JUNIOR RESEARCH PAPER

In what ways did the early nineteenth-century reform movements for abolition and women's rights illustrate both the strength and weaknesses of democracy in the early American republic?

BLONDER, AMIT
3/30/2015
Mrs. Oedbauer

In a democracy, the power of a nation's government is vested in the people as a whole and adheres to the desires of the common populace. The democratic beginnings of the United States of America have started with the formation of the Articles of Confederation and later the Constitution. During the Constitutional Convention, however, the founding fathers made no mention of slavery or of a guarantee of suffrage and required the Great Compromise of 1788 in order to retain a direct vote of the people through the House of Representatives.[1] Throughout the early nineteenth century, reform movements have tested the strength of the nation's democracy and their power to change the laws, particularly those of abolition and women's rights. The existence of these reform movements have shown that the people could speak publicly on issues they deemed demanded concern, however they faced heavy opposition by those who preferred to stay traditional.[2]

The strength of democracy in the United States was exemplified by the formation of the abolition and women's rights movements. In the abolition movement, reformers could petition, protest, and organize and attracted members of all race, sex, and color. They have also attained a few victories, including the 1808 ban on the slave trade and the prohibition of slavery in certain US territories in the Missouri Compromise of 1820.[3] Many advocators of women's rights were also involved with abolition as the two reform movements intermingled. This induced different opinions which encouraged debate and therefore publicity on the matter. Furthermore, many reformers of women's rights insisted on equal opportunities for education which would allow the

[1] U.S. Const. Accessed March 8, 2015.
[2] Penney, Sherry H., and James D. Livingston. "Lessons about Reform from "A Very Dangerous Woman." *New England Journal Of Public Policy* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 105. *Advanced Placement Source*, EBSCO*host* (accessed January 11, 2015).
[3] Currie, Stephen. *The Quest for Freedom: The Abolitionist Movement*. Detroit: Lucent, 2006. Print.

populace to learn about the importance of these movements and how to join them, increasing the power of democracy.

Reform movements of the early nineteenth century, however, experienced great struggles and depicted the faults in the current state of American democracy. Firstly, abolitionists have resorted to violence, insisting that it was the only way to get their point across. Furthermore, the movement itself was tainted by the very racism and discrimination it was seeking to abolish, as many still scorned the blacks. Indeed, the abolitionists were despised by all parts of the country and faced great dangers in their work. Women also had an arduous ordeal in attempting to break the traditions set in stone of the Cult of Domesticity and the *femme couverte,* which inhibited women from public speaking. Reformers for women's rights were also opposed by many women who only knew this tradition of motherhood and subordination.

The antislavery movement of the early American republic had been around since colonial times and lobbied during the Federal period from 1788 to 1828 to achieve an 1808 ban on the importation of slaves. While slavery seemed to be on the decline, however, in 1819 it was revitalized by cotton plantations, and southerners pushed for Missouri to be admitted as a slave state.[4] This prompted Henry Clay, a gradual emancipationist, to establish the Missouri Compromise of 1820, prohibiting slavery in US territories north and west of Missouri.[5] Furthermore, in the New York State Constitutional Convention of 1821, Federalist politician Peter Jay rose to defend blacks against their complete disenfranchisement in an amendment to

[4] McNeese, Tim. *The Abolitionist Movement: Ending Slavery*. New York: Chelsea House, 2008. Print.
[5] Currie. *The Quest for Freedom: The Abolitionist Movement*.

the New York voting rights, pleading for the equality on which the nation was founded.[6] The constitution's delegates voted down the addition of "white" as a clause of voting, demonstrating that the values of the constitution and the bill of rights still burned strongly within the people. The movement, however, was poorly organized, easily ignored, and beaten back by changes in Southern farming which allowed slave labor to be more efficient and therefore more necessary for the South.[7]

