter, Aileen S. Kraditor, and Gerda Lerner, all influenced to some degree by Betty Friedan and all writing in the climate created by the popular success of *The Feminine Mystique*, argued that American women’s history had to be understood not only by way of events but through a prism of ideology as well. Between the historians and the reality of women’s lives impinged a pervasive descriptive language that imposed a “complex of virtues . . . by which a woman judged herself and was judged by . . . society.”<sup>3</sup>

Welter’s 1966 essay was a frank attempt to do for the nineteenth century what Friedan had done for the twentieth. Retrieving sources resembling Friedan’s—women’s fiction and popular prescriptive literature—and reading them freshly, Welter identified a nineteenth-century stereotype, which she called the “Cult of True Womanhood” and for which she said a synonym might be “mystique.” Among the cardinal virtues Welter found associated with women was domesticity (the others were piety, purity, and submissiveness); home was referred to as women’s “proper sphere.” She quoted a woman’s revealing defense of that choice of sphere:

St. Paul knew what was best for women when he advised them to be domestic. There is composure at home; there is something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), 84. Erik H. Erikson, “Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood,” in *The Woman in America*, ed. Robert Jay Lifton (Boston, 1965), 1–26. These papers, originally read at a 1963 conference, include Alice S. Rossi, “Equality between the Sexes: An Immodest Proposal,” *ibid.*, 98–143, and offer important evidence of the state of academic thinking about sex roles in the early 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151–74, esp. 152; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963).

And Welter concluded that American women of the nineteenth century, saddled with a stereotype so encouraging and yet so constraining, experiencing “guilt and confusion in the midst of opportunity,” had been as much bemused by ideology as Friedan’s (and Welter’s) troubled contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Tocqueville’s, Welter’s judgment of the separate sphere was a negative one. Separation denigrated women, kept them subordinate. The choice of the word “cult” was pejorative. Welter’s essay—thoughtful, subtle, witty—was much cited and often reprinted; the phrase “cult of true womanhood” became an essential part of the vocabulary of women’s history.

Less than two years later, Kraditor published *Up from the Pedestal*, still a striking anthology of documents. Considering what Kraditor called “the primitive state of historiography” in 1968, her introduction was pathbreaking. In it she identified what she called “the question of ‘spheres’” as central to an understanding of American feminism. She contrasted “autonomy” with “women’s proper sphere”: “Strictly speaking,” she wrote, “men have never had a ‘proper *sphere*,’ since their sphere has been the world and all its activities.” She proposed that the separation of spheres was somehow linked to the Industrial Revolution, which “broadened the distinctions between men’s and women’s occupations and certainly provoked new thinking about the significance and permanence of their respective ‘spheres.’” And she noted the persistent description of home as refuge in antifeminist literature, a refuge that had somehow become vulnerable long before Christopher Lasch coined the phrase “haven in a heartless world.”<sup>5</sup>

Three years later, Lerner used the social history of women as a base for hypotheses about general political and economic questions in an important essay, “The Lady and the Mill Girl.” Introducing class into the analysis and extending the link to the Industrial Revolution, Lerner argued that “American industrialization, which occurred in an underdeveloped economy with a shortage of labor, depended on the labor of women and children” and that one “result of industrialization was in increasing differences in life styles between women of different classes. . . . As class distinctions sharpened, social attitudes toward women became polarized.” Welter’s “cult of true womanhood” was interpreted by Lerner as a *vehicle* by which middle-class women elevated their own status. “It is no accident,” Lerner wrote in 1969, “that the slogan ‘woman’s place is in the home’ took on a certain aggressiveness and shrillness precisely at the time when increasing numbers of poorer women *left* their homes to become factory workers.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Welter, “Cult of True Womanhood,” 162, 174.

<sup>5</sup> Aileen S. Kraditor, ed., *Up from the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism* (Chicago, 1968), 9, 14, 10; Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Gerda Lerner, “The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 10 (Spring 1969), 5–15, esp. 10–12. Lerner also observed that Friedan’s “feminine mystique” is the continuation of the old myth of woman’s proper sphere. With no reference to Lerner, Neil McKendrick made much the same argument for England: the literature of separate spheres was an effort of middle-class women to maintain the difference between themselves and working-class women. McKendrick also noted men’s resentment of the new purchasing power of working women; the language of separate spheres expressed their view of the new earnings “as a threat to male authority, a temptation to female luxury and indulgence, and an incitement

The careful reader of Kraditor and Lerner could hardly fail to notice that their description of women's sphere as separate from, and subordinate to, that of men was congruent with Marxist argument. For Lerner and Kraditor, the metaphor of sphere related not only to Tocqueville, but to Friedrich Engels's conceptualization of a dichotomy between public and private modes of life. Tracing the development of gender relations, Engels had argued that the "world-historical defeat of the female sex" had been accompanied by a shift in control of space: "The man took command in the home also." Engels gave classic expression to the concept of a public/private split, a split in which the most important psychic locus was the home, understood to be a woman's place, but ultimately controlled by man. "With . . . the single monogamous family . . . household management lost its public character. . . . It became a *private service*."<sup>7</sup>

Rhetorically, Engels identified a psychological and legal shift (from matrilocality to patrilocality) and gave it a physical context: the nuclear family's home. (Perhaps because this cultural shift had been accomplished long before his own time and had already come to seem the common sense of the matter, Engels did not feel the need to make explicit or defend the equivalencies he identified.) His strategy was to link private-home-woman and then to speak in synecdoche; any part of the triad could stand for any other part. He did so despite his explicit statement that the home was also a locus of men's behavior; indeed for Engels and for Karl Marx, the home is the locus of struggle between the sexes.

Awareness of the socially constructed division between public and private, often expressed through the image of sphere, gave energy to much Marxist-feminist writing in the late sixties and early seventies. "The contemporary family," wrote Juliet Mitchell, "can be seen as a triptych of sexual, reproductive and socialization functions (the woman's world) embraced by production (the man's world)—precisely a structure which in the final instance is determined by the economy. The exclusion of women from production . . . is the root cause of the contemporary *social* definition of women as *natural* beings." At the end of her powerfully argued *Woman's Estate*, Mitchell reiterated that the central problem for women was their relegation to the home during their child-bearing years, "the period of adult psychic and political formation." Bourgeois and working-class women alike were deprived of the opportunity to learn from any but the most limited experience. "The spider's web is dense as well as intricate . . . come into my parlour and be a true woman," Mitchell concludes. "In the home the social function and the psychic identity of women as a group is found."<sup>8</sup>

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of female independence." Neil McKendrick, "Home Demand and Economic Growth: A New View of the Role of Women and Children in the Industrial Revolution," in *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London, 1974), 152–210, esp., 164–67.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York, 1972), 120, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (New York, 1971), 148, 182. See also Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, 1974), 207–22; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Placing Women's History in History," *New Left Review* (May-June 1982), 5–29.

The great power of the Marxist interpretation was that it not only described a separation of spheres, but also offered an explanation of the way in which that separation served the interests of the dominant classes. Separate spheres were due neither to cultural accident nor to biological determinism. They were social constructions, camouflaging social and economic service, a service whose benefits were unequally shared.

The idea of separate spheres, as enunciated by Welter, Kraditor, Lerner, and Mitchell, took on a life of its own. Women's historians of the mid-1960s had inherited a subject that had been, with only few conspicuous exceptions, descriptive and anecdotal. Books like Alice Morse Earle's *Home Life in Colonial Days* loomed large.<sup>9</sup> When earlier historians of women had turned to politics, a Whiggish progressivism had infused much of their work, suggesting that the central theme in women's history was an inexorable march toward the suffrage. The concepts of separate spheres and of a public/private dichotomy offered ways of addressing women's history that employed social and cultural, as well as political, material. Historians who did not think of themselves as Marxists were nevertheless deeply indebted to Marxist analysis. Social theory enabled women's historians to introduce categories, hypotheticals, and analytical devices by which they could escape the confines of accounts of "great ladies" or of "the progress of women." Still—whether handled by Erikson, who grounded the separation of spheres in what he took to be permanent psychological verities; Welter, who grounded it in culture; or socialist feminists (including Lerner and Kraditor), who grounded it in property relations—in the early 1970s separation was generally associated with subordination, deteriorating status, and the victimization of women by men.<sup>10</sup>

In 1975 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg offered a striking reinterpretation of the possibilities of separation in her pathbreaking essay "The Female World of Love and Ritual." Several years later she recalled: "I began with a question. How can we understand the nature of the emotionally intense and erotic friendships between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century married women and society's benign approval of such relationships?" Smith-Rosenberg maintained that separation could make possible psychologically sustaining and strengthening relationships among women. Victorians did not make rigid distinctions, as we do, between heterosexuality and homosexuality. A culture of separate spheres was not simply an ancestral culture differing from our own primarily in the extent of industrialization; it was, Smith-Rosenberg argued, a *dramatically* different culture in which boundaries were differently marked, anxieties differently expressed. Nineteenth-century women had available sources of psychological support that had eroded in our own day. Smith-Rosenberg's work implied that there had existed a distinctive women's culture, in which women

<sup>9</sup> Alice Morse Earle, *Home Life in Colonial Days* (New York, 1898).

