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The Temperance Movement: Feminism, Nativism, Religious Identity, and Race

Over the course of the nineteenth century, an anti-alcohol movement known as the Temperance movement grew in America. The Temperance movement mainly involved Protestant women, especially after the Civil War. These Temperance women were unable to vote at the time, but their involvement in politics was strong and public: not only were these women monumentally influential in building the Prohibition movement, they also had to battle daily those who believed that it was not their place to be involved in politics. Women's involvement in the Temperance movement was a huge step forward in feminism for American women in the nineteenth century.¹

The ways in which alcohol-dependent people, then referred to as drunkards, were discussed and depicted was often as racialized Irish and Italian Catholics: both European groups were not considered "White" at this time, and these men came from Catholic countries, which threatened many Protestants. Depicting non-White people as agents of both violence and uncontrollable sexuality was in many ways an appeal to the American people, who were very much caught up in Nativist anti-Catholic anti-Irish/Italian beliefs.

Political cartoons during the late nineteenth century give modern-day historians a window into the mind of the American people during the Temperance movement, including but not limited to how they viewed women, race, religion, and the prohibition of alcohol.

Temperance Movement

The Temperance movement, which began in the 1820s and gathered strength and support for the next hundred years, was an American movement that was a milestone for both feminism and nativism in American politics. Spearheaded by Protestants and intensifying after the Civil War, the Temperance movement used religious and moral backing to support its cause. Those involved in the Temperance movement, who were mainly women in the latter half of the nineteenth century, believed that alcohol was to blame for domestic abuse, infidelity, and violence, and that if alcohol were made illegal, these issues would decrease drastically.

Although these women had valid arguments, women were not allowed to vote at this time. Additionally, women being politically involved and engaging in political arguments was seen as unseemly and as women stepping out of their place—though often their arguments involved moral suasion, and therefore were

¹ B. M. Nicolaidis, "The state's "sharp line between the sexes": women, alcohol and the law in the United States, 1850-1980," *Addiction (Abingdon, England)* 91, no. 8 (1996): 1211-1229.

still considered appropriate to their sphere.² As a result, there was substantial pushback against both the Temperance movement as well as the women involved. The women were painted as unwomanly, masculine, trouble-making, ugly, and even sacrilegious—they were going against God’s way by attempting to have a say outside of their own homes.

Nineteenth Century American Feminism

In America in the nineteenth century, feminism took many different forms, the most notable being women’s involvement in national politics. The main political issues women were involved in during the nineteenth century were (chronologically) abolition/anti-native removal, women’s right to divorce their husbands, Temperance, and women’s suffrage.

Women’s involvement in abolition and anti-native removal is long and well-documented, including but not limited to groups such as the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, which petitioned “state and national governments, circulated anti-slavery propaganda,” and sponsored an annual fundraiser for the cause of abolition;³ and individual women including Catharine Beecher and Lydia Sigourney creating national campaigns against Indian Removal under Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren.⁴

Feminists and women’s groups such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union “identified the roots of [violence by men against women] in the nature of...male sexuality, and intemperance.⁵ The feminist movement is intimately tied to the Temperance movement, which sought to criminalize alcohol in the hopes of decreasing male violence, particularly in the home. All of these movements demonstrated the power that women had within the political realm, and laid the groundwork for the women’s suffrage movement that continued into the twentieth century.

Nativism

In nineteenth century America, as more and more Europeans were immigrating to the United States, a political/social ideology known as nativism emerged. Taking form in both the “Know-Nothing Party” and within individuals and groups belonging to other political sects, nativism is, at its core, a nationalist,

² Jed Dannenbaum, “The Origins of Temperance Activism and Militancy among American Women,” *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (1981): 235–252.

³ Julie Roy Jeffrey, “The Liberty Women of Boston: Evangelicalism and Antislavery Politics,” *The New England Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2012): 39.

⁴ Mary Hershberger, “Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 15–40.

⁵ Elizabeth Pleck, “Feminist Responses to ‘Crimes against Women,’ 1868-1896,” *Signs* 8, no. 3 (1983): 460.

racist, religiously intolerant ideology aiming to limit the number of Europeans coming to the United States from certain countries.

