Gender and the Public Sphere: Alternative Forms of Integration in Nineteenth-Century America*

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This paper intends to evaluate two competing models of multicultural integration in stratified societies: the “multiple publics” model of Nancy Fraser and the “fragmented public sphere” model of Jeffrey Alexander. Fraser and Alexander disagree on whether or not claims to a general “common good” or “common humanity” are democratically legitimate in light of systemic inequality. Fraser rejects the idea that cultural integration can be democratic in conditions of social inequality, while Alexander accepts it and tries to explain how it may be realized. In order to address this debate, I analyze the cultural foundations of the female-led, maternally themed social movements of nineteenth-century America. The language of these movements supports Alexander’s position over Fraser’s, though it also suggests that Alexander is mistaken in the specifics of his cultural theory of a general and democratic “common good.” While Alexander’s model of integration is structured uniquely by what he and Philip Smith have called “the discourse of civil society,” the evidence suggests a distinctly alternative, equally democratic code at play in this case, which I have labeled a discourse of affection and compassion.

My purpose in this essay is to offer an empirical test case for the abstract theoretical discussions of the public sphere that have been in fashion in the social sciences for the last decade or so. With the fall of socialist and military regimes in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America as well as the cultural “crises” of many liberal democracies, research on the self-governing potential of civil society has grown immensely. This boom has been largely framed by Jurgen Habermas’s belatedly translated Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere ([1962] 1989). Although Habermas has been a central figure in political philosophy for decades, his work has repeatedly been criticized by more sociologically oriented writers for its empirically challenged level of abstraction. However, not only did the historically rich Structural Transformation offer a link between Habermas’s discursive theory of democracy and “real life,” it did so at a time when interest in the political value of public discourse was surging. Nonetheless, even though it has served as a grounding reference point for recent work on the public sphere, Structural Transformation has taken considerable criticism in terms of the accuracy of Habermas’s historical interpretation (Ryan 1990, 1992; Eley 1992; Benhabib 1992; McCarthy 1992). In particular, questions of cultural difference and pervasive social conflict have posed significant obstacles to Habermas’s formulation of a unitary public sphere. In response to these critiques, several political theorists have pointed in different directions as means for negotiating a model of the public sphere that acknowledges both Habermas’s strengths and his weaknesses. However, such outlines have rarely been accompanied by strong empirical support. As a result, in this paper I look to test opposing views on the proper conceptualization of the post-Habermassian public sphere against historical evidence. In particular, I focus on competing directions for improvement recently put forth by two theorists—Nancy Fraser and Jeff Alexander—and on the gendered public sphere of nineteenth-century America.

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Fraser, who describes her theoretical approach as “post-socialist” critical theory, presents the image of a public sphere cut into competing grouped enclaves. These groups, which she sees as distinct publics in and of themselves, form as the result of mechanisms of inequality and domination that are deeply ingrained in modern liberal societies. Because the political culture of contemporary liberal societies is so skewed by power hierarchies, Fraser has little faith in the rhetoric of commonality, universality, and solidarity that is typically found in these public spheres. On the other hand, Alexander, whose theoretical background is in the neofunctionalist school that he helped define in the 1980s, offers a model in which general solidarity does not seem to be strictly dependent on power structures. In direct opposition to Fraser, Alexander claims that processes of democratic expansion can only happen to the extent that members of different groups or publics find symbolic constructs of commonality and continuity that they share. Moreover, he claims to have isolated the sacred language of commonality and solidarity that corresponds to the symbolic ideal of democracy—what he and Philip Smith have called “the discourse of civil society” (Alexander and Smith 1993). In his view, it is through the creative and continued negotiation with this discourse that legitimate democratic dialogues of unity, recognition, and integration may emerge. Although one author tends to focus more on the conflictual nature of public dialogue and the other on its potential for solidarity, let me underscore that neither presents a one-dimensional perspective. Both offer nuanced, multilayered models of the public sphere that attempt to encapsulate both conflict and recognition, both the reality of inequality and the potential for integration. Together, Fraser and Alexander present the strongest examples to date for empirically rich specifications of the public sphere that try to grapple with the cultural dynamics required for legitimate democratic association.

As these two scholars try to include both conflict and consensus in the public sphere concept, I have tried to locate a historical instance of expanded political integration that speaks to the tensions between their approaches. As is well known, the conventional wisdom of nineteenth-century American culture designated a very strict gendered division of social and economic life. The ideal family was the conjugal family, whose male head represented the interests of the entire family in public life. The female, in contrast, was to remain silent in virtually all public arenas. However, over the course of the century, women slowly but forcefully entered into the political public sphere through a series of maternally themed political associations. Through such social movements as the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening, the moral reform campaigns, the temperance crusade, and the abolition movement, women were able to translate the popular emphasis on the importance of motherhood onto the national stage. However, this civic participation proved volatile, as many argued that such political action betrayed the domestic boundaries of “woman’s sphere.” Supporters and critics heatedly went back and forth on what became known as “the woman question”: What should be the public role of women in American society in light of the alleged limitations of womanhood? Through both their actions and their words, the women reformers of the nineteenth century argued that they should be integrated into the political arena, that their influence should directly affect public policy.

While it is true that others have presented critiques and outlines for conceiving the public sphere, Fraser’s and Alexander’s works are the most conducive to this study. Other work along these lines has tended either to focus more narrowly on the institutions of civil society (Putnam 1993, 2000), to reiterate the general Habermassian line of trusting communicative action as the means to democratic publicity (McCarthy 1992; Cohen and Arato 1995), or to present thoughts on the public sphere in terms so general as not to be of much use as a concrete sociological model (Melucci 1996). More directed engagements with the empirical implications of the Habermassian approach, even when very successful, have usually not been accompanied by a generalized theoretical framework for reconceptualizing the democratic public sphere (Landes 1988). All in all, Fraser and Alexander provide the strongest examples to date that this author is aware of for sociological inquiry into the proper conceptualization of the liberal public sphere.
In this sense, we have a case of expanded incorporation into the public that, as I hope to show, is peculiar enough in its specifics to shed significant light on the competing approaches to the public sphere.