<sup>10</sup> See Barbara Sicherman et al., *Recent United States Scholarship on the History of Women* (Washington, 1980).

assisted each other in childbirth, nurtured each other's children, and shared emotional and often erotic ties stronger than those with their husbands.<sup>11</sup>

Other work of the 1970s filled in details of the distinctive women's culture that Smith-Rosenberg had identified. In "Female Support Networks and Political Activism," Blanche Wiesen Cook focused on four women who had significant political careers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cook dealt with the probability of homosexual relationships among some of her subjects, arguing that politically activist women were sustained by complex and powerful friendships with other women. She maintained that such friendships were part of the history historians sought to trace and that, instead of ignoring them as irrelevant, historians should address them frankly, understanding that the "sisterhood" of which so many women spoke included female friendships that ran the gamut from acquaintance to long-sustained sexual relationships. Kathryn Kish Sklar's biography of Catharine Beecher analyzed the woman who did most to define the ingredients of the traditional women's sphere: domesticity, nurture, and education. Beecher took the position that women's sphere did not encompass politics, notably in exchanges with Angelina Grimké. Significantly, Beecher addressed extensively the elements of the physical location of the women's sphere, not only in abstractions like "the classroom" or "the home" but also in explicit and original physical plans for *The American Woman's Home*.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Bonds of Womanhood*, Nancy F. Cott explored the way in which "the doctrine of woman's sphere" actually was practiced in early nineteenth-century New England. Cott found in middle-class women's diaries and letters a distinctive "orientation toward gender" that derived from shared patterns of work. She found in those writings an understanding of domesticity that placed it in direct opposition to ongoing "social and economic transformation" and that emphasized the complexity of the role of motherhood. Organized church groups became one of the few institutional contexts in which women could "connect purposefully" to the community, and such groups, in turn, set a "pattern of reliance on female friendships for emotional expression and security."

Cott ended by proposing that the feminist political movement of the nineteenth century had grown out of the separation of spheres and taken its distinctive shape and interests *from* that separation. For Cott the "ideology of woman's sphere formed a necessary stage in . . . softening the hierarchical relationship of marriage." Although the idea of women's sphere was not necessarily protofeminist, domesticity

<sup>11</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, 1 (Autumn 1975), 1-29. Her later observations appeared in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," *Feminist Studies*, 6 (Spring 1980), 55-64, esp. 60. See also her collected essays, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism: Lillian Wald, Chrystal Eastman, Emma Goldman," *Chrysalis* (no. 3, 1977), 43-61; Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, 1973). In Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (Boston, 1842), 26-36, Beecher quoted Tocqueville at length and with admiration.



and feminism were linked by "women's perception of 'womanhood'" as an all-sufficient definition and of sisterhood as implicit in it. That *consciousness*, Cott argued, was a necessary precondition for feminism, even though in opening up certain avenues to women because of their sex it barricaded all others.<sup>13</sup>

Like others before her, Cott sought an economic base for the social transformation she discerned. E. P. Thompson had argued that the crucial psychological change of the early stages of the Industrial Revolution was a shift from the task orientation of traditional artisan work patterns to the time discipline associated with modernity. Cott added the thought that married women's work became less like men's work in the early nineteenth century, as men's work was subjected to modern time discipline while women's work remained task oriented. Work patterns reinforced women's sense that their lives were defined differently from men's. Domesticity could even embody "a protest against that advance of exploitation and pecuniary values. . . . by upholding a 'separate sphere' of comfort and compensation. . . . The literature of domesticity . . . enlisted women in their domestic roles to absorb, palliate, and even to redeem the strain of social and economic transformation."<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the historian to use the concept of separate spheres most energetically was Carl N. Degler, whose book *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* was published in 1980. For Degler, the definition of separate spheres was an important nineteenth-century development that accompanied and made possible the replacement of patriarchal family relationships by companionate ones. Drawing on the work of Daniel Scott Smith, he suggested that women's political autonomy in the public world had been preceded by a form of sexual autonomy, or at least assertiveness, in the private world, and he pointed to the declining birth rate in the nineteenth century as evidence that women were able to exercise a growing degree of control in their sexual relations. Domesticity offered advantages as well as disadvantages to women, smoothing the way to popular acceptance of extrafamilial activities by women. "Separate spheres" deflected conflict; the very language anticipated negotiation. The metaphor of separate spheres helped Degler establish order among issues as disparate as abortion, suffrage, literacy, and friendship. Reference to the omnipresent ideology became a useful guide, enabling the historian to anticipate which changes Americans could be expected to support (for example, the entry of women into the teaching profession) and which they would resist (for example, suffrage, because it could not be accommodated to the concept of separate spheres). *At Odds*, a wide-ranging, fluent, and thoughtful

<sup>13</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, 1977), 200, 125, 70, 173, 197, 200, 205.

<sup>14</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* (Dec. 1967), 56–97; Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 58, 68–70. In 1964, David M. Potter had observed, "The profound differences between the patterns of men's work and women's work are seldom understood by most men, and perhaps even by most women." He noted that middle-class women's lives remained task-oriented deep into the twentieth century. David M. Potter, "American Women and the American Character," in *History and American Society: Essays of David M. Potter*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1973), 277–303, esp. 287.

survey of women's history and family history may well represent the high-water mark of reliance on separate spheres as an organizing device.<sup>15</sup>

The first stage of the development of the metaphor—in the late 1960s and early 1970s—was marked by an effort to identify separate spheres as a theme central to women's historical experience, locating the ideology in the context of antebellum American society. The second stage—in the later 1970s—encompassed an effort to refine the definition and identify complexities, introducing the liberating possibilities of a "women's culture." By 1980 historians had devised a prism through which to view the diaries, letters, and organization records that had been freshly discovered and whose analytical potential was freshly appreciated.

But the language of separate spheres was vulnerable to sloppy use. Above all, it was loosely metaphorical. Those who spoke of "cult" did not, after all, mean a voluntary organization based on commitment to explicit ideological or theological tenets; by "sphere" they did not mean a three-dimensional surface, all points of which are equidistant from a fixed point. When they used the metaphor of separate spheres, historians referred, often interchangeably, to an ideology *imposed on* women, a culture *created by* women, a set of boundaries *expected to be observed* by women. Moreover, the metaphor helped historians avoid thinking about race; virtually all discussion of the subject until very recently has focused on the experience of white women, mostly of the middle class.<sup>16</sup>

In response to this problem, *Feminist Studies* published an exchange in which five historians—Lerner, Smith-Rosenberg, Temma Kaplan, Mari Jo Buhle, and Ellen DuBois—discussed the problems of usage inherent in the terms "women's sphere" and "women's culture." The *Feminist Studies* symposium of 1980 conveniently marks the opening of a third stage, in which historians have sought to embed women's experience in the main course of human development and to unpack the metaphor of "separate spheres." In this stage, historians have undertaken a conscious criticism of their own rhetorical constructions. The comments of the symposium contributors showed that the word "cult" had virtually dropped out of professional historians' usage, although its challenge—that we allocate how much was prescribed for women and how much created by women—remained. DuBois warned that pride in the possibilities of a distinct women's culture might blind historians to the facts of women's oppression. Her respondents tended to caution against conflating the terms "women's sphere," which they took to express a limiting ideology, and

<sup>15</sup> Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980), 9, 298. See also *ibid.*, 26–29, 50–54, 189, 283–98, 302–8, 317, 429. Daniel Scott Smith, "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. Mary S. Hartman and Lois W. Banner (New York, 1974), 119–36.

<sup>16</sup> Note, however, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, forthcoming), which addresses with subtlety the intersection of the spheres of slaveholding and enslaved women; and see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); and Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985).

"women's culture," a term which embraced creativity in the domestic arts, distinctive forms of labor, and particular patterns of social relationships.<sup>17</sup> The need to break out of the restrictive dualism of an oppressive term (women's sphere) and a liberating term (women's culture) has propelled what I think is a third stage in the development of the metaphor of separate spheres. Taking an interactive view of social processes, historians now seek to show how women's allegedly "separate sphere" was affected by what men did, and how activities defined by women in their own sphere influenced and even set constraints and limitations on what men might choose to do—how, in short, that sphere was socially constructed both *for* and *by* women.

The first major characteristic of the third stage of understanding is the application of the concept to the entire chronology of human experience, rather than to the discussion of antebellum society where, perhaps by accident, perhaps thanks to Tocqueville, historians first encountered it. A great deal of recent work has made it clear that the separation of spheres was not limited to a single generation or a single civilization.

Surveys of the history of political thought have shown that the habit of contrasting the "worlds" of men and of women, the allocation of the public sector to men and the private sector (still under men's control) to women is older than western civilization. In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Lerner locates the crucial moment in a prehistoric shift from hunting and gathering societies to agricultural ones and an accompanying intertribal "exchange of women" in the Neolithic period. "Women themselves became a resource, acquired by men much as the land was acquired by men. . . . *It was only after men had learned how to enslave the women of groups who could be defined as strangers, that they learned how to enslave men of those groups and, later, subordinates from within their own societies.*"<sup>18</sup>

The distinction between the private and the public was deeply embedded in classical Greek thought. As Hannah Arendt lucidly explained, the Greeks distinguished between the private realm, defined by the "limitation[s] imposed upon us by the needs of biological life," which preclude choice, and the public realm of action and choice. Women, "who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species," were understood to live wholly on the private sector; in Greece they were confined to the large family household and did not mingle, promiscuously, with people on the streets. They were understood to lack the civic virtue that enabled men to function as independent moral beings. Men were advantaged; they lived in *both* the private and the public mode; men realized themselves most fully in the activities of the *polis*. For Aristotle, "the *sophrosyne* (strength of character)

<sup>17</sup> Ellen DuBois, Mari Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," *Feminist Studies*, 6 (Spring 1980), 26–64.