In 1828, however, the antislavery movement completely changed its direction from a mild, peaceful, gently nagging group of Quakers to brash, headstrong champions of abolition with the 76-page pamphlet called *Walker's Appeal*.[8] This inflamed appeal by freedman David Walker bitterly attacked slavery and insisted on violent resistance by the slaves, asserting that it was the only way to get the point across.[9] Such insistence on violence would lead the abolitionist movement to a course of much bloodshed from both sides, leading most Northerners to disclaim abolitionists as radical fanatics and object to their violent tone, and infuriating white Southerners. In turn, abolitionists like John Kenrick would attack gradual emancipationists, or gradualists, who believed that with time, slaves will be educated and masters "righted".[10] Thus, gradualism would be replaced with the more violent immediatism which would depict the flaws of democracy as a peaceful system.

[6] Polgar, Paul J. "'Whenever They Judge It Expedient': The Politics of Partisanship and Free Black Voting Rights in Early National New York." *American Nineteenth Century History* 12, no. 1 (March 2011): 23. doi:10.1080/14664658.2011.559746.
[7] Currie. *The Quest for Freedom: The Abolitionist Movement*.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

The new abolitionist movement was comprised of angry, determined youths who were absolutely certain they were in the right and criticized of being "irresponsible, overzealous, and misguided".[11] They delved into an extremely controversial topic and were condemned for being too radical, and as such were scorned and hated in all parts of the country. William Lloyd Garrison, passionate editor of abolitionist newpaper *The Liberator*, had started off relatively unknown until southerners began attacking him and blaming him for Nat Turner's Rebellion of August 1831, where rebel slaves killed around 60 people.[12] According to historian Aileen Kraditor, abolitionism after 1831 became "a tiny and despised movement" because of its ferocity and aggressiveness.[13] As Southerners were not going to permit interference with their labor and social institution, abolitionist demands were tantamount to supporting the destruction of the Union and rejection of the Constitution, and northern whites saw abolitionists as disruptive and divisive. Therefore, according to historian Benjamin Quarles, the life of an abolitionist became one of "economic reprisals, a freezing of one's credit, a loss of employment, or a blacklisting of one's name," and abolitionists were disowned by their families, faced demands for immediate reparations of loans and endured physical attacks on themselves and their property.[14] The hatred toward abolitionists was so great that anti-abolitionist mobs roamed through many northern towns attacking black property and supporters, mostly from fear of miscegenation, peaking in 1835 with almost four dozen riots against abolitionists, including Garrison.[15] Hence, speaking in

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ferrell, Claudine L. *The Abolitionist Movement*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006. Print.
[13] Ferrell, Claudine L. *The Abolitionist Movement*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006. Print.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

public became a great risk for any reformer, and freedom of speech was taken away by those who disapproved of the speech.

Abolition, however, did demonstrate the effectiveness of a democratic organization of people who wish to change the status quo. In 1832, the New England Anti-Slavery Society was formed by a dozen men, including Garrison and New York businessmen Arthur and Lewis Tappan, which differed from previous groups in that it pushed for the inclusion of blacks in its organization.[16] In December 1833, anti-slavery societies met in Philadelphia to form the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) with 63 delegates, 3 of whom were black and 4 were Quaker women.[17] The delegates created the Declaration of Sentiments, dictating the task of the society to educate the public and achieve conversion through "moral suasion", which spoke to the heart of the people by connecting with their Christian faith and its appeal to equality. The AASS drew members from the middle class with speeches and pamphlets and won over 140,000 members by late 1830s, demonstrating democracy by way of organization by political belief.[18] Abolitionists believed that the problem lay beyond slavery, and it was black inferiority and inequality, but that slavery must first be ended before any progress can be made towards equality.