In the last 30 years, as interest in social history led to a veritable explosion of research into American gender history, the developments of these movements have been well documented. In this paper, I make no claims to add any significant historical research to this still growing mountain of scholarship. Instead, I use the general but nonetheless consistent trends of gendered politics in the nineteenth century to make my theoretical case. These trends are overwhelmingly accepted by gender historians, so much so that they have come to be repeated as a matter of course throughout the literature. As a result, if the select quotes presented here do not constitute a “thick description” of each element of nineteenth-century maternal politics, it is not for lack of available resources. It is a choice of presentation, made in the interest of both space and readability. My focus here is not on the development of each movement per se but on the notion that together they represent a general expansion of participation into the public sphere by a previously marginalized group in which the specific cultural identity of that group is not lost.

In the end, while each author offers a compelling argument, I find both incomplete. Briefly stated, I conclude that the lack of Fraser’s model to appreciate universal forms of solidarity is her theoretical undoing, for there is a clear symbol of civic unity that ran through the negotiation of the increased publicness of women’s sphere. For his part, Alexander fares only slightly better. To his credit, he is able to construct a model by which universal codes of democracy can be “self-transforming” so that they include new social groups without necessarily subjecting them to mechanisms of assimilation. However, his formulation is limited because in his model the only code that may serve this purpose on a universal platform is the discourse of civil society. The civic associations of motherhood that flowered in the public sphere throughout the nineteenth century used a discourse that is analytically distinct from that of civil society but that is nonetheless universal in nature. This is a code of affection and nurture that this history suggests is just as central to democracy as the code of civil society. It is true that historically the characteristics of compassion and affection have been associated with femininity and with private life. However, as this history shows, the generalizability of its referents provides the same self-transforming potential that Alexander demonstrates in the discourse of civil society. With this in mind, I conclude with general suggestions on how to model the relationship between civility and affection into an improved understanding of the dynamics of the democratic public sphere.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE: A NEW VOCABULARY FOR UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY

As a means of defining the public sphere, Habermas explains that “[t]he subject of this publicity is the public as carrier of public opinion” ([1962] 1989:2). The sociological foundations of the public sphere, then, are the arenas to which people come to express and create collective opinion. This process has particular interest from a democratic perspective, since democracy requires that political authority be a reflection of the public will. Because of the importance of public opinion to democratic political legitimacy, Habermas has spent most of his theoretical life trying to conceptualize models of collective will formation that are fundamentally democratic (1984, 1990, 1996, 1998a). His reasoning has been that if the process of constructing public opinion is truly democratic, then the content of its result is politically legitimate.
Habermas's communicative approach is based on the attempt to ground democratic legitimacy in the rules and procedures of public debate rather than the content of the debate itself. In doing so, he has self-consciously hoped to get beyond the transcendental notions of democratic citizenship that typified Kantian political philosophy. The argument at the core of this “deliberative ethics”—that all people have potentially equal abilities for communication—does not rely on any metaphysical idealism about what is right and wrong. Therefore, deliberative politics leaves more potential room for ideological differences to be negotiated in the field of democratic communicative exchange (Habermas 1992a; Calhoun 1992). In this way, Habermas attempts to supersede the long-held argument of critical theorists that because modernist aspirations cling to unitary notions of metaphysical “truth,” they have been no more than a means of dominating the “other” and silencing cultural difference. Since cultural differences do not change the fundamental formalistic structures of democratic communication, Habermas (1998b) argues, deliberative politics may be a strong foundation for a true multicultural and open democracy.

While the Habermassian perspective has gained increasing popularity in political philosophy, historians and sociologists have long been frustrated with its overly abstract formulation—a problem that has even befuddled Habermas at times. With the belated translation of Structural Transformation, however, English-speaking readers were finally given a glimpse into what Habermas believed to be the historical origins and empirical processes behind deliberative democracy. Taking late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England as his model case, Habermas argues that the development of the egalitarian form of communication—which he here calls “rational-critical communication”—grew out of the salons and coffeehouses of bourgeois society. Here people of different class and status backgrounds came together to discuss the relative merits of cultural objects. The end result of this type of debating process is to arrive at a consensus that is based on “the authority of the better argument” and that therefore excludes any “external” pressures such as coercion or status distinctions ([1962] 1989:36). In order to eliminate such potential contaminants to argument-based authority, rational-critical communication demands a series of necessary preconditions to be legitimate. These include the “bracketing” of the status-based particularities of the participants and an equal opportunity for each to speak and plead his or her case.

According to Habermas, the Reform Bill of 1832 in England and the subsequent establishment of British government in the image of liberal political philosophy instituted this form of communication on a national political stage for the first time in Europe. To be sure, this institutionalization was achieved under the cultural hegemony of the early nineteenth-century capitalist bourgeoisie. As a result, it was initially highly elitist and exclusionary along classist, gendered, and racist lines. Nonetheless, argues Habermas, the foundations of this public sphere remain universal because they are communicative. Any individual or group may argue for continued incorporation into the decision-making process simply by demonstrating their ability to reason and to express their point of view. This is the self-transforming quality of the bourgeois public sphere. Because consequent generations of previously excluded groups would display their abilities for rational-critical thought and debate, this public sphere “could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique” (Habermas [1962] 1989:37).