<sup>18</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, 1986), 212–13. Italics added. "For nearly four thousand years women have shaped their lives and acted under the umbrella of patriarchy," Lerner continues. "The dominated exchange submission for protection, unpaid labor for maintenance. . . . It was a rational choice for women, under conditions of public powerlessness and economic dependency, to choose strong protectors for themselves and their children." *Ibid.*, 217–18. See also *ibid.*, 27–28.

of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman are not . . . the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying." In the ancient formulation, the separate world of women was located securely in a larger patriarchal social context. Classical assumptions about the appropriate relationship between men and women have been attacked only sporadically until recent times. Except for socialist writers, Western political theorists have treated women in what Susan Moller Okin has called a "functionalist" mode, which assumes that women cannot be dissociated from their function in the family.<sup>19</sup>

When Europeans ventured to the New World, they brought with them the long-standing Western assumptions about women's separate world. Colonial American culture made firm distinctions about what was appropriate for each sex to do and took for granted the subordination of women. Whether viewed skeptically or sympathetically, English colonists in North America appear to have done little questioning of inherited role definitions. From northern New England to the Carolinas there stretched a society in which a woman was defined by her family life and acted in response to relatives' and neighbors' claims on her. The Christian faith of the immigrants ratified both distinctive roles and a subordinate status for women. "Of all the Orders which are unequals," wrote the Congregational minister Samuel Willard, ". . . [husband and wife] do come nearest to an Equality, and in several respects they stand upon even ground. . . . Nevertheless, God hath also made an imparity between them, in the Order prescribed in His Word, and for that reason there is a Subordination, and they are ranked among unequals." Recent studies of witchcraft have suggested that women at risk for accusation included those who pressed at the boundaries of expected women's behavior, intentionally or unintentionally. One of the major factors in the colonists' perception of Indians as uncivilized was the Indians' tendency to define gender relations differently than did Europeans. Europeans were particularly dismayed when Indian women played roles that were not subordinate or when Indian societies did not display a separation of spheres as Europeans understood them. (For example, Europeans found matrilocality indecipherable.)<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York, 1958), 22–78, esp. 24, 72. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York, 1943), 77 (1260a). I am grateful to Judith F. Hallett for this reference. Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1979), 9–11, 233. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, 1981), builds on a similar dichotomy, although Elshtain ends by decrying contemporary feminists for permitting the intrusion of politics into the private sector. See also Ruth H. Bloch, "Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles: A Survey of Four Centuries of Change," *Signs*, 4 (Winter 1978), 237–52.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Willard, *A Complete Body of Divinity in Two Hundred and Fifty Expository Lectures* (Boston, 1726), 609–12, quoted in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Virtuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1688–1735," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Spring 1976), 20–40, esp. 30. For skeptical views, see Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power: The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Urbana, 1980). Laurel Thatcher Ulrich describes a social order in which men's and women's life roles were sharply distinct, overlapping, however, in the role of "deputy husband," which enabled women to act in the public sector if authorized by husbands and fathers. See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York, 1982). Even Ulrich, however, represents a drastic revision of the generalizations about early American life made in the 1950s. See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958), 186–87. For the boundaries of witchcraft, see John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York, 1982), 281–83 (the maps of relationships between alleged witches

As the American Revolution began to impinge on white middle-class women, what Mary Beth Norton has called the "circle of domestic concerns" bounded their lives: the choice of husband (an especially important decision in a virtually divorceless society), the nurture of children, the management or service of the household. The Revolution shook old assumptions about women's place and suggested new possibilities; guerrilla war made few concessions to alleged frailty, and many women, whether Loyalist or Patriot, were involuntarily given an accelerated course in politics and independence. By the end of the war, the domestic roles of women could no longer be taken for granted; such roles now required defensive ideological articulation. Thus emerged the antebellum prescriptive literature we have come to know.<sup>21</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, the ideology of republican womanhood was an effort to bring the older version of the separation of spheres into rough conformity with the new politics that valued autonomy and individualism. Issues of sexual asymmetry dominated public discourse to an unprecedented extent as people tried to define a place for women in postrevolutionary society. Even as Americans enlarged the scope, resonance, and power of republicanism they simultaneously discounted and weakened the force of patriarchy. They recoded the values of women's sphere, validating women's moral influence on their husbands and lovers, ascribing world-historical importance to women's maternal role, and claiming for women a nature less sexual and more self-controlled than the nature of men. The ideology of republican womanhood recognized that women's choices and women's work did serve large social and political purposes, and that recognition was enough to draw the traditional women's "sphere" somewhat closer to men's "world." But to use the language of domesticity was also to make a conservative political choice among alternative options, rejecting the frankly feminist option, articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft in England and Etta Palm in France, that claimed for women direct connection with republican political life. Indeed, I believe that the American Revolution was kept from spinning on an outwardly expansive and radical track in part by the general refusal to entertain proposals for redefining the relationship between women and the Republic. By contrast, major changes in women's political life were associated with the radical stages of the French Revolution, and erasure of those changes was associated with the retreat from radicalism.<sup>22</sup>

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and their accusers); and Carol F. Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987). On European attitudes toward sex roles in Indian societies, see James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York, 1985). For an example of Europeans who observed intensely, but rarely understood, Indian culture, see Paul Le Jeune, *Relation of What Occurred in New France in the Year 1633 in The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (73 vols., Cleveland, 1896–1901), V–VI. William Penn was a major exception to this rule. See, for example, "Letter to the Free Society of Traders," Aug. 16, 1683, in *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania, 1680–1684: A Documentary History*, ed. Jean R. Soderlund (Philadelphia, 1983), 308–19.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, 1980), 298. Norton found reference to women's sphere in the late colonial period. Samuel Quincy wrote to Robert Treat Paine in 1756, fearing that women want "to obtain the other's Sphere of Action, & become Men," but hoped "they will again return to the wonted Paths of true Politeness, & shine most in the proper Sphere of domestick Life." *Ibid.*, 8. See also Linda K. Kerber, "Daughters of Columbia: Educating Women for the Republic, 1787–1805," in *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*, ed. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick (New York, 1974), 36–59.

<sup>22</sup> Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill,

The second major characteristic of the current stage of understanding is that we are giving more attention to questions about the social relations of the sexes and treating the language of separate spheres itself as a rhetorical construction that responded to changing social and economic reality. Tocqueville's visit occurred at the end of more than a half century during which one variant of the separation of spheres and the patriarchal culture in which it was embedded had been undermined by commercial, political, and industrial revolutions. Adam Smith had given voice to the great commercial transformation, the founders at Philadelphia had articulated the political one, and new technology embodied the industrial one. In each realm the world maintained itself by the spinning gyroscope of successive decision and choice. Political rules, like economic ones, had been written anew. In a world from which familiar boundaries had been erased, new relationships had to be defined, new turf had to be measured, and in Thomas L. Haskell's phrase, new "spheres of competition" had to be freshly aligned. In a system of laissez-faire, which relied on the dynamic force of self-interest in commerce and in politics, the "sphere of competition" was everywhere. In a Tocquevillean world of equality, where all the old barriers had been removed, little was left that was not vulnerable. Marvin Meyers discerned many years ago that Tocqueville's American Man was characteristically anxious, as well he might be in a world in which so little seemed reliably fixed.<sup>23</sup>

The capitalist revolution also had deeply unsettling implications for women. As patriarchy eroded, social reality involved unattached individuals, freely negotiating with each other in an expansive market. The patriarchal variant of separate spheres was not congruent with capitalist social relations; capitalism required that men's and women's economic relations be renegotiated. A capitalist system tended to undermine an older scheme of property relations that, by keeping a woman's property under the control of the men to whom she was entrusted, could also keep it out of the marketplace, for example, when dower property was shielded from seizure for debt.

Capitalism had the potential to enhance the position of women by loosening patriarchal control of property and removing factors that shielded property from the pressures of the marketplace. The revised understanding of the relationship between women and the marketplace was embodied in the married women's property acts, devised state by state in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Such statutes gave married women the right to hold and manipulate their own earnings and property. The statutes created a vast new group of property-holding, but unenfranchised, citizens; married women's property acts unintentionally but inexorably created an

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1980), 185–231. See also Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1976), 187–205. For France, see Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795: Selected Documents Translated with Notes and Commentary* (Urbana, 1979). On sexuality, see Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," *Signs*, 4 (Winter 1978), 219–36. For the implications of republican ideology for the relations between women and men, see Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (Oct. 1987), 689–721.

