

Lisa Pace Vetter

The Political Thought of America's Founding Feminists

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Reviewed by Judy D. Whipps, 2018

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The Political Thought of America's Founding Feminists adds to the ongoing feminist project to recover the neglected voices and influences of women in the philosophical canon. Lisa Pace Vetter examines the political significance of seven nineteenth-century women's rights/abolitionist activists and theorists to demonstrate the foundation they laid for later feminist theorists as well as their impact on political theory. Her intent, she says, is to "innovate within a discipline," working within political theory to diversify and expand our understanding of American political thought. Vetter brings Frances Wright, Harriet Martineau, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth into dialogue with Scottish Enlightenment thinker Adam Smith, utilitarians Jeremy Bentham and Robert Owen, as well as Alexis de Tocqueville. These women theorists drew on the works of Smith, Bentham, Owen, and Tocqueville but also revised and expanded, and sometimes predated, their ideas. The moral sentiment of sympathy, beginning with Adam Smith, is woven throughout Vetter's analysis.

As the title says, this is a book of political theory, but Vetter looks beyond formal conventional modes of theorizing to consider women's activism, as well as their speeches, letters, and the writing of their contemporaries. She includes nontraditional perspectives, such as the religious underpinnings of their activism and philosophies. The influence of these nontraditional perspectives illustrates her point that American political theory emerged from unexpected venues and diverse voices.

The selection of the women in this volume is sometimes surprising; for example, Frances Wright was from Scotland but eventually moved to the United States after visiting and writing about her travels. Harriet Martineau is usually considered an English author; she spent only two years traveling in the United States. Vetter writes extensively about Elizabeth Cady Stanton but doesn't mention her compatriot and fellow author Susan B. Anthony. Lucretia Mott and Sojourner Truth are important figures in feminist history, but as theorists, they wrote little. All the women in this book made connections among abolitionism, women's rights, and democratic citizenship. They connected natural and equal rights for slaves as part of a "liberalism of rights" and used human-rights theory to argue for their own rights as women (10), but went beyond liberalism to

socialism in some cases, and to a political model of consensus-building informed by Quaker collective deliberation.

Although she isn't explicit about the timeframe for the book, most of Vetter's analysis centers on writing from the 1820s to the 1860s. If she had extended that period, other women theorists and activists would have fit well into her theoretical framing, in particular the feminist pragmatist theorists at the turn of the century. Moral theory based in imagination and sympathy that develops from practical experience, and the experiential epistemology articulated by many of these women, parallels much of the writings of pragmatists Jane Addams, John Dewey, and Mary Parker Follett, demonstrating the continuity of American philosophical thought.

Frances (Fanny) Wright (1795-1852) was somewhat infamous in her time but hasn't been considered a major figure in American philosophy or feminist theory. Wright was the first American woman newspaper editor, one of the first women to speak publicly to mixed male/female audiences, or to be involved in the labor movement. As someone who has taught courses on utopias, I knew Wright from her failed experimental utopian community, Nashoba, which was meant to serve as a model for how to end slavery and as a way to establish economic equality. Born in Scotland, Wright traveled to America with Lafayette, resulting in her *Views on Society and Manners in America* (1821), predating Tocqueville's influential *Democracy in America*. As has so often been discovered in feminist intellectual history, Vetter found that "many of the innovative ideas and observations with which Tocqueville is credited appear years earlier in Wright's work" (35). This is particularly true of Wright's critique of American women's equality, a point later taken up by Tocqueville. After her trip to America, Wright was invited to a study group of "philosophical radicals" in Jeremy Bentham's home. Bentham's utilitarian influence on Wright is evident particularly in her reliance on knowledge that is verified through empirical experience and independent inquiry. In her political theory, Wright makes the transition from republicanism to an active political socialism that could "live up to the promise of representative government" (43) in contrast to many apolitical utopian movements of her time.