In 1998, Habermas came to UCLA in order to give a talk on his projections for the possibilities of democratic solidarity arising from the newly formed European Union. After the talk, in a more intimate question and answer session put together for students of sociology at UCLA, one graduate student asked Habermas if his concepts of “lifeworld” and “system”—terms that he has used to specify different fields of the public sphere—were intended as purely analytical terms or as empirically specific social practices and spaces. After having thought about this a moment, Habermas smiled and said “Yes . . . well, I suppose I left sociology too early on in my career.” He was himself not quite sure of the answer.
With an empirically grounded Habermassian text to finally sink their teeth into, researchers have examined these sociological foundations and found them lacking. More specifically, historians and political theorists have argued that rational-critical communication is not as universal and politically neutral as Habermas suggests. They argue first that the idea of bracketing social differences is a myth that serves to hide the very deep and real social and cultural differences between groups. Second, they claim that the liberal model of democratic association is not the only such version and that there are other ways to interact on democratic terms. In each case, the implication is that the bourgeois public sphere is a mechanism that hides differences and alternatives for political discourse, all the while claiming to be a universal model of democracy.

In this paper, I focus on the specific problem that gender difference poses for the Habermassian model of the public sphere. While the idea that males and females have different modes of being is not a new one, the exact outline of a sociologically rich model of the “female public sphere” may not be intuitively clear. However, gender historians have filled this void to a large extent by documenting the particular circumstances of the female experience in Western history. Perhaps the historian who has done the most to specify the dynamics of the female mode of public action, at least with regard to nineteenth-century America, is Mary Ryan (1981, 1982, 1990, 1992, 1997). In her works, Ryan paints a portrait of distinctly female forms of public action in the nineteenth century, forms that I will explore in greater detail below. According to Ryan, these were situated completely outside the formal communicative boundaries of the American public sphere and substantively focused on topics particular to issues of womanhood and family. Although women were not presented as equals within the public sphere (neither by men nor by the women themselves), the forms of action that they did undertake should be seen as democratic modes of expression and communication. They were examples of voluntary public agency that strongly influenced the American political process and by Habermas’s definition were certainly a part of the American public sphere. However, Habermas’s model cannot include them, since they certainly do not conform to the qualifications of rational-critical discourse. From this point of view, then, Ryan (1997) sees Habermas’s model as incomplete, if not dangerously masculinist. His allegedly unbiased universal mode of democratic communication is recast as an ideal built by men in their own image and explicitly against the image of women. It is a model that continues to hide domination and mechanisms of exclusion, not in the name of a universal form of reason such as the Kantian model had done but in the name of universal means of communication, debate, and publicity. Finally, because the liberal public sphere demands that the only way for marginalized groups to gain legitimate entrance into it is by adopting its mode of communication, so-called processes of integration are in fact assimilationist and normalizing, rather than being truly democratic.

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1 This line of attack has been made forcefully with respect to class and race as well. For example, Geoff Eley paints a picture of the Jacobin inspired working class public sphere of early nineteenth-century England as one illustration. This working class alternative, according to Eley, had to be suppressed by the bourgeois model in order for the latter to attain the hegemonic position that it currently enjoys (Eley 1992). For an argument on racial differences and the public sphere in the American context, see Dawson (1995) along with the rest of that issue of Public Culture. For a general critique of the idea that difference may be “bracketed,” see Young (1988).

4 Theories of gender difference have a rich history in many disciplines. In the field of psychology, for example, Carol Gilligan’s (1982) famous argument about the difference between male and female modes of thinking is a clear example. In political philosophy, Carole Pateman (1988) has made the argument that the Western notion of citizenship is exclusively male in its construction, since the two models of social relationships on which it is based—one fraternal and one paternal—exclude the specific character of women as social reproducers and embodied selves. However, while these classic works have engendered new fields of scholarly research into gender and gender difference, they remain rather thin sociologically. The empirical individualism of Gilligan’s psychological perspective and the theoretically abstract position of Pateman’s philosophical approach make it difficult to deduce a clear sense of the sociological definition of a “female public sphere.”
In response to critics of his original public sphere model, Habermas concedes the need to include alternative modes of publicity and of public agency in sociological understandings of the public sphere (1992b). However, rather than spell out the contours of such a model, Habermas confines his remarks to the insistence that the social integration necessary for a democratic public sphere will only be found in the inclusionary possibilities of communicative action and the self-transforming nature of deliberative politics. He is unfortunately silent on just how we should reconceptualize the public sphere in order to operationalize these possibilities. In this section, I present the two recent approaches for filling in this theoretical void that will ground the remainder of this paper. The first of these is the “counterpublics” perspective presented by Nancy Fraser (1992). Like the work of Habermas, the majority of Fraser’s work is distinctly normative. Politically, Fraser is dedicated to what she refers to as “radical democracy” (1997:173). She uses this phrase to refer to a two-sided demand for equality: a commitment to the recognition of cultural difference and the leveling of systemic socioeconomic inequalities. She repeatedly has claimed that most contemporary forms of oppression involve a mixture of these two axes of domination and exclusion and that any conception of democracy must appreciate this to be successful. Indeed, her primary criticism of Habermas is that his theory of communicative politics goes too far in dissociating processes of recognition from mechanisms of social inequality.

In stratified societies, argues Fraser, the “basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination” (1992:112). As a result, the means of communication and interpretation are hierarchically divided along group lines such as class, race, and gender. She concludes that “the bourgeois public sphere was never the public” and that the grouped differences in personal experience, social dialogue, and public institutions lead to a series of symbolically unique and distinct public spheres (1992:115). Moreover, because they are the result of social inequality, the relationship between these spheres is essentially conflictual. “[L]ike it or not,” she claims, in stratified societies, “subaltern counterpublics stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics” (1992:128). Hence, the multiple publics model posits a Gramscian relationship between the various public spheres, whereby a dominant (read “patriarchal, eurocentric, and bourgeois”) public sphere suppresses the alternative, subaltern counterpublics of various subordinated social groups. For the subaltern groups, their counterpublics provide resources of power for their struggle against the dominant groups. “On the one hand,” writes Fraser, “they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (1992:124).