<sup>23</sup> Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, 1957), 45. Thomas L. Haskell used the phrase in a letter to me in May 1984.

internally contradictory situation that was ultimately resolved by granting the vote—and with it, service on juries and the opportunity to hold public office. The franchise acknowledged women's connection to the political community as the law of property had acknowledged their entry into the marketplace. As the patriarchal corporate economy broke down, the traditional version of the separate sphere was destabilized. One plausible way to read nineteenth-century defenses of separate spheres, not least among them Tocqueville's, is to single out the theme of breakdown; the noise we hear about separate spheres may be the shattering of an old order and the realignment of its fragments.<sup>24</sup>

But the old order, like the parson's one-horse shay, took a long time breaking down. Patched up and reconstructed, it continued to rattle along for a long time. The first wave of married women's property acts did not seem to usher in a new era; they protected only property given or willed to women, expressing fathers' distrust of irresponsible sons-in-law. In protecting gift property from seizure for debts contracted by husbands, married women's property acts were debtor relief acts that directly benefited men. The new property acts expressed a relationship between men—as well as a revised relationship among men, women, and the marketplace. Only at the stage of revision—1855 in Michigan, 1860 in New York, later elsewhere—did the new statutes specifically protect married women's earnings and their right to manage their own property. Not until 1911 did Michigan law permit a married woman to define the full use of her own earnings; until then her husband had the right to decide whether or not a woman could work for wages.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the older property relations between husbands and wives persisted long after limited elements of those relations had been modified by statute. Studying nineteenth-century Michigan women's correspondence, Marilyn Ferris Motz has argued for the continuing instrumental usefulness of the separate female sphere as “a system of human relations” that provided a “cushion” against a legal system whose rules privileged the authority of husbands and fathers over married women's property relations during a lengthy transitional period. Because the early versions of married women's property acts protected only inherited and gift property, they created a paradox in which a woman exercised much more control over property she inherited from her parents than over property she had helped build—on a farm or in a family business—in the course of her marriage. In such a legal context, Motz argues, there was good economic reason for women to work energetically to establish and maintain networks of female kin. “Women attempted to balance their lack of authority within the nuclear family with the collective moral, social, and financial

<sup>24</sup> On fathers in commercial settings willing real estate to daughters, see Toby L. Ditz, *Property and Kinship: Inheritance in Early Connecticut, 1750–1820* (Princeton, 1986). For the anomalies of the impact of capitalism on the status of women, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), esp. 299–336. For a succinct review of these developments, see Norma Basch, “Equity vs. Equality: Emerging Concepts of Women's Political Status in the Age of Jackson,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 3 (Fall 1983), 297–318, esp. 305.

<sup>25</sup> Basch, “Equity vs. Equality.” See also Norma Basch, *In the Eyes of the Law: Women, Marriage, and Property in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, 1982); and Suzanne O. Lebsack, “Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women,” *Journal of Southern History*, 43 (May 1977), 195–216.

pressure of their kin networks," Motz observes, "... from whom [they] could inherit and to whom [they] could turn for alternative support." In an era when alimony was rare, women who wished to divorce their husbands leaned on female kin for support. A woman who faced early death in childbirth counted on her sisters to protect her children from mistreatment by possible future stepmothers. Young widows turned to their female kin to sustain them and their children; elderly widows counted on their daughters and daughters-in-law to nurse them in reciprocity for earlier care. Motz draws an analogy between the social dynamics that sustained the separate sphere of middle-class nineteenth-century Michigan women and the patterns of service and reciprocity traced by Carol B. Stack among twentieth-century working-class women. She argues forcefully that the "women's culture" and "women's values" of the separate sphere rested on long-term economic and psychological self-interest.<sup>26</sup>

In Motz's Michigan, as in Cott's New England, the work patterns of men deviated ever farther from those of women, perhaps reinforcing the need to maintain the boundaries of the separate women's sphere. But as Tamara K. Hareven observed in 1976, members of families might be drawn into capitalist ways at different rates. When women worked in factories and taught in schools, their work was modernized and forced into the new time-bound, clock-measured matrix to which E. P. Thompson has given classical formulation. For the first time in history, substantial numbers of women could earn substantial amounts of cash. In a careful reading of the letters of Lowell mill women, Thomas Dublin criticizes the older assumption that mill women remained embedded in the traditional family economy. "Work in the mills," he writes, "functioned for women rather like migration did for young men. . . . the mills offered individual self-support." Perhaps the clearest expression of that position comes in a letter written by a father on a farm to a foster daughter in the mills: "You now feel & enjoy independence trusting to your own ability to procure whatever you want, leaning on no one no one depending on you."<sup>27</sup>

How are we to find our way through the confusions of local idiosyncrasy, sometimes providing dependence, sometimes independence? Two important books, published in the early 1980s, both community studies built on demographic and quantitative research in documents revealing economic relationships, offer complex but carefully nuanced analyses. Together they testify to the dramatic force of capitalist pressures on women's sphere.

<sup>26</sup> Marilyn Ferris Motz, *True Sisterhood: Michigan Women and Their Kin, 1820-1920* (Albany, 1983), 29, 33-35, 121-25, 155-56, 168; Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York, 1974).

<sup>27</sup> Tamara K. Hareven, "Modernization and Family History: Perspectives on Social Change," *Signs*, 2 (Autumn 1976), 190-206; McKendrick, "Home Demand and Economic Growth," 164-67; Thomas Dublin, ed., *From Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York, 1981), 22-23, 166. Class, race, ethnicity, location, and time all affected the psychological impact of work outside the home. Leslie Woodcock Tentler found that factory women in early twentieth-century Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago not only continued to think of themselves as embedded in the family economy, but also found in the workplace other young women who reinforced this traditional understanding. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York, 1979). See also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill, 1987).



In antebellum Petersburg, Virginia, the language of domesticity and the deferential separation of spheres escaped explicit public challenge. But Suzanne Lebsock can unambivalently conclude from her intensive analysis of public records that “women in Petersburg experienced increasing autonomy, autonomy in the sense of freedom from utter dependence on particular men. Relatively speaking, fewer women were married, more women found work for wages, and more married women acquired separate estates.” The changes occurred largely without the assistance of a politically oriented discourse. Separate estates—a legal device that deflected coverture and assured married women control over property—provided a shelter against family bankruptcy and an apolitical response to repeated economic panics. “It stands to reason,” Lebsock writes, “that an ideology that tried to fix the boundaries of women’s sphere should have become pervasive and urgent just as women began to exercise a few choices. . . . As women acquired new degrees of power and autonomy in the private sphere, they were confronted with new forms of subordination in the public sphere.”<sup>28</sup>

The character of the women’s sphere of the mid-nineteenth century as distinctive social construction is elaborately developed and richly argued in Mary P. Ryan’s important study of Oneida County, New York, *Cradle of the Middle Class*. Stressing the connections between public and private realms, Ryan begins by describing the patriarchal assumptions of the traditional early modern domestic economy. In her reading, many aspects of patriarchy broke down in the early nineteenth century, under blows from an increasingly commercial economy that made unentailed estates and liquid inheritance advantageous to heirs. Instead of the language of separate spheres, Ryan speaks of the changing interests of families as a whole. Ryan interprets the retreat to the private conjugal family as a way of mobilizing private resources for upward social mobility. Over a half century, from 1810 to 1855, the number of children per family dropped sharply, from 5.8 to 3.6, permitting more attention to each child. At the same time, the language of domesticity, which emphasized the role of mothers in raising children, was congruent with increased psychological investment in child nurture and education and, most important, with keeping *sons* out of the work force in order to extend their education and improve their chances for upward mobility. One major surprise is Ryan’s finding that as boys were kept out of the work force, middle-class women and daughters were increasingly apt to work for pay—for example, by keeping boarders, or serving as domestics. Women’s energy was used “to maintain or advance the status of men in their families.”<sup>29</sup>

In Ryan’s account, women’s “separate sphere” was deeply paradoxical. The concept clearly served the interests of the men with whom women lived. Yet, women also claimed it for their own, defining their own interests as inextricably linked to the upward mobility of their families, repressing claims for their own autonomy.

<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York, 1984), xv, 234.

<sup>29</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge, Eng., 1981), esp. 56, 185.



Authorities promoted the ideology of domesticity and separate spheres to southern blacks, even when most still lived in slave cabins.  
 Reproduced from Clinton B. Fisk, *Plain Counsel for the Freedmen* (1866).  
 Courtesy Library of Congress.

When women went to work for pay, they entered a severely segregated work force (the white-collar jobs of clerks were still reserved for their sons and brothers). The diaries of their friendships show them circulating in a world of women. The logic of their situation drove a very few to political feminism, but for most, the “female world of love and ritual” and the ideology of domesticity that purported to explain it remained powerful and persuasive.

Black families were not immune to the ideology of separate spheres, and recent

work by James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, Dorothy Sterling, Jacqueline Jones, and Deborah Gray White has been particularly shrewd in tracing their ambivalent responses to it.<sup>30</sup> The American ideology was to some limited extent congruent with African traditions of matrilocal, of women's clear responsibilities for child support and child raising, and of a sex-linked division of labor. Enslaved men lacked the economic power that white men exercised over their families; the nuances of relationships between slave men and women are debated by historians. It is clear that directly after the Civil War, prescriptive literature addressed to recently freed slaves, people living in hovels with dirt floors, counseled delicacy among women and a clear division of their work from men's work, implicitly promising that adoption of the ideology would ensure elevation to the middle class.<sup>31</sup>

The ideology of separate spheres could be both instrumental and prescriptive; its double character has made it difficult for historians to work with. In the first mode, it was an ideology women found useful and emotionally sustaining, a familiar link between the older patriarchal culture and the new bourgeois experience. This aspect could be particularly welcome as a hedge against secularization; religious women of virtually all persuasions sustained a pattern of separateness both in their religious activism and in their own religiosity.<sup>32</sup> It could also, as Gerda Lerner discerned, protect the interests of one class of women in a time of change. But in its prescriptive mode, the ideology of separate spheres required constant attention if it were to be maintained.