The reform movement for abolition also illustrated the strength in democracy that was racial diversity. Anyone could join the movement, white or black, male or female, rich or poor, ranging from Midwest evangelicals to New England editors and from daughters of Southern

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

planters to free blacks.[19] Blacks became major parts of the abolitionist movement, as abolitionist papers published speeches, essays, and poems of educated, successful free blacks such as Philadelphia businessman James Forten and eventually Frederick Douglass. These papers "advertised" morality and noted how slavery "robs the slave of all his rights as a man" including "wages, wives, children."[20] Each reformer was a teacher and preacher of morality and rights, and came from many different backgrounds. Black abolitionists believed that giving suffrage to blacks would lead to freedom and equality and tried but failed to get it into the AASS's agenda. Richard Allen, an educated black and founder of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church called blacks to fight for their liberty by petition, protest, and organization, and not resorting to violence.[21]

However, while the blacks attempted to "prove their worth" by advocating education and peaceful organization, there was still racism inside the abolitionist movement, as the white was the manly "intellectual, aggressive, and assertive" and the black was the womanly "emotional, submissive, and peaceful". Furthermore, Virginian John Randolph and Kentuckian Henry Clay believed that removing free blacks to Africa would "rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous portion of it population" while lifting Africa from "ignorance and barbarism".[22] These colonizationists who wanted to ostracize the black inferiority believed that blacks and whites were never going to live together peacefully and formed the American Colonization Society (ACS) in Washington D.C. in December 1816. This program, however, was impractical

[19] Currie. *The Quest for Freedom: The Abolitionist Movement*.
[20] Ferrell. *The Abolitionist Movement*.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

and rejected by blacks, who continued to promote black equality and suffrage, necessary for true democracy.

The abolitionist movement was not only open to all races, but also invited women to boldly attend the AASS organizational meeting and allowed feminist Lucretia Mott to speak there, arguing that the perceived notion of man's superiority to woman came from the Clergy, not the Bible, attacking the status quo as a theocratic instead of a democratic rule.[23] Women had attended the abolitionist movement not only to support the freeing of slaves, but also the rights of women. Reformist Martha Coffin Wright challenged both fronts in her assault against the status quo, earning her label by her conservative neighbors in Auburn, New York as "a very dangerous woman".[24] According to an article in "The Scotsman", Miss Wright in her lectures in the "Free Enquirer" advocated opinions such as those of Mary Woolstoncraft about the rights of her sex, which were admired in the article but condemned for stepping "so far beyond what we consider the proper sphere of female duties, as to become the champion of infidelity".[25] The women's rights movement arose to challenge this thousand-year old tradition of the Cult of Domesticity and the *femme couverte* (covered woman), where a married woman could not sign contracts, had no title to her own earning, property or children, and very rarely was able to be divorced and only for the most flagrant of abuses.[26] The movement began in the British Owenite movement and was brought over to the US by Frances Wright, a leader in Jacksonian workingmen's rights

[23] *The Sun (1837-1987)* (Baltimore, MD). "Another Woman's Rights Convention." August 9, 1848, 1. Accessed January 11, 2015. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[24] Penney, Sherry H., and James D. Livingston. "Lessons about Reform from 'A Very Dangerous Woman.'" *New England Journal of Public Policy* 20, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2005): 105-21. Advanced Placement Source (19889104).
[25] *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh, Scotland). "Miss Wright." October 7, 1829, 1. Accessed January 11, 2015. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[26] Flexner, Eleanor. *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1975. Print.

and the first public figure to advocate women's rights.[27] The women's rights movement, however, did not push for woman suffrage until much later.

It was commonly believed for hundreds of years that the woman's brain was smaller and was thus unfit for education and politics and could only counsel and console the man and serve and support him in his ventures.[28] In the beginning, advocates of women's rights desired education, but not for greater opportunities and independence, rather only for more knowledge so that they can become better mothers and housewives. There were many obstacles, though, to achieving education, and progress was slow, but women slowly gained independence by way of looms. In 1814 the first power-driven loom was run by Deborah Skinner, and by 1817 three looms were being run by Sally Winters, Hannah Borden, and Mary Healy.[29] The looms allowed women to work at home, creating income for the family and challenging the traditional male doctrine of dominance. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 also encouraged westward expansion and with it pushed the frontier of working women, where a woman cannot be idle in a struggling society with a labor shortage.