Counterpublics remain alienated from the dominant public because it is the latter that sets the political agenda at most levels of the public sphere. Even though this agenda is called “the common agenda,” it is in fact a dominating agenda that serves to perpetuate and reproduce the subordinated and silent status of subaltern groups. Because the bourgeois public sphere assumes that it represents “common humanity” as such, it tends to concern itself only with issues that appear to pertain to an all-encompassing “we.” As a result, claims of self-interest and group interest can never even make it on the agenda because they are (ironically) seen as divisive and exclusionary. In such an environment, “[a]ny consensus that purports to represent the common good in this social context should be regarded with suspicion, since this consensus will have been reached through deliberative processes tainted by the effects of dominance and subordination” (Fraser 1992:131). Therefore, she reasons, public opinion and the political authority that rests on it remain tainted
by relations of domination and subordination, privilege and suppression. So long as the stratified socioeconomic order produces and reproduces subaltern publics, political dialogue based on cultural differences remains largely ineffective, illusory, and normalizing. Thus, she concludes, as she has repeated elsewhere, “cultural differences can be freely elaborated and democratically mediated only on the basis of social equality” (Fraser 1997:186). In socially stratified societies, she argues, the best we can do is increase the terrains of subaltern publics, so that the concentration of power of the dominant public may erode or be dispersed.

But if the agenda is set by ruling social groups so that it excludes private interest issues from public deliberation, and if the relationship between subaltern publics and the dominant public is so profoundly conflictual, how is it that some private issues have in fact been discussed and indeed embraced in many liberal democracies? Fraser herself admits that the opportunity “for minorities to convince others that what in the past was not . . . a matter of common concern should now become so” is inherent in the concept of democratic publicity (Fraser 1992:124). Indeed, she uses feminism as an example of such cross-sphere dialogue. “Until quite recently,” she explains, “feminists were in the minority in thinking that domestic violence against women was a matter of common concern. . . . Eventually, after sustained discursive contestation, we succeeded in making it a common concern” (1992:129). However, while she stresses the conflictual nature of bringing new matters to public attention, Fraser does not explain just how such contestation may happen. Having outlined a model of the public sphere that silences minority issues, she says little about how political integration of marginalized groups may occur in a socially stratified environment.

To be sure, Fraser has not always overlooked such issues. Quite to the contrary, much of her work has been an investigation into the forms of recognition and integration that most strongly bring about radical democracy (Fraser 1997:11–40, 173–88). Here she has questioned which model of integration and which approach to cultural difference are most fruitful. With regard to gender, Fraser argues that the multicultural approach of “difference” feminists is problematic since it leaves intact the mistaken assumption that men and women are truly different (1997:175–80). She claims that a true equality will only be reached through a deconstructive approach that seeks to untangle the misrecognition of gender identity. This echoes her more general normative claim that identity movements tend to make a mistake when they avoid problematizing the stability of group identities themselves. While Fraser’s argument may indeed spell out the most fruitful type of integrative politics, it does not clarify the means by which such politics may proceed. Though she spells out the need for integrative politics as well as the type of integration she supports, there is no explanation of just how subaltern groups may advance their cause. Certainly, because she is a political philosopher, it is arguably outside of her disciplinary interest to systematize the processes of political contestation in the public sphere. Yet, if we wish to investigate the utility of the criticism she has made of Habermas’s work and, more generally, its potential contribution to a sociology of the democratic public sphere, then we must realize this void and look to fill it. For our purposes, then, Fraser offers a sketch of the public sphere that appreciates its hidden biases and constitutive inequalities, at least in socially stratified societies. Moreover, within this point of view discourses of commonality and solidarity that cut across the particularities of different spheres are politically dubious if not dangerous. Although she does not systematize the process by which marginalized groups gain recognition or power, she certainly implies that such a process would not involve the unitary rhetoric of “common humanity.” If it did, then such a process would be assimilative and normalizing rather than a true source of the recognition of difference.
In contrast to Fraser’s “multiple publics” point of view, Alexander (1998) argues for what he calls a “fragmented public sphere” model. At the heart of Alexander’s approach is the insistence that even in highly differentiated, socially hierarchical societies, all individuals retain egalitarian status within an overarching sphere of “common humanity” that he calls the civil sphere or civil society. For Alexander, the inclusive potential inherent in civil society is what enables the cross-sphere, generalized solidarity that Fraser denies. In a series of related articles, Alexander (1991, 1996, 1998, forthcoming) has argued that the trick is not to see the two positions as a zero-sum game. As he puts it, “people can be members of civil society and participants in differentiated social institutions at the same time” (Alexander 1997:132). Alexander (1997) calls this the “dual citizenship” of democratic societies. It is through their potential membership as symbolic equals in civil society, according to Alexander, that once excluded or marginalized groups may gain incorporation and recognition in the public sphere. This is in fact similar to the position to which Habermas has stuck from the beginning: that the democratic public sphere presupposes a civil realm of which all are members. The crux of Alexander’s argument, however, rests on his ability to explain exactly that which both Habermas and Fraser omitted: how it is that people successfully argue that they are in fact members of the symbolic community of “common humanity” without losing sight of their distinct cultural identities. He does this by reconceptualizing the dynamics of inclusion into a cultural, rather than a rationalized, communicative framework.