In *Beyond Separate Spheres*, Rosalind Rosenberg has located the beginnings of modern studies of sex differences in the Progressive Era. Two generations of brilliant social scientists, among them Helen Thompson, Jessie Taft, W. I. Thomas, Franz Boas, and Elsie Clews Parsons, established the foundation for a "fundamental shift that took place in the way women viewed themselves and their place in society." By the early twentieth century at least some psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists were coming to understand that many sex differences were the result of socialization, not biology. Finally it became possible to imagine a culture that was not divided into separate spheres. Our own ideas about sex differences still rely heavily on their work.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the real world took its time catching up with what academics believed they

<sup>30</sup> James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York, 1979); Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984); Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*; White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?* I am indebted to the interpretations of Evelyn Brooks, "The Problem of Race in Women's History," in *Radical Ends and Impossible Means: Feminism/Theory/Politics*, ed. Elizabeth Weed (forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup> Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, 319–20.

<sup>32</sup> Tamara K. Hareven's point that the rate of modernization may be different for men and women even within the same family applies to secularization as well. Nineteenth-century American Protestant women sustained a pattern of separateness in their religious activism and in their own religiosity. See Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, 1976), 83–102; and Joan Jacobs Brumberg, "Zennas and Girlless Villages: The Ethnology of American Evangelical Women, 1870–1910," *Journal of American History*, 69 (Sept. 1982), 347–71.

<sup>33</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1982) xiv.

knew. Quite as much energy, male and female, has gone to maintain boundaries as to break them down. One result of the traditional assumption that what women have done is trivial is that historians have severely underestimated the extent of the energy—psychological, political, and legal—thus expended. Writing of rural communities in the nineteenth-century Midwest, John Mack Faragher describes the dynamics of the process: “the regulation of the sexual division of labor was achieved through the perpetuation of a hierarchical and male-dominant family structure, linked to a public world from which women were excluded. . . . Men were free to pursue the work of the public world precisely because the inequitable division of labor at home made them the beneficiaries of women’s and children’s labor.”<sup>34</sup>

Examples of the energy put into maintaining boundaries abound. Thus Mary Kelley’s *Private Woman, Public Stage* is in part an extended accounting of the price paid in pain and anguish by the first generation of professional women writers who sought to break their traditional intellectual isolation, and the “deprivation and devastation of spirit,” the “subversion of intellect,” to which the tradition of separate spheres had consigned them. Degler and Kraditor have emphasized the energy that antisuffragists dedicated to maintaining the boundaries of the separate spheres as they knew them. Cindy Sondik Aron’s important study of the continuing negotiation of manners and reciprocal obligations in the mid-nineteenth-century civil service, the first large-scale labor force that was genuinely mixed in gender, shows that the ideology of separate spheres—like all ideology—is not frozen in time but is in a constant state of refinement until it fits reality so badly that a paradigm shift in conceptualization is unavoidable. Margaret W. Rossiter’s *Women Scientists in America* provides, among many other things, a case study in the strategies of boundary maintenance and renegotiation. As women scientists successfully met the traditional markers of professional accomplishment, the standards themselves were redefined so as to enclose a sector of the population that was male.<sup>35</sup>

Feminist historians of the Progressive Era have been particularly sensitive to the force of opposition that women met when they sought public influence. The years 1870–1920 may be the high-water mark of women’s public influence: through voluntary organizations, lobbying, trade unions, professional education, and professional activity. But women also met unprecedented hostility and resistance that seems disproportionate, even in the no-holds-barred political arena: When she opposed United States intervention in World War I, Jane Addams was attacked as “‘a silly, vain, impertinent old maid’ who had better leave the fighting to the men.”

<sup>34</sup> John Mack Faragher, “History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America,” *American Quarterly*, 33 (Winter 1981), 537–57, esp. 550. Faragher proceeded to write a history that demonstrated the gendered nature of community formation and the uneven allocation of work and power. See John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1984), 187, 100; Cindy Sondik Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle-Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York, 1987); Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore, 1982). Carl Degler pointed to the paradox that woman suffrage met severe resistance while other barriers to suffrage—property and race requirements for men—were being removed. He suggested that the resistance was in part due to the psychological investment that many women, as well as men, had in the status quo. Degler, *At Odds*, 340–61.

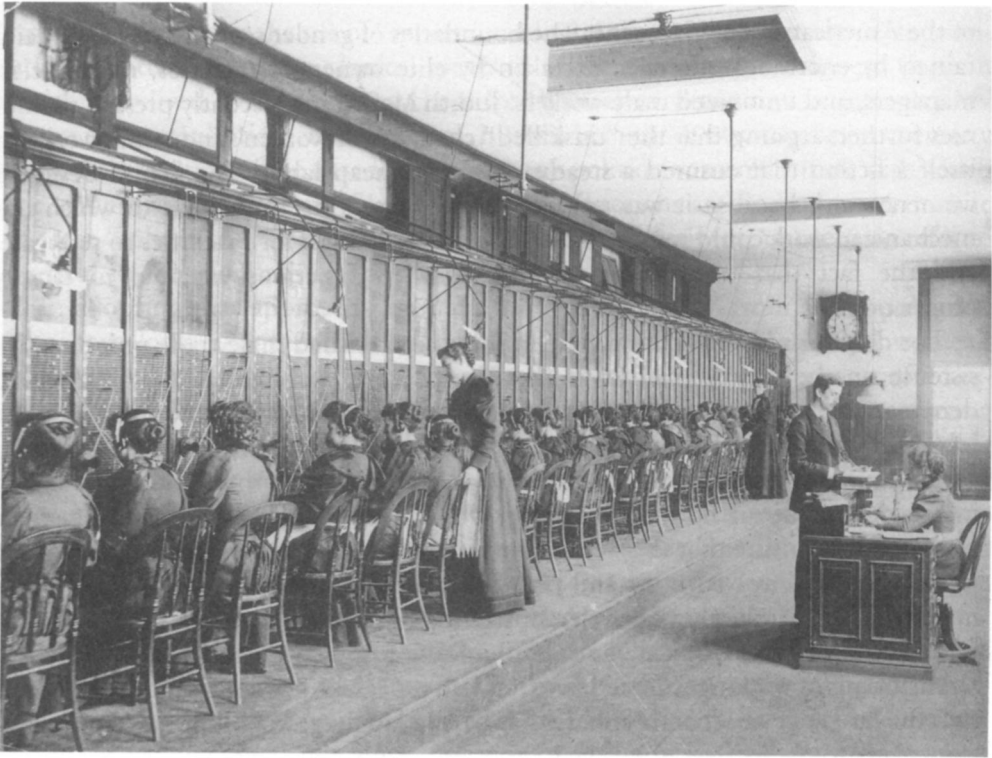
Barbara Sicherman asks, "Why did the Anti-Saloon League replace the WCTU as the leading temperance organization? Why were women's organizations especially subject to red-baiting in the 1920s?" We might add other examples from the 1920s and later: the extraordinary bitterness of the American Medical Association's campaign against the modest recommendations of the Sheppard-Towner Act; the bitterly vindictive, personal attacks on Eleanor Roosevelt throughout her life; the marginalization and isolation of political women like Oveta Culp Hobby in the 1950s; the rich resources of advertising used in the 1920s to redefine the housewife and again in the 1950s to sustain that definition. The evidence that the woman's sphere is a social construction lies in part in the hard and constant work required to build and repair its boundaries.<sup>36</sup>

In the last decade historians of working women have made it abundantly clear that the phrase "separate spheres" is a metaphor for complex power relations in social and economic contexts. Capitalist social relations from the late eighteenth century until now have balanced precariously on the fictions that women "help" rather than work, that their true "place" is in the home, that when they venture "out" of the home they are best suited to doing work that replicates housework. Such work is "unskilled," interruptible, nurturing, and appropriately rewarded primarily by love and secondarily by a segregated marketplace that consistently values women's work less than men's. The point is not only that the marketplace is segregated by gender; it is also that the segregation has been constantly under negotiation and constantly reaffirmed. That these broad patterns are worldwide and cross-cultural was made clear in a special issue of *Signs* in 1977.<sup>37</sup>

The particulars of the American experience have been the target of sustained investigation by social historians who have developed a powerful feminist critique of Marxism for its conflation of the situation and interests of working-class men and working-class women. In *Out to Work*, published in 1982, Alice Kessler-Harris offered an important history of women's labor force participation. For Kessler-Harris, the dynamics of the marketplace and the ideology of separate spheres were interdependent, together defining a gender-segregated workplace, while forcing working-class women to live with the depressing ironies inherent in their situation as physically exhausted workers who were regarded as not really at work. Mary H. Blewett's studies of the work culture of shoemakers in preindustrial New England reveal that women were assigned the single task of binding the uppers of the shoes, a task housewives did in their kitchens, isolated from the shop, in a setting that denied them access to other aspects of the craft or to the collective experience of working with colleagues. Thus the industrial work culture of the nineteenth century inherited, writes Blewett, "gender categories [that] made it difficult for male artisans

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Sicherman, "Separate Spheres as Historical Paradigm: Limiting Metaphor or Useful Construct?" comment delivered at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Los Angeles, April 1984 (in Barbara Sicherman's possession); Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley, 1988). Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, forthcoming).