Like Mary Wollstonecraft, Wright argued for universal free education, believing that gender inequalities were culturally manufactured through unequal education. She thought that if women were educated on par with men, they would develop the critical reasoning skills needed to participate in a democracy. She was likewise critical of the elite and their "hired servants" (such as educators and religious leaders) who provide only "half the truth" (59-60) to those who did not have the education to independently verify information. She understood that this intentional deprivation of learning solidified the dominance of the privileged.

Vetter says that Wright's arguments for women's rights and her critique of slavery "include[] elements that would become part of critical race theory" (25), because she combined race, class, and gender to analyze systems of oppression (37). In this she cites Alan Tillery's work that identifies Tocqueville's writing as an example of early critical race theory (Tillery 2009). Yet, as groundbreaking as Wright was, I think it is an overstatement to categorize her work as critical race theory. Wright, like Adam Smith, understood that "morality is determined largely by the particular cultural context in which people live" (47), pointing to the social construction of slavery and racism. Some of her reasoning seems strange today, as when she said that one reason that slavery continued in the South was because Africans were more suited to working in hot

climates. Given the naivety of Nashoba--where slaves were purchased with the intent of allowing them to work off the cost of their freedom in the fields--and given the racist descriptions of black people in some of her writing, it's difficult to categorize her work under a critical race theory umbrella. Without diminishing Wright's work, I would think that to consider Wright as an early precursor to critical race theory, evidence would need to be found that she was reflective about her own privilege and power as a white, upper-class woman in her culture (see Wing 1997).

Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) was a prolific English writer, able to support herself financially with her writing. She published over two thousand articles in her lifetime and over a dozen books, including the three-volume *Society in America*, based on her two-year travels in America. Her book *How to Observe* includes a critique of a universalized system of moral behavior absent its cultural and historical context. Her argument for women's voting rights rested on the contradiction between the ideal of democracy and women's inability to give consent to the laws that govern them. According to Vetter, her writing style was distinctive in that it utilized narrative fiction to explain complex political theory, disrupting male professional norms (75-76). This has led to categorizing her writing as "popularizing." In contrast, Vetter reads Martineau as a writer who expands on theory, particularly Adam Smith's moral theory of sympathy in his lesser known *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Smith 1985). Their ideas differ in that Smith emphasizes imagination, and Martineau focuses on discourse and actual experience to understand the cultural context needed for sympathy (80-81). Martineau used moral sympathy to understand majority rule in American democracy, to create connections across diverse populations (26-27), to oppose slavery, and to argue for women's rights. Given her commitment to discourse, it appears she talked with those opposed to slavery as well as to slave-owners, but there is no evidence that she talked with actual African-American slaves themselves.

Angelina Grimké Weld (1805-1879) and Sarah Grimké (1792-1873) were sisters from a South Carolina slave-holding family who became passionate abolitionists and women's rights pioneers. As Southerners they had early personal experience of the treatment of slaves, and so could speak with the authority of experience. Both sisters connected women's rights to African Americans' rights, thereby, Vetter says, developing "an early understanding of intersectionality by tracing systemic oppression in all domestic relations" (104). Vetter focuses on Angelina's rhetorical use of emotion and sympathy, and in the chapter on Sarah Grimké, she examines Sarah's early feminist theories.

Vetter opens the chapter on Angelina Grimké with Grimké's endorsement of using "a sledge hammer of truth" against slavery, referencing a critique by Catharine Beecher who had accused Grimké of overusing an emotional appeal of sympathy for slaves. Vetter defends sympathy as part of the Scottish Enlightenment tradition of "balanc[ing] reason with emotion" (102), using Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1982). Smith claimed that the duty of the spectator is to establish "fellow feeling with the sufferer" as a basis for moral communities (110). Vetter demonstrates how Grimké's *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* is in line with Smith's moral theory of rhetoric because it draws on her own experience of Southern slavery and her personal experience of being female in a culture that doesn't allow her a public voice.