Capitalizing on Durkheimian and semiotic themes, Alexander argues that the ideal of democracy and democratic association constructs a binary normative code of sacred and profane characteristics. Put differently, “democracy” as a symbolic construct prescribes an array of human and social characteristics that are “democratic” and others that are “counter-democratic.” Along with Philip Smith, Alexander has outlined this code and named it the “discourse of civil society” (Alexander and Smith 1993). This discourse details a host of qualities that the democratic individual must possess in order to be considered deserving of membership in the civil community. Such characteristics include, among others, being “rational,” “reasonable,” “autonomous,” and “independent.” Conversely, the opposites of these terms—“irrational,” “passion-driven,” and “dependent”—are presented as the profane qualities that signify a person as being undeserving of membership. A similar set of characteristics exists for public institutions and social relationships to meet in order for them to be seen as democratically legitimate. For example, the democratic legitimacy of social institutions is divided along lines of being rule regulated versus arbitrarily regulated, impersonal versus personal, and egalitarian versus hierarchical. Having outlined the discourse of civil society, Alexander argues that processes of incorporation and recognition in the democratic public sphere are the product of a cultural “translation game” in which marginalized groups are able to identify themselves with the democratic characteristics of the civil sphere. This, according to Alexander (1998), is the only way that true acceptance and recognition can be attained, since it is the definitive means of building democratic solidarity. To return to Fraser’s example of domestic violence, Alexander’s model implies that feminists were able to thematize domestic violence as a public concern.

5The theoretical foundation for Alexander and Smith’s outline of the discourse of civil society is a perspective that Alexander has generally labeled “late-Durkheimian.” Borrowing from the moralizing duality found in Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1911), Alexander and Smith focus on the binary nature of normative reasoning that was so central in the functionalist work of Talcott Parsons. However, Alexander leaves the teleological baggage of Parsons’s modernization theory behind in his elaboration of how the discourse of civil society works. The emphasis on the semiotic malleability of language, which I review below, reflects an embrace of the insights of the cultural turn, an embrace that has equally been made by Fraser. Alexander and Smith explain this foundation in their article. For an elaboration of Fraser’s adoption of a “discursive” or “linguistic” perspective, see Fraser (1989:1–13).
by showing that such forms of assault betray the autonomy and independence that women, as members of the civil community, rightly deserve. Success is based on the group’s ability to move the gravity of their political argument “from particular institutions to a position inside civil society itself” (Alexander 1996:230).

However, if recognition is based on the successful connection by outside groups with a model of civility constructed by the dominant groups in their own image, is such acceptance still merely the result of a process of assimilation, the very silencing of true differences that Fraser was trying to highlight? After all, the terms that Alexander and Smith spell out as the allegedly universal references of civility have historically functioned to create masculinist, classist, ethnocentric, and heterosexist biases into the ideal of “common humanity.” Indeed Alexander shows that he is aware of this, though he claims that affiliation with the discourse of civil society does not have to be a normalizing process. In order to explain this dynamic, Alexander (forthcoming) has posited three ideal-typical means of incorporation into the American public sphere: assimilation, ethnic hyphenation, and multiculturalism. Each of these is a process of negotiating symbolic representation through the discourse of civil society, but only the first two are inherently normalizing processes that hold on to the previous dominant/subordinate relations of power. In democratic multiculturalism, according to Alexander, stigmatized groups are able to gain recognition and acceptance without “closeting” their particularistic identities while still constructing a referent of solidarity with the previously core members of civil society. This hinges on showing that cultural variability, rather than being an alienating, utterly “different” mode of being, is in fact simply an alternate manifestation of the characteristics of civil society. As Alexander puts it, previously stigmatized social differences such as “[r]ace, peripheral national origins, marginalized religions, subordinated genders and repressed sexualities . . . become reinterpreted as representing variations on the ‘sacred’ qualities of civility” (forthcoming). In essence, they are able to change the valence of their “polluted” symbolic construction—as “passionate” women, “unthinking” workers, “irrational” Other—by arguing that those forms of difference—femininity, labor, or general Otherness—are in truth part of the common framework of civil society. They may show that “reason,” “independence,” or “autonomy” may wear male or female, straight or gay, black or white clothes, all of which are “civil.” As a result, Alexander claims, “in multiculturalism, the universal is particularized” (Alexander forthcoming). When marginalized groups show that their stigmatized qualities are in fact alternatives on the sacred themes of civil society, the language of civility is itself reconstructed. The basic semiotic blueprint does not change, but the meanings associated with its elements do. In this way, Alexander explains the empirical mechanics of the self-critique and self-transformation of the public sphere that have been so central to Habermas.

We have, then, two opposing visions of the public sphere that try to get beyond the problems of Habermas’s original model. Both accept the critique made against Habermas that there are alternative models of the public sphere that vary from the bourgeois conception. With this in mind, they try to answer the same questions: How can these alternative discourses engage the dominant ideology of the public sphere without being silenced or assimilated? In what ways may they serve as the means for a truly multicultural, democratic incorporation of marginalized groups into political life? In Fraser’s view, true incorporation of cultural difference cannot happen in stratified societies. Rather, members of subaltern publics try to combat the dominant one for expanded rights, resources, and power. The claim to common ground across these publics is not to be trusted since it is usually defined by members of the core group and has only their interests in mind. For Alexander, true integration is indeed possible through increased incorporation, even in socially stratified societies. Such integration may only be accomplished through a common normative
framework that can be shared by “core” and “outside” groups. This common framework is represented by the characteristics of civility as described by the discourse of civil society.