<sup>37</sup> "Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change," *Signs*, 3 (Autumn 1977), 1-338.



New technologies were almost immediately segregated by gender.  
Switchboards, Cortland Exchange, c. 1890.  
*Courtesy Library Company of Philadelphia.*

to regard women as fellow workers, include them in the ideology and politics based on their work culture, or see in the experience of working women what awaited all workers under industrialization.”<sup>38</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, groups as disparate as the carpet weavers organized by the Knights of Labor, studied by Susan Levine; women socialists, studied by Mari Jo Buhle; and the Women’s Trade Union League, studied by Nancy Shrom Dye and Robin Jacoby were torn in various ways by simultaneous commitments to “equal rights” in the public sector, to a future in which women would “return” to their “natural” sphere of the home, and to an ugly reality in which working women labored in the public sector by day and returned to domestic chores by night. The result was to make the segregation of women in unskilled jobs a permanent feature

<sup>38</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982). The argument is developed forcefully in Alice Kessler-Harris, “The Just Price, the Free Market and the Value of Women,” paper delivered at the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Wellesley, Mass., June 1987 (in Alice Kessler-Harris’s possession). Mary H. Blewett, “The Sexual Division of Labor and the Artisan Tradition in Early Industrial Capitalism: The Case of New England Shoemaking, 1780–1860,” in *To Toil the Livelong Day: America’s Women At Work, 1780–1980*, ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca, 1987), 35–46, esp. 36.

of the American industrial scene. The boundaries of gender segregation were maintained by enormous efforts undertaken by elite owners of factories, middle-class managers, and unionized male workers. Judith McGaw has recently pressed the ironies further, arguing that the "unskilled" character of women's industrial work was itself a fiction that ensured a steady supply of cheap labor. The fiction devalued women's work because it was unmechanized, obscuring the extent to which unmechanized work could require a degree of skill too high for machines to replicate, and the fact that unmechanized work fulfilled functions essential to factory production.<sup>39</sup>

The dynamics have persisted. Sheila Tobias established male trade unionists' insistence on the exclusion of Rosie the Riveter from post-World War II factories, denying women who had joined the skilled work force during the war not only the jobs promised to returning veterans but their own earned seniority and thrusting a generation of working women into a pink-collar ghetto. Ruth Milkman has shown in convincing detail how even during World War II, unions and management cooperated to ensure that the work Rosie did was defined and redefined as women's work even if it involved skills and physical capacities previously understood to be male. Myra H. Strober has been demonstrating how in our own time, the new computer technology was quickly and emphatically assigned a gendered identity.<sup>40</sup>

Historians of working women have thus had especially good reason to understand that the language of separate spheres has been a language enabling contemporaries to explain to themselves the social situation—with all its ironies and contradictions—in which they understood themselves to be living. "Separate spheres" was a trope that hid its instrumentality even from those who employed it; in that sense it was deeply ambiguous. In the ambiguity, perhaps, lay its appeal.<sup>41</sup>

A third major characteristic of recent work, one whose potential is at last being

<sup>39</sup> Susan Levine, *Labor's True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia, 1984), 10, 148; Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, 1981); Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, 1980); Robin Miller Jacoby, "The Women's Trade Union League and American Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Fall 1975), 126–40; Judith A. McGaw, *Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change in Berkshire Paper Making, 1801–1885* (Princeton, 1987), 335–74. Judith A. McGaw, "No Passive Victims, No Separate Spheres: A Feminist Perspective on Technology's History," in *In Context: History and the History of Technology—Essays in Honor of Mel Kranzberg*, ed. Stephen Cutcliffe and Robert W. Post (Bethlehem, Pa., 1988), argues that a transformation of housework preceded the Industrial Revolution and made many of its characteristics possible.

<sup>40</sup> Sheila Tobias and Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana, 1987); Myra Strober and Carolyn L. Arnold, "Integrated Circuits/Segregated Labor: Women in Computer-Related Occupations and High-Tech Industries," in *Computer Chips and Paper Clips: Technology and Women's Employment*, ed. Heidi Hartmann, Robert E. Kraut, and Louise Tilly (Washington, 1986), 136–82. For important studies of the "tipping" of an occupation from male to female, see Myra H. Strober, "Toward a General Theory of Occupational Sex Segregation: The Case of Public School Teaching," in *Sex Segregation in the Workplace: Trends, Explanations, Remedies*, ed. Barbara F. Reskin (Washington, 1984), 144–56; and Myra H. Strober and David Tyack, "Why Do Women Teach and Men Manage? A Report on Research on Schools," *Signs* 5 (Spring 1980), 494–503.

<sup>41</sup> "When we seek to make sense of such problematical topics as human nature, culture, society, and history, we never say precisely what we wish to say or mean precisely what we say," warns Hayden White. "Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them . . . the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion of them." Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 1.

vigorously tapped, is the use of "sphere" in a literal sense. Historians are paying considerable attention to the physical spaces to which women were assigned, those in which they lived, and those they chose for themselves. Stressing the interplay between the metaphorical and the literal, historians in the 1980s may be on their way toward a resolution of the paradoxes of women's politics/women's culture with which the symposiasts of *Feminist Studies* wrestled. Historians are finding it worthwhile to treat "sphere" not only as metaphor but also as descriptor, to use it to refer to domain in the most obvious and explicit sense.

In adopting that approach historians have learned much from anthropologists, who have long understood the need to scrutinize separate men's and women's spaces. Men's places were often clearly defined; menstruating women were often excluded from them. Men's space normally included the central community meeting place and the fields; that is, as Lucienne Roubin writes, the village government "tends to juxtapose and to fuse male space with public space." Women's space, by definition, is what is left: sleeping enclosures, gardens. In the mid-1970s historians found *Woman, Culture, and Society*, an anthology edited by anthropologists Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, deeply resonant for its analyses of the significance of women's behavior in domestic settings.<sup>42</sup>

As we have seen, historians who examined sex roles were likely to link physical separation with social subordination. That was particularly true for historians of early America: as Lyle Koehler observed, "Puritan society was organized in a way that explicitly affirmed the belief in sex segregation as a reminder of men's and women's different destinies." In a 1978 essay, Mary Maples Dunn reversed the argument. In a brilliant examination of the way control of physical space could affect public behavior, Dunn argued that the spiritual equality that Quaker theology offered women was confirmed and authenticated by the device of separate women's meetings. Women's meetings enabled women to control their own agenda, to allocate their own funds, and to exercise disciplinary control over their members, especially by validating marriages. Those roles were reinforced by Quaker women's control over their physical space, in meetinghouses with sliding partitions in the center that provided "women and men with separate spaces for the conduct of their separate business." Women of no other denomination claimed such control over their space and their record keeping, and Dunn suggests that the elements of physical control were central to women's more autonomous spiritual role in the Quaker community.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Lucienne Roubin, "Male Space and Female Space within the Provincial Community," in *Rural Society in France: Selections from the Annales: Economies, Societies, Civilisations*, ed. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, trans. Elborg Forster and Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, 1977), 152–80, esp. 155. See also Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. Rosaldo and Lamphere, 17–42; Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male As Nature Is to Culture?" *ibid.*, 67–87; and Louise Lamphere, "Strategies, Cooperation, and Conflict in Domestic Groups," *ibid.*, 97–112. Also important is Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, 1975), especially Reiter's own essay, Rayna R. Reiter, "Men and Women in the South of France: Public and Private Domains," *ibid.*, 252–82 (her description of the "sexual geography" of a village).

<sup>43</sup> Koehler, *Search for Power*, 41; Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," in *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (Philadelphia, 1980),



In 1979, Estelle Freedman published an important essay, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930." In it she sought to overcome the simplifications of the traditional male-public/female-private hierarchy by a construction that bridged the two categories: the "public female sphere." By that she referred to the "'female institution building' which emerged from the middle-class women's culture of the nineteenth century." She had in mind women's clubs (like Sorosis, which was initiated when the New York Press Club excluded women journalists in 1868); women's colleges; women's settlement houses, most notably Hull House; women's political organizations; women's trade unions; even the women's buildings at the International Centennial Exposition in 1876 and the World's Columbian Exposition in 1892. In each case, the refusal to merge their groups into male-dominated institutions gave women not only crucial practical and political experience but also a place where they could rest the levers with which they hoped to effect social change. The space that Freedman ended by recommending to women was in part metaphorical: women needed their own networks, and they needed to nurture their own culture. Embedded in her essay, however, was also the observation that feminists had been most successful when they had commanded actual physical space of their own, which they could define and control.<sup>44</sup>

If we imagine Freedman as staking out an empty shelf in the bookcase of women's history in 1979, we could now say that the shelf is crowded with books and articles that illustrate her point. New studies of the history of domesticity have understood domesticity to be an ideology whose objective correlative is the physical space of the household. The "material feminist" reformers of Dolores Hayden's *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, who flourished between 1870 and 1930, sought to reappropriate that space and to redesign it to socialize domestic work. Central kitchens, cooked food delivery, professionalized home cleaning, and other efforts to reconstruct women's work within the domestic sphere severely challenged the traditional social order. Such inventions were squelched. Powerful interest groups countered them with home mortgage policies that privileged male-headed households, highway construction that encouraged diffuse suburban development, and urban design that stressed single-family homes lacking central services. Hayden's book was followed by detailed histories by Susan Strasser and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, which tracked the development of housework and household technology. Cowan argued that the definition of the home as women's sphere was accompanied by a change in household technology with the result that men—excused from chopping wood for fire, pounding meal, and other household tasks—found the home a place of leisure, a "haven in a heartless world" while it retained its character as a place of

27–46, esp. 45; originally published in *American Quarterly*, 30 (Winter 1978), 582–601, esp. 600. About the most clearly bounded women's religious social space—the convent—we know little. In the colonial period there was a convent in Montreal, but we have no studies of its internal dynamics, though we know that some American women captives chose to stay there rather than be repatriated. See Axtell, *Invasion Within* 302–27. On the general problem, see Elizabeth Kolmer, "Catholic Women Religious and Women's History: A Survey of the Literature," in *Women in American Religion*, ed. James, 127–39.