For some women, though, this wasn't enough, and activists pushed for "total independence", as written by Hannah Mather Crocker in her tract *Observations on the Real Rights of Women* in 1818, where total independence meant for women to be able to get education like that of men.[30] Emma Hart, who grew up gifted with education, realized that women were

[27] DuBois, Ellen Carol. "Outgrowing the Compact of the Fathers: Equal Rights, Woman Suffrage, and the United States Constitution, 1820-1878." *Journal of American History* 74, no. 3 (December 1987): 836-62. Advanced Placement Source (15559140).
[28] Ibid.
[29] Flexner. *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*.
[30] Ibid.

prejudiced against learning higher math and studied the higher subjects by herself so that she may teach new female teachers geometry and trigonometry and such. Furthermore, Oberlin, the first institution to offer women a curriculum remotely comparable to men's, was founded in Ohio in 1833 and graduated Lucy Stone, an outstanding woman's rights speaker, and Antoinette Brown, the first woman minister, however it did not proclaim itself as feminist.[31] The college stayed within the sphere of motherhood and had no intention of giving women greater opportunities or rights, which women will have to fight for.

It is important to realize that not all women wanted equal rights, because tradition was so engrained into society that it is improper or even scandalous for women to publicly express their opinion as they did in the AASS by circulating petitions, publishing articles and books, and delivering speeches.[32] Catherine E. Beecher was one of these women who criticized female reformers, particularly abolitionists, stating that one sex is superior, and the other subordinate. Beecher explains through Christianity that the only power that is lawful to a woman is her "kindly, generous, peaceful and benevolent principles" and that she gains respect by peace and love.[33] The General Association of Massachusetts Congregational Churches also criticizes women who give speeches in their pastoral letters to ministers in 1837, demonstrating the backing of the church in the institution of the tradition of womanhood.[34]

[31] Ibid.
[32] Stalcup, Brenda. *The Women's Rights Movement: Opposing Viewpoints*. 34. San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven, 1996. Print.
[33] Beecher, Catherine Esther. "An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females." 1837. In *The Women's Rights Movement: Opposing Viewpoints*, by Brenda Stalcup, 35-38. San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven Press, 1996.
[34] Ibid.

On the other side, Angelina Emily Grimké, member of the Female Anti-Slavery Society, went on a speaking tour of England with her sister Sarah in 1837 and attracted enormous attention because she was one of the first women to lecture audiences of both sexes.[35] Sarah expressed her contempt of the church in her response to the pastoral letters with her own remarks upon the passages, countering the ever-opposing church. [36] Angelina agitatedly replies to Beecher's viewpoint, stating that woman subordination is without proof and questioning the validity of her interpretation of the Bible and Christianity.[37] Both Beecher and Angelina Grimké refer to Christianity and biblical history for credibility and evidence, suggesting, as implied by Lucretia Mott, that the current democracy was really more of a theocracy, where popular opinion was based on the standing of the church.

The United States is said to be a beacon for democracy, however during the early days of the republic, democracy was weakened by violence and racism, as well as rigid traditionalism. Hate and scorn from the public over the reform movements spurred mobs and attacks on reformers, and the attaining of equal rights would be delayed for many years to come. However, democracy was still aflame, for abolitionists could petition, protest, and organize and had attracted members of all race, sex, and color, and the women's rights movement encouraged education and had intermingled with abolitionists to form a stronger movement. In conclusion, while the country had shaky starts, it always stood on two legs.

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[35] Stalcup, Brenda. *The Women's Rights Movement: Opposing Viewpoints*. 39. San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven, 1996. Print.
[36] Grimké, Sarah Moore. Letter, "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women," 1838. In *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, by Miriam Schneir, 36-48. New York: Random House, 1972.
[37] Grimké, Angelina Emily. Angelina Emily Grimké to Catherine Esther Beecher, "Letters to Catherine E. Beecher, in Reply to 'An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism', Addressed to A.E. Grimké," 1838. In *The Women's Rights Movement: Opposing Viewpoints*, by Brenda Stalcup, 40-45. San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven Press, 1996.

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