As I claimed in my opening discussion, I believe the history of the nineteenth-century incorporation of women into the American public sphere sheds light on the tension between these two perspectives. It provides us with an example of a marginalized public that gained increased integration into the general public sphere and did so without any loss of its own particularized identity. Over the course of the nineteenth century, a series of women-led organizations pushed into American public life by arguing that the “domestic” sphere of women had publicly relevant dimensions to it. Fraser herself cites this “counter civil society of alternative, woman-only, voluntary associations” as a premier example of a countermarginalized public sphere that struggles with a dominant male public for recognition and rewards (Fraser 1992:115). For Fraser’s model to hold, the process by which women gained the right to have domestic concerns be treated as common concerns would have to reflect a deep measure of symbolic and communicative conflict and little symbolic basis for commonality between this sphere and the male-dominated public sphere. Although Fraser did not give a complete account of how to operationalize such struggles, perhaps the historical evidence would point us in such a direction. To the extent that domesticity was “made” into a common concern by these associations, Fraser’s model would be supported, and in the details, we would be able to fill in the spaces that Fraser left blank. As far as Alexander’s perspective is concerned, this history provides us with a case of incorporation that is neither based on assimilative nor hyphenated models of citizenship. Rather, because the “primordial” qualities of woman were left largely intact in the years between 1820 and 1860, one would have to expect that the multicultural mode of incorporation that Alexander offers would be the best explanatory fit for understanding this history. For Alexander’s model to hold, one would expect that nineteenth-century female integration into the public sphere would be predicated on the connection of womanhood, in some form or another, with the sacred side of the discourse of civil society. As we examine the symbolic and rhetorical processes of antebellum America, we should be able to see which theorist provides the better fit.

TRUE WOMANHOOD AND REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD: AN ALTERNATIVE MODE OF PUBLICNESS?

Throughout the first 60 years of the nineteenth century, the overwhelmingly dominant mode of representing the “good” American female was the construct of the “true woman.” Even today, Barbara Welter’s (1966) classic account of “true womanhood” remains its definitive explanation. According to Welter, this construct was the result of a complex interplay of religious and civic ideologies in the new republic and was comprised of four primary characteristics: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (1966:151). By virtue of her piety and purity, “woman” was represented as the morally superior sex. Her “tenderness,” “infinite kindness,” and “untainted spirit” would be a guiding light in the harsh industrial realities of the new republic. Through good domesticity, “woman” was to construct a nurturing environment for the education of children and a warm shelter of compassion and care for the man of the house. Finally, since “woman” was so connected

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6 Because Fraser herself uses the nineteenth-century female public sphere as an example of a subaltern public, I believe it is fair to assume that she believes it fits the theoretical framework that she presents. Without this, it might be objected that nineteenth-century gender difference does not fit into the type of public sphere model that Fraser intends or that their social movements should not be seen as an example of incorporation. Indeed, she has specifically said that there are “different kinds of differences” and that we have to approach them on a case-by-case basis (Fraser 1997:202–04). However, one must assume that gender difference fits her intended model, since she uses it as a constitutive example.
to nurturing, to compassion, and to love, she was easily swayed by emotion and sensitivities. As a result, she could not be trusted to reason independently and was hopelessly vulnerable in the conflict-ridden “jungle” of the commercial world. While “woman’s sphere” was an undoubtedly sacred national institution, women were to remain submissive in public life, reverently obeying the decisions of men. Her very source of strength in “private” matters was her Achilles heel in the public sphere. According to Welter, true womanhood was such a strong national image that, “[i]f anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex virtue which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic” (1966:152).

Since Welter’s pathbreaking work, a series of studies has deepened our understanding of how the ideal of true womanhood functioned throughout the nineteenth century. Historians have shown how its realization in American society was splintered along the lines of class, race, and region. Nonetheless, scholars agree that with very few exceptions, women and men throughout the country accepted the image of true womanhood as the normative ideal, even if—as was quite often the case—they did not have the means to live up to it. The symbol of true womanhood reigned supreme throughout popular literature, national political symbolism, and texts for child education, as well as in the many weekly magazines of literary society that were so popular in the early nineteenth century. Moreover, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gender was such a definitive dimension of self-conception for women that the construct of true womanhood was perpetually on the minds of women, if not by choice, then by necessity.

The irony of nineteenth-century gender history is that it was the same pacifying ideal of womanhood that would eventually usher women into public life as reformers and activists. In 1778, “founding father” Benjamin Rush declared that “Virtue, Virtue alone . . . is the basis of a republic,” expressing a growing consensus of the early republic (Norton 1980:242). Since women were the untainted possessors of virtue, it would be their duty to ensure that American society would remain as pure as women were. In Rush’s view, women would ensure a virtuous America through the proper care and education of children and their ever-patient womanly influence on their husbands. By 1820, the political connection between women and the nation was a commonly accepted ideal, an ideal that Linda Kerber (1980) famously dubbed “republican motherhood.” The conspicuous characteristics of the role of the republican mother were that while it gave women the publicly significant responsibility of framing the national character, it did not challenge the allegedly private domain of “woman’s sphere.” As Kerber explains, “[h]er political task was accomplished within the confines of her family. The model republican woman was a mother” (1980:228). Just as the image of true womanhood reigned supreme for most of the century, republican motherhood was an equally hallowed symbol in the popular consciousness. According to Kerber, “[m]otherhood was discussed almost as if it were a fourth branch of government, a device that ensured social control in the gentlest possible way” (1980:200). Moreover, like true womanhood, republican motherhood was overwhelmingly embraced as the normative ideal to which all women should aspire, if they possibly could (Bloch 1978; Norton 1980; Zagarri 1992).