<sup>44</sup> Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979), 512–29, esp. 513.



Jane Addams in Hull House dining room with staff and guests, c. 1930. Men are invited to women's space. Facing camera: Ida Lovett (smoking a cigarette), Robert Morss Lovett, Alice Hamilton (face hidden), Addams; back to camera: Edith de Nancrede, Rachelle Yarros. I am grateful to Mary Lynn McCree Bryan for the identifications.

*Courtesy Swarthmore College Peace Collection.*

labor for women. The work of Faye E. Dudden on household service shows that women's domestic space was pervaded by class considerations; the home was a theater, in which the mistress of the house claimed her space and assigned to the servant the space she might occupy.<sup>45</sup>

The philosophy and ideology of other institutions are increasingly understood to be embedded in their arrangement of physical space. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz has traced the complex relationships between the visions that women's college

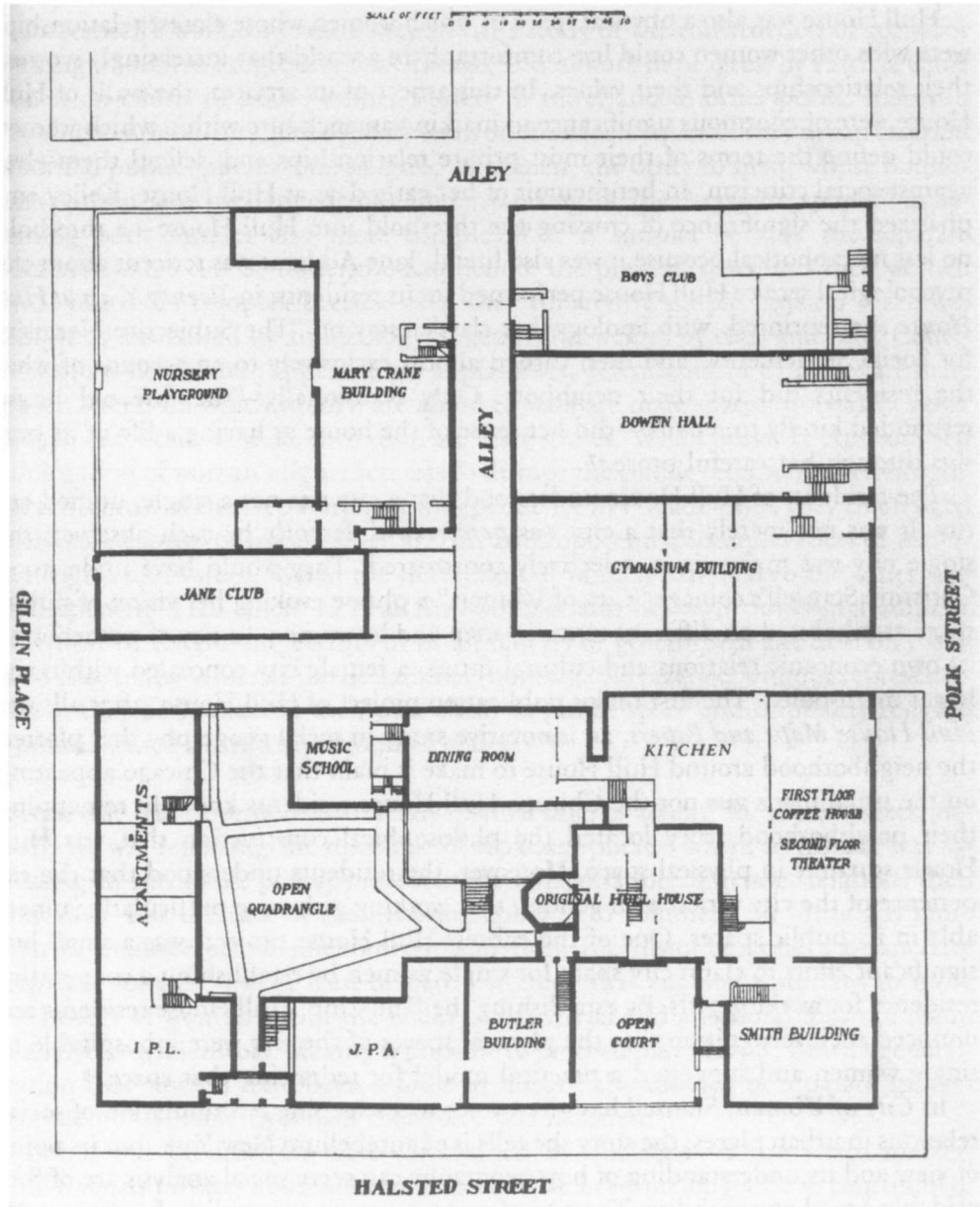
<sup>45</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, 1983); Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, 1983).



Halsted Street view of Hull House, c. 1915. Although its name suggested the cozy family home that was its original core, at its height Hull House included twelve buildings and filled two city blocks.

*Courtesy Jane Addams Memorial Collection, Special Collections, University Library, University of Illinois at Chicago.*

founders had for their institutions and the architecture that they commissioned. In her work, even intellectual history is understood to be deeply affected by its physical context. And a rich outpouring of work on the women of the Hull House community has made it increasingly clear that having control of the physical institution of Hull House—which at its height included thirteen large structures spaced over two square blocks—provided an institutional base permitting women reformers, in Kathryn Kish Sklar's words, to “enter realms of reality dominated by men, where, for better or for worse, they competed with men for control over the distribution of social resources.” Hull House was many things, not least among them a physical space in which the divorced Florence Kelley could find housing, community, and child care while she went to law school. Hull House's communal dining room was an innovative solution to the practical problems of self-maintenance for single



Plan of the Hull House buildings, c. 1963.  
 Courtesy Jane Addams Memorial Collection, Special Collections,  
 University Library, University of Illinois at Chicago.

professional women, a vigorous testimony to the advice of the material feminists whose work was chronicled by Hayden.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York 1984); Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women Reformers," *Signs*, 10 (Summer 1985), 658–77, esp. 659.

Hull House was also a physical space in which women whose closest relationships were with other women could live comfortably in a world that increasingly scorned their relationships and their values. In this aspect of its services, the walls of Hull House were of enormous significance in marking an enclosure within which women could define the terms of their most private relationships and defend themselves against social criticism. In her memoir of her early days at Hull House, Kelley emphasized the significance of crossing the threshold into Hull House—a threshold no less metaphorical because it was also literal. Jane Addams was reticent about the psychological service Hull House performed for its residents; in *Twenty Years at Hull House* she reprinted, with apology, her classic essay on “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements” and then turned almost exclusively to an account of what the residents did for their neighbors. Only occasionally—“the fine old house responded kindly to repairs”—did her sense of the house as having a life of its own slip through her careful prose.<sup>47</sup>

The residents of Hull House understood that a city was not a single, unified entity. It was not merely that a city was *perceived* differently by each observer; the single city was many cities, selectively constructed. They would have understood Christine Stansell’s coinage “City of Women,” a phrase evoking her vision of public space as inhabited on different terms by men and by women, “a city of women with its own economic relations and cultural forms, a female city concealed within the larger metropolis.” The first major publication project of Hull House, after all, was *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, an innovative study in social geography that plotted the neighborhood around Hull House to make it plain that the Chicago appearing on the usual maps was not the Chicago Hull House residents knew. In remapping their neighborhood, they located the philosophical construction that was Hull House squarely in physical space. Moreover, the residents understood that the experience of the city varied with gender, that working girls were particularly vulnerable in its public spaces. One of the earliest Hull House projects was a small but significant effort to claim city space for single women by establishing a cooperative residence for working girls. By establishing the Jane Club, Hull House residents announced their recognition that the physical spaces of the city were inhospitable to single women and suggested a practical model for redrawing that space.<sup>48</sup>

In *City of Women*, Stansell has given voice to a sweeping reformulation of social relations in urban places; the story she tells is of antebellum New York, but its point of view and its understanding of how geography can serve social analysis are of formidably broad applicability. The city of women has its own political economy, its own patterns of sociability, its own uses of the streets. It varies by class: the world of working-class women has not been the same as the world of middle-class women but neither has it been the same as the world of working-class men.

<sup>47</sup> Florence Kelley, “I Go to Work,” *Survey*, June 1, 1927, pp. 271–74, 301; Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House, with Autobiographical Notes* (New York, 1910), 93.

