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Review Of "The Origins Of Women's Activism: New York And Boston, 1797-1840" By A.M. Boylan

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The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840 by Anne M. Boylan
Review by: Bruce Dorsey

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The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797–1840. By Anne M. Boylan (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 343 pp. \$49.95 cloth \$19.95 paper

The influential journal articles that Boylan published on the history of women's organizations between 1984 and 1990, along with Lori Ginzberg's *Women and the Work of Benevolence* (New Haven, 1990), represented the crest of a wave of scholarship that can be traced back to the birth of U.S. women's history. Boylan's latest book has built on that foundation and added significant new insights and a broader angle of vision to the history of women's benevolent activism. *The Origins of Women's Activism* examines the earliest years of women's organizations in the United States, exhaustively examining the memberships of over seventy-five associations in New York City and Boston prior to 1840. Not designed to be a comparative history of each city's women's organizations, the work utilizes a social-history analysis of the "life histories" of urban activist women to demonstrate what Boylan sees as the reciprocal relationship between women's organizations and the formation of a hegemonic bourgeois gender system in nineteenth-century America. As Boylan maintains, the "founders of women's organizations helped create and reproduce a gender system to fit the times" (16).

Much like her previous articles on women's activism, Boylan argues that life cycle is crucially important for understanding the experiences of benevolent women. Not only did married women dominate positions of leadership in their associations; women activists also engaged in a balancing act of their domestic and organizational responsibilities. Yet, despite the social authority vested in their role as wives and mothers, these women rarely mentioned their domestic lives in their records and publications. Thus could benevolent women elide any conflict between their public labors and their household duties, and position themselves as protectors of individuals outside the boundaries of "true womanhood" and the middle class.

This volume comes to life when Boylan paints the life portraits of five representative women activists who bridged the diversity of social experiences that characterized activist women in the early republic. This chapter reveals both the promises and a few of the shortcomings of this book. By examining the experiences of Catholic and African-American women activists in dialogue with more prevalent white Protestant women, Boylan moves closer to developing the kind of broad and inclusive approach that the history of gender and activism requires. No existing work comes anywhere near what Boylan has done in exposing how gender informed the differences between the organizational actions of Protestant and Catholic women. Some readers might wish that Boylan had found a way to intersperse these lively personal histories throughout the whole book rather than isolating them in a separate chapter. Others might wonder why no activist woman from the "reform" era deserved a life portrait.

Boylan depicts the trajectory of women's activism in New York and Boston as the linear movement of three overlapping but distinct phases or "waves" of activism—the first being the founding generation of benevolent societies (1797–1806), the second involving the triumph of evangelical organizations (1812–1820), and the third coinciding with the tidal shift from charity or missionary actions to more radical calls for ending such social practices as slavery, prostitution, or selling alcohol (1820–1840). But Boylan has not given equal attention to the reform phase, which serves instead as a foil to demonstrate the contrasting life course and organizational apparatus of the early generations of benevolent women.

Choosing to end this study in 1840 highlights this dilemma. Not only are the life stories of reforming women underexamined, but her wonderful contrast of the experiences of Catholic and Protestant women calls for an extension of this analysis into the era of large-scale Irish Catholic immigration and nativism in the 1840s. Overall, however, readers will discover one of the most comprehensive social histories of women's organizational activities in Boylan's fine volume.

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A Sphinx on the American Land: The Nineteenth-Century South in Comparative Perspective. By Peter Kolchin (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2003) 124 pp. \$22.95

Kolchin offers "an extended analytical essay designed to explore old questions in new ways" (6). This work of both history and historiography pays particular attention to slavery and emancipation, the Civil War, and the meaning and source of southern identity. As elsewhere, Kolchin in this book makes a strong case for the use of comparative history. Indeed, he argues that "analysis that focuses on one case or locale but places it in a broader—comparative—framework" is particularly appropriate for the study of the South (3–4).

The book is divided into three main parts. In the first part, Kolchin compares the South to the North, or what he terms the "un-South." He examines both what the public and historians have said about this comparison and how pronouncements about the South versus the North have changed over time. His key point is that efforts to distinguish the South make sense only within a broad national context. He also argues that what most distinguished South from North were slavery and the Civil War. The higher a region's percentage of slaves and the greater a region's support for secession, the more southern was that region.

In the second part, Kolchin insists that despite southerners' clear conception of their difference from other Americans, there were also "many Souths." Change and variation existed between areas and times in the South. Using the density of blacks, either slave or free, and the