Other works have outlined the development of true womanhood in the literature, politics, and popular culture of postrevolutionary America. See, for example, Cott (1977), Baym (1978), Kelly (1983), and Bloch (1987). Working class women could seldom afford the luxuries necessary to live up to the nineteenth-century ideal, as many had to work or had no means to construct an acceptable domestic environment in the home. Slave women and even freed black women were seen as largely excluded from the ideal, since the institution of slavery undermined femininity. For the relationship between the cult of domesticity and class, see Stansell (1987), White (1987), and Stevenson (1996). In addition, research has shown that the image of domesticity varied regionally as well, with both southern and western states offering a variant of the ideal. See, for example, Scott (1970), Jeffrey (1979), Clinton (1982), and Genovese (1988). For a comparative analysis that cuts across class, race, and region, see Pease and Pease (1990).
As the nineteenth century progressed, the overlap between motherhood and nationhood granted women an increasing means for direct action in the public sphere. In order to ensure that American society was truly virtuous, women started to disseminate opinions in print, effect legislation, and demonstrate publicly on behalf of “virtuous” causes. Such causes included issues like religious revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, the antiprostitution position of the Moral Reform movement, the abolition movement, married women’s property rights, labor reform, and temperance. The consistent rhetorical trends of these social movements show a distinctly feminine form of public discourse. The most common rhetorical position involved the protection and proper education of children. This was the most important task of the republican mother, and it ran through the rhetoric of all of the female benevolent and reform organizations. The argument usually presented a picture of helpless children whose minds were corrupted by an evil society, whose hearts were broken by absent or abusive fathers, and who desperately needed the nurturing guidance of virtuous parents. At times, this theme became a cause on its own, such as in the female-run Children’s Aid Societies. However, even when the cause was not explicitly for children, this rhetoric was always present. As the Seventh National Temperance Convention claimed in 1873,

"Our mission is not merely to save the drunkard, but to save every boy and girl from the drunkard’s sin and shame. . . . Our literature is not to be the life-buoy flung out to the man already sinking in the death tide, but the baby-tender, if you will, to train and strengthen the least of the little ones. (Sanchez-Eppler 1995:11)"

This type of “protect the children” imagery was presented with every public action for change led by women under the republican motherhood symbol.

A second common theme was the need for shelter and protection for women. In the popular mind, women’s individual capacities for self-defense and economic autonomy were the same as they were for children: women were helpless. When they were taken advantage of by drunk husbands, when their social condition turned them to prostitution, when they were seduced by a predatory male, or when slavery destroyed their family structure and required them to perform strenuous physical labor, women played the role of victim in the same way that children did. The injustice here results from the denial to the victimized women of the possibility to live up to the ideal of true womanhood. In what was to become a typical rhetorical device for thematizing the contradictions between slavery and womanhood, the “Ladies Department” of William Garrison’s abolitionist Liberator pictured on its masthead a female slave in chains over the caption “Am I not a Woman and a Sister?” (Venet 1991:3).

Finally, republican mothers harped on the need to lessen if not eradicate the licentious and vice-ridden characteristics of males. In keeping with the submissive nature of women thematized in the cult of domesticity, reform associations overwhelmingly blamed the presence of moral evil on the unchecked ambitions, aggressions, and libidos of men. Female reformers argued against the double standard of a culture that increasingly ignored male

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9 In the temperance movement, for example, the image of children regularly abused, either physically or sexually, was a common trope in the popular literature (Sanchez-Eppler 1995). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s overwhelmingly popular Uncle Tom’s Cabin depicted a slave woman who chose to kill her own children rather than see them sold and taken from their family. Moral reformers repeatedly argued that a licentious father or public sphere corrupted the minds of young men and destroyed the dignity of America for generations to come (Ryan 1982, esp. chap. 4, 1981:119–20). A similar argument was made in the fight for child custody rights for mothers (Ashby 1997).

10 For a discussion of how intemperance was represented as denying women their just status as republican mothers, see Pleck (1987). For the same dynamic in abolitionism, see Yellin and Van Horne (1994), Venet (1991), and Jeffrey (1998).
immorality yet demanded it from females to the extreme. In fact, throughout the century the image of the aggressive, self-interested male grew to be familiar and largely accepted in America (Carnes 1989; Carnes and Griffen 1990; Kimmel 1995; Rotundo 1990). Western culture had long posited the male as naturally libidinal and passion driven. In both philosophy and religion, thinkers sought mechanisms for repressing these dangerous tendencies. However, in the context of the nineteenth century, increasing industrialization and the ideology of the free market served to construct an arena in which ambition, competition, and strict self-interest were not only tolerated but encouraged. To be sure, the “good” American male used his intelligence and reason to moderate and control his aggression. But along the way the public sphere became a more dangerous and enticing arena in which men’s baser tendencies were always at play. Practices that were once strictly immoral were now dismissed as an unfortunate consequence of modern society. For the republican mothers of America, however, such loose morality would not be tolerated. As the moral conscience of the country, they condemned the habits of male “seducers,” “predators,” and “drunkards” who lived off the suffering of wives and children. Accordingly, the stated aims of the New England Female Moral Reform Society were

...to guard our daughters, sisters, and female acquaintances from the delusive arts of corrupt and unprincipled men. . . . (and) to bring back to the paths of virtue those who have been drawn aside through the wiles of the destroyer. (Hobson 1987:55)

Although I have only provided a glimpse of the themes of the maternal politics campaigns, let me emphasize the extent to which they pervaded the rhetoric of female associations throughout antebellum America. The conceptual thread between them was simple: Female-led reform movements were acts of compassion for society’s powerless victims, with whom the true woman could not help but sympathize. Guided by this single principle, organizations would branch out beyond their original single-issue domain into other terrains of social maternity, such as the shelters for the poor organized by the moral reform societies (Smith-Rosenberg 1971). The thematic unity and specificity of this array of institutions support the view that this constituted an alternate public. This public was “female” both in terms of its membership and in cultural content. Moreover, it was directly oriented toward influencing general public opinion and therefore constitutes a public sphere in the Habermassian sense.