<sup>48</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986), xi; Residents of Hull-House, *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (New York, 1895). For the Jane Club, see Mary Kenny’s reminiscence in Allen F. Davis and Mary Lynn McCree, eds., *Eighty Years at Hull-House* (Chicago, 1969), 34–35.

In Stansell's work, in Joanne Meyerowitz's study of the construction of space for working women in Progressive Era Chicago, and in work in progress by Patricia Cline Cohen on efforts to assure women's safety in travel and in other public spaces in the nineteenth century, and by Mary Ryan on the nineteenth-century urban creation of formal public spheres, one assigned to women, the other to men, whose boundaries shifted and overlapped, our understanding of the "separate sphere" is becoming both simpler and more complex.<sup>49</sup> It is simpler because the separate women's sphere can be understood to denote the physical space in which women lived, but more complex because even that apparently simple physical space was complexly structured by an ideology of gender, as well as by class and race. Courtrooms in which women appear singly as plaintiffs, defendants, or witnesses are male spaces; streets on which women are afraid to walk are male spaces; universities that women enter only at male invitation are male spaces. When Susan B. Anthony led a delegation of woman's rights activists to disrupt the public ceremonies celebrating the centennial of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, they challenged both male control of public space and an anthropocentric interpretation of American rights and values. When the delegation of women marched to the other side of Carpenters' Hall, there to hear Anthony declaim her own centennial address, which called for the impeachment of all officers of government because they had been false to the values of the declaration (notably, "no taxation without representation"), they both asserted their own claim to public space and implicitly rejected a politics based on the separation of spheres.<sup>50</sup>

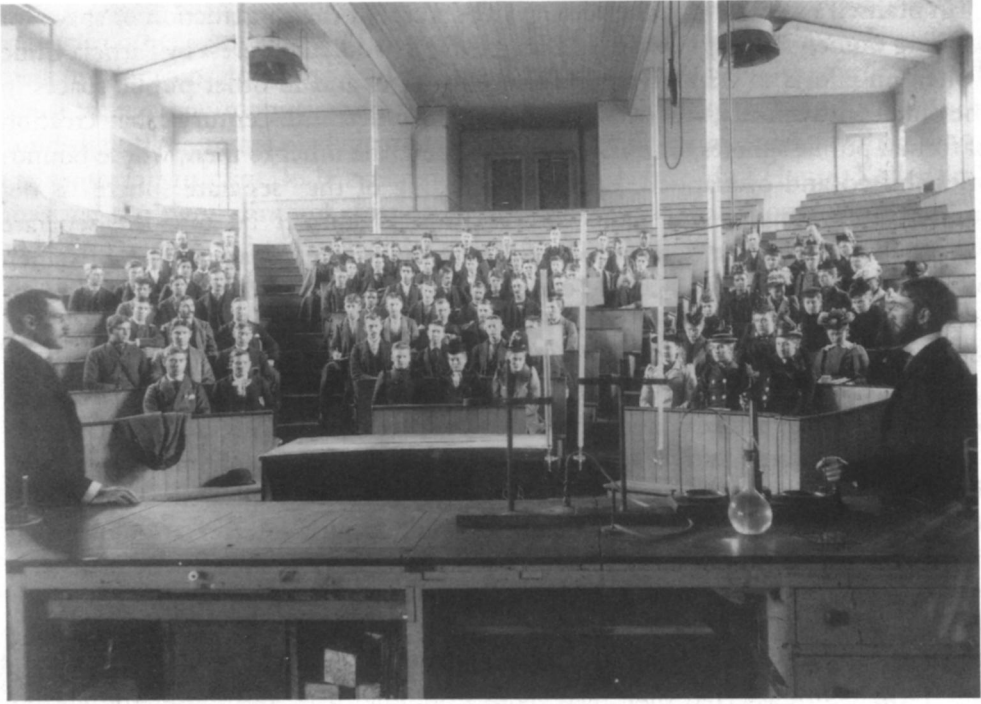
Tocqueville had discerned "two clearly distinct lines of action" for the two sexes. Actually he was reporting the discourse of separate spheres, which in his day was increasing in shrillness, perhaps to cover the renegotiation of gender relations then underway. But the task of the historiographer is to comment on historians more than to evaluate actual phenomena, and from the historiographer's perspective "separate spheres" was at least in part a strategy that enabled historians to move the history of women out of the realm of the trivial and anecdotal into the realm of analytic social history. Making it possible to proceed past Mary R. Beard's generalization that women have been a force in history, the concept of separate spheres proposed a dynamic by which that force was manifest.<sup>51</sup>

But if our predecessors were constrained by dualisms—home versus market, public versus private, household versus state—we need no longer be so constrained. In an important essay written late in her tragically abbreviated life, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, who had made her reputation exploring the contrasts between the public and the private, nature and culture, argued forcefully that it was time to

<sup>49</sup> Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, "Women in Public: Explorations of Gender in Three American Cities, 1825–1880," forthcoming; Patricia Cline Cohen, "Safety and Danger: Sexual Peril in Public, 1790–1850," forthcoming.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds. *History of Woman Suffrage* (6 vols., Rochester, 1881–1922), III, 3–56.

<sup>51</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, 212; Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History: A Study of Traditions and Realities* (New York, 1946).



Men and women sit separately in a physics lecture room  
at the University of Michigan, c. 1890.

*Courtesy University of Michigan Medical School Collection, Michigan  
Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library.*

move on to more complex analyses. "The most serious deficiency of a model based upon two opposed spheres," she wrote, "appears . . . in its alliance with the dualisms of the past, dichotomies which teach that women must be understood not in terms of relationship—with other women and with men—but of difference and apartness." Approaches that attempt to locate "women's 'problem' in a domain apart. . . . fail to help us understand how men and women both participate in and help to reproduce the institutional forms that may oppress, liberate, join or divide them."<sup>52</sup> To continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society, and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships.

<sup>52</sup> M. Z. Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding," *Signs*, 5 (Spring 1980), 389–417, esp. 409, 417. See also the important essay, Joan Kelly, "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory: A Postscript to the 'Woman and Power' Conference," *Feminist Studies*, 5 (Spring 1979), 216–27. "Woman's place is not a separate sphere or domain of existence but a position within social existence generally," *Ibid.*, 221. Jeanne Boydston is a historian who understands this point. See Jeanne Boydston, "To Earn Her Daily Bread: Housework and Antebellum Working-Class Subsistence," *Radical History Review*, (no. 35, 1986), 7–25; and Jeanne Boydston, "Home and Work: The Industrialization of Housework in the Northeastern United States from the Colonial Period to the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1984).

As we discuss the concept of separate spheres, we are tiptoeing on the boundary between politics and ideology, between sociology and rhetoric. We have entered the realm of hermeneutics; our task—insofar as it involves the analysis and demystification of a series of binary opposites—is essentially one of deconstruction. What are we to make of this polarity between the household and the world, an opposition as fundamental as the opposition between the raw and the cooked, the day and the night, the sun and the moon? We do not yet fully understand why feminists of every generation—the 1830s, the 1880s, the 1960s—have needed to define their enemy in this distinctively geographical way. Why speak of worlds, of spheres, or of realms at all? What is it in our culture that has made feminists think of themselves, in Mary Wollstonecraft's words, "as immured in their households, groping in the dark"?<sup>53</sup>

The metaphor remains resonant because it retains some superficial vitality. For all our vaunted modernity, for all that men's "spheres" and women's "spheres" now overlap, vast areas of our experience and our consciousness do not overlap. The boundaries may be fuzzier, but our private spaces and our public spaces are still in many important senses gendered. The reconstruction of gender relations, and of the spaces that men and women may claim, is one of the most compelling contemporary social tasks. It is related to major social questions: the feminization of poverty, equal access to education and the professions, relations of power and abuses of power in the public sector and in the family. On a wider stage, the reconstruction of gender relations is related to major issues of power, for we live in a world in which authority has traditionally validated itself by its distance from the feminine and from what is understood to be effeminate.<sup>54</sup>

Little is left of Tocqueville except what he left to implication: that political systems and systems of gender relations are reciprocal social constructions. The purpose of constant analysis of language is to assure that we give power no place to hide.<sup>55</sup> But the remnants of "separate spheres" that still persist are symptoms, not cause, of a particular and historically located gender system. One day we will understand the idea of separate spheres as primarily a trope, employed by people in the past to characterize power relations for which they had no other words and that they could not acknowledge because they could not name, and by historians in our own times as they groped for a device that might dispel the confusion of anecdote and impose narrative and analytical order on the anarchy of inherited evidence, the better to comprehend the world in which we live.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody Kramnick (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1975), 87.

<sup>54</sup> On gender in Nazi ideology, see Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion A. Kaplan, *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York, 1984). On gendered language and birth images in contemporary strategic analysis, see Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs*, 12 (Summer 1987), 687–718.

<sup>55</sup> The reciprocal relationship of political and gender systems is developed far more explicitly throughout Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (Harmondsworth, Eng. 1973), esp. 270–81; and Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York, 1949), 94–108. For a brilliant analysis, see Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91 (Dec. 1986), 1053–75. And see Michael J. Shapiro, "The Political Responsibilities of the Scholar," in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, ed. John Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey (Madison, 1988), 380.