Only immigrants from some European countries were admitted to the United States and accepted into American society; the two main factors in deciding which European countries were acceptable were whether or not the European country was Catholic, and whether or not said country was considered to be “White.” Whiteness, a social construct that has changed over time, was constructed to create racial solidarity to prevent class solidarity, and is based off of socio-economic status, skin tone, and place of origin. Race science was introduced and flourished in the nineteenth century. Though it may seem arbitrary now, Whiteness was and is the biggest facet of nativism, leading to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes of non-Whites, such as Irish and Italian Catholics. The fact that these non-White groups were Catholic exacerbated nativists’ mistrust of them: American Protestants saw Catholics as morally dangerous and a threat to the American way of life.⁶

Political Cartoons

Political cartoons have a long and rich history, not only in the United States, but worldwide.⁷ Placing image-based political messages in pamphlets, newspapers, and other mediums not only is an efficient means of circulation, it is also accessible: for citizens with limited schooling/literacy, political cartoons made messages easily digestible for people across all classes.

Political cartoons utilize stereotypes, public fears, and social norms/altering social norms to convey messages about political figures.⁸ Women in political cartoons are severely stereotyped by their sex/gender, made to look masculine and unsightly, and are frequently drawn in relation to men—all strategies used to both insult and undermine the authority and veracity of political women.⁹

Political cartoons and caricatures are a source often used by historians to understand popular opinion during a given period; as Kemnitz notes, “Not only can cartoons provide insight into the depth of emotion surrounding attitudes, but

⁶ Emily Suzanne Clark, “Religion and Race in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, last modified February 2017, <http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-322>.

⁷ Samuel J. Thomas, “Teaching America’s GAPE (Or Any Other Period) with Political Cartoons: A Systematic Approach to Primary Source Analysis,” *The History Teacher* 37, no. 4 (2004): 425–446.

⁸ Janis L. Edwards, “Drawing Politics in Pink and Blue,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40, no. 2 (2007): 249–253.

⁹ Edwards, 51.

also into the assumptions and illusions on which opinions are formed.”¹⁰ Political cartoons speak to rumors, public opinion and popularly held cultural beliefs, and national relations, making the political cartoon a vital primary source.

Interpretation and Historiography

In their book *Religious Intolerance in America*, John Corrigan and Lynn S. Neal create a collection of various mainline Protestant groups and movements that were, among other things, anti-Catholic. Corrigan and Neal discuss the normalization of anti-Catholic violence in nineteenth-century America, wherein various mobs attacked Catholics and/or their places of worship. As immigration increased, Corrigan and Neal argue, so did religious intolerance: the Catholic population grew dramatically, and American Protestants viewed Catholics as “secretive, conspiratorial, deadly, morally unregenerate, bent on political domination, cruel, duplicitous, and seductive.”¹¹ These beliefs, as well as racist and classist overtones, led to the formation of nativist groups such as the Know-Nothing Party, who pushed for stricter immigration laws.

In *Gender and the American Temperance Movement of the Nineteenth Century*, Holly Berkley Fletcher discusses the power of women in the Temperance movement. Fletcher argues that women took on the role of Crusaders, spearheading a holy and moral war against the consumption of alcohol.¹² Fletcher also argues that the women involved in the Temperance movement laid the groundwork for women’s suffrage, future women’s rights movements, and feminism as we understand it today.

Both books make compelling points, and neither book is “wrong” in its assertions. However, both Fletcher and Corrigan and Neal fail to mention both feminism/women *and* nativism/religious intolerance. In the nineteenth century—as well as today—these two facets of American society were deeply intertwined. Women of the Temperance movement relied on racial and anti-Catholic stereotypes to push their dry agenda, and nativism/anti-Catholicism was subsequently further promoted in the American mind. Examining both nineteenth century feminism and nativism together would lead both scholars to a more nuanced and accurate argument.

Primary Source #1: Uncle Sam’s Lodging-House

¹⁰ Thomas Milton Kemnitz, “The Cartoon as a Historical Source,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1 (1973): 92.

¹¹ *Religious Intolerance in America: A Documentary History*, ed. John Corrigan and Lynn S. Neal (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 18.