Sarah Grimké's *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1838) may be the first American theoretical argument for the equality of the sexes (Grimké 1988). While

acknowledging historian Gerda Lerner's influential portrayal of the Grimké sisters's reliance on Enlightenment human-rights-based liberalism (see Whipps n.d.), Vetter points out the additional strong influence of Quaker theology in their work. Liberalism, Vetter says, relies too much on the idea of the rights of the "abstract woman" who is unencumbered by any cultural, historical, or contextual influences" (126). Instead, Vetter sees Grimké's feminism as emanating from her lived experience as well as her spirituality. She categorizes Sarah Grimké and Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) as representing "Quaker constitutionalism," a combination of reason and spiritual reflection requiring public deep deliberation and political engagement. Grimké also defended women's rights by challenging and rewriting traditional interpretations of Bible passages used to subordinate women to men, an approach taken up later by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Lucretia Mott is perhaps an unusual choice for a book about political theory. She is well known among feminist historians for her abolitionist and women's rights work, and as a Quaker minister, she was an influential public figure. She was a mentor to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and was one of the organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention. Yet she left few texts behind, which left Vetter to analyze her letters and speeches to understand her theoretical work. Mott's major contributions are in her critiques of any type of dogma, advocating instead individual knowing through reflection, listening to the "inner voice," and--contrary to many Quakers of the time--engagement in community and politics.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) is a seminal figure in the history of the women's suffrage movement. The fight for women's suffrage was her lifelong work, starting with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. Vetter takes up Stanton's theoretical work, drawing parallels in content and style between Stanton and Adam Smith, particularly in their rhetorical use of sympathy and emotion, indirect description and impartial observation.

Stanton did not believe that the differences between the sexes are due to "nature," but rather are "culturally and socially determined" (172). These same cultural conditions prevent men from developing a sympathetic understanding of women's lives, leading them to assume dominance. Per Vetter, Smith also described similar failures of sympathy that result in a false sense of superiority (173-74). Like Smith, Stanton thought that part of the solution to inequality was in education, although Smith did not think women should be educated via formal schooling (175). As Vetter points out, Stanton has been criticized for racism in her writing (this is also true for Anthony, although Vetter doesn't discuss this.) Although Vetter wants to say that Stanton's racism showed up primarily in her early writing and may just be a "misunderstanding" of the rhetoric of ridicule that she adopts (186), it is clear that Stanton's racism is more than a misunderstanding; in fact the early history of the women's suffrage movement can be justly criticized for racism. Although they were both abolitionists, Stanton (and Anthony) split with other suffrage workers, including Sojourner Truth, when they actively campaigned against the Fifteenth Amendment that gave African-American males--but not women--the right to vote. Stanton uses racist language to describe the African-American male, comparing his traits to the "education and refinement" of the white women who were still excluded from voting. This was enough for Frederick Douglass to condemn Stanton's 1869 speech, while still acknowledging Stanton as a friend (196).

Vetter ends her analysis of early American feminist political figures with Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883), who did not leave writings as did other black female abolitionists, such as Harriet Jacobs and Ellen Watkins Harper. But Vetter chose Truth intentionally, aligning this choice with her goal to "demonstrate the relevance of alternative means of theorizing" beyond traditional written treatises (199). Truth challenged conventional conceptions of femininity, race, class, and Christianity in her enthusiastic performative speeches, combining "wit and wisdom" (203) in ways that disrupted the privileged position of her listeners.

All the theorists in this book share concepts of moral theory and behavior based on sympathy, along with an epistemology that is developed through and tested by practical experience. What distinguishes this volume from a book on moral theory or feminist history is that Vetter specifically ties this sympathetic morality to the practice of American democracy. The egalitarian and participatory nature of democracy requires an understanding of the lives of others (85-88). Vetter also makes an important contribution by demonstrating the continuity of American thought in the eighteenth century, which carries over to the work of later philosophers. A theory of democracy based in social engagement and empathy was taken up by later philosophers such as John Dewey and Jane Addams. As Addams says in *Democracy and Social Ethics*, "diversified human experience and resultant sympathy . . . are the foundation and guarantee of Democracy" (Addams 1902/2002, 7).

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