¹² Holly Berkley Fletcher, *Gender and the American Temperance Movement of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2008).



This political cartoon, titled “Uncle Sam’s Lodging-House,” was created by Joseph Ferdinand Keppler on June 7, 1882.¹³ This image is ripe with information about popular opinion and nineteenth century nativist sentiment. In this cartoon, the “lodging-house” is grossly overcrowded, with far more foreigners than Americans. Although this in itself would have been an issue to Keppler and other nativists, there is one particularly rowdy guest: the man in the bunk labeled “IRISHMAN.” This man is yelling at Uncle Sam and waking up ENGLISHMAN. IRISHMAN’s brow is low and furrowed, giving him an ape-like appearance. One hand is pointed upward argumentatively while the other is balled into a fist. This fist suggests violence, and his argumentative hand suggests other nativist fears such as immorality, politically conspiratorial, and a threat to the American way. To make matters worse, “NO RENT” is written on the bottom of IRISHMAN’s shoe, reinforcing the classist belief that the Irish who immigrated to the US are poor because they are lazy, refuse to work, feel entitled to various amenities, for example. Last but certainly not least, IRISHMAN has a bottle of alcohol not only in his possession, but in bed with him. The placement of the alcohol suggests sexual immorality as well as a threat to marriage, as many Temperance women warned.

This cartoon exemplifies the fears of nineteenth century American nativists, including but not limited to political upheaval, moral corruption,

¹³ Joseph Ferdinand Keppler, “Uncle Sam’s Lodging-House,” June 7, 1882, http://library.artstor.org/asset/LOCEON_1039797155.

overcrowding, a threat to Americans/the American way of life, laziness/entitlement of foreigners, alcoholism, violence, crime and sexual impurity. This cartoon effectively gets across racist, classist, and anti-Catholic sentiment in a single image.

Primary Source #2: “I cannot tell a lie—I did it with my little hatchet!”

This political cartoon was created by Amelia B. Moore in 1895.¹⁴ This cartoon depicts Carry Nation, an American Temperance activist, in an historical scene—unlike most political cartoons, this cartoon depicts an actual event that took place, rather than an exaggerated, caricatured, personified/anthropomorphized political message.



Carry Nation was a staunch Temperance activist who tried many methods to get men to cease their drinking. She tried praying outside of bars, singing hymns and playing the accordion, but to no avail. Unwilling to simply give up, Nation took the matter into her hands—or rather, to her hatchet. Nation went on a series of rampages, destroying bars with her small hatchet. The aftermath of one such event is depicted in this cartoon.

Carry Nation stands the largest and tallest in the cartoon, proud and unrepentant of her actions. Her arms are crossed, adding to the power of her stance. She holds her hatchet casually but firmly, suggesting her commitment to

¹⁴ Jeff Nilsson and William Allen White, “Who Was Carry Nation?” *The Saturday Evening Post*, last modified December 24, 2015, <http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2015/12/24/history/post-perspective/who-was-carry-nation.html>.

her cause as well as her belief that she had done the right thing. She is well-dressed, modest and fashionable, suggesting that the creator of this piece believes that Nation is not stepping out of her station. Nation's expression is firm and thoughtful as she gazes at her handiwork, her face reminiscent of a mother or grandmother examining a newly completed quilt. Her benevolent expression suggests a sympathetic audience to this scene.

All other people in this image are men, and are drawn at most half her size. The bartender cowers behind the bar, as do the men at the bar's entrance: they recognize her power and their own powerlessness, suggesting that the reader ought to acknowledge Nation's power as well.

This cartoon expresses sympathy with both Nation and the Temperance movement, admiring Nation's actions as well as admonishing the cowardly men who frequent bars.

Conclusion

Throughout the Temperance movement in the United States, Protestant women were hugely influential despite the fact that they were barred from voting or participating in politics in any way. Although a large step forward for American feminism, the Temperance movement was rooted in and relied upon racist and nationalist ideologies, as well as anti-Catholic sentiment. The feminist accomplishments of the Temperance movement were for White, Protestant Christian women, and buttressed existing racist and nativist ideology in the United States.

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