Not only was the thematic content of the female public sphere unique, but the manner in which it existed in public life was as well. Because they were excluded from direct participation in the formal institutions of politics, women used alternative ways to “be” public. For example, in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening, when common ideology had it that “God has not made it their duty to lead, but to be in silence,” women found “silent” ways to affect public life (Ryan 1981:76–88). They used measures such as continuous public prayer, weeping, and their simple presence in public places to compel men, often out of guilt or sympathy, to alter their behavior or, indeed, to join the movement. Missionary societies used petitions and circulars to ask for financial or political support, always using a rhetoric designed to elicit sympathy. It seemed that if women could not directly speak unto men with discursive authority, there were a handful of other options available.11

11 Certainly, there were exceptions in which women were boldly active in public discussion, church decision making, and revivalist sermons. For an account of direct female publicity in the Second Great Awakening, see Lawes (2000). In fact, Lawes argues that the silencing of women throughout the movement is exaggerated in the literature, claiming that it was less common in small towns and on farms than in urban environments. However, the overwhelming majority of the literature suggests that by far the typical sentiment toward the character of nonslave women throughout the United States and across class divisions was the silenced version of true womanhood.
By and large, print was to be the dominant mode of publicity used by associations of republican motherhood throughout the century. Each specific maternal cause had at least one primary voice in the print media, usually a weekly periodical such as the Advocate for Moral Reform, the Friend of Virtue, the Permanent Temperance Documents, or the Voice of Industry. In addition, a significant strand of popular literary fiction was written from the motherhood perspective, depicting a series of victims and the need to return moral character to society. Finally, there was one means of text-based action that female associations regularly used that was “inside” the formal mechanisms of government. Female associations sent letters and petitions to governing bodies asking for assistance on such issues as increased spending on expanded female education, and greater property rights for married women. They sent unswerving declarations for the passage of laws against, among other things, slavery, seduction, the solicitation of prostitutes, and public drunkenness. More direct public actions lay in public demonstrations, rallies, strikes, and celebrations, though these nonetheless remain outside the formal institutions of government (Ryan 1990, 1997).

Many associations found ways to use guilt or humiliation to motivate men into acting according to the desired principles by printing lists of known sex offenders as well as lists of the men who donated to their causes. Furthermore, the female associations gained an increasing political power by virtue of the usage of feminine symbolism by the emerging political parties. The heavy usage of motherly and feminine representations in both parties meant that each wanted to assure society at large that it indeed carried the blessings of the republican mothers (Baker 1984). All in all, the “empire of the mother” had a handful of mechanisms for public action that were explicitly designed to directly impact either public opinion or public policy but that remained excluded from many of the formal deliberative processes of political life. This public sphere is one that, certainly by the second wave of the temperance crusade in the 1850s and 1860s, had achieved at the very least a partially institutionalized and routinized integration into the practices of the public sphere. To be sure, women were not members on equal terms with men. But women’s associations had become accepted and respected by most of the population, and the level of direct influence on public affairs was becoming greater and greater.

How are we to understand these processes within a model of the public sphere that explains the relationship between the core publics and more peripheral alternate publics? Since this is certainly not a case of full inclusion or membership in the public sphere as equals, how can we adequately understand the boundaries between this sphere and the public sphere per se? Was the use of republican motherhood a form of contestation through which women forced men to address the female issues of the day, as Nancy Fraser’s typology suggests? Or was it a process of gradual, if limited, connection of women with the democratic characteristics of civility, as Alexander’s model implies? Was there indeed a “common ground” that served as a mechanism of solidarity, and if so, was it in one way or another a representation of the discourse of civil society?

In my view, while both hypotheses can find a measure of support in the history of antebellum maternal politics, neither one provides a fully satisfactory account of the symbolic processes of these movements. On the one hand, Fraser is right to note that any demands for change that come from an alternative public model will be met with contestation and conflict, if not direct suppression and violence. For at almost every step, whenever it seemed that women were attempting to assume an active position of authority over men, they were vehemently challenged by those who believed this departed from “woman’s sphere.” The contradiction between the ideal of true womanhood and the usage of republican motherhood as a means to enter the political public sphere was simple: The symbolic status of women demanded that they enter into public life at the same time that it presented them as incapable of doing so. As a result, the rise of “the empire of the
mother” repeatedly met with resistance from forces that argued that domesticity, submission, and purity should not be sacrificed, even in the name of morality, compassion, and nurture. When moral reformers began their campaign against the sexual double standard and the manipulation of disadvantaged women by sex-driven men, the standard reaction from many men as well as women was one of disapproval. It was not the arguments against prostitution that bothered them. Rather they claimed that the topic itself was simply inappropriate for females to address. According to an 1836 editorial by the New York Herald, such issues “never should be known—never alluded to—never be hinted at in the presence of a virtuous, lovely, and accomplished woman” (Whiteaker 1977:6). The “ugly” side of modern life, though morally problematic, was simply too barbaric for the delicate sensibility of the true woman.

Another common theme was the anger expressed by men over the notion that women could speak unto them in matters of politics. For example, while women’s public speech was common in woman-only organizations, it was not tolerated in the male-led benevolent societies, even when their moral aim was the same. In fact, the first statewide women’s temperance society was founded by a young Susan B. Anthony in 1852, after she tried to speak before a New York temperance convention and was told that the women supporters were there not to speak but to listen and learn (Bordin 1981:5). Female abolitionists, even those arguing exclusively from a motherhood perspective, faced angry hecklers who at times turned into physically threatening mobs (Hansen 1993). As this evidence suggests, the relationship between the sphere of republican motherhood and the general public sphere was largely one of conflict and alienation. Moreover, scholars have suggested that many women grew resentful of their subordinated position in society and a path of life that teased them with a sense of empowerment as girls and then stripped it away once they were married (Epstein 1981; Bowman 1996). Indeed, an entire strand of theorizing about this history has seen the female public sphere as a source of strength and confidence for women, whose increasing social power as mothers bred a network of support and esteem that led to the eventual contestation of all forms of female exclusion.12 This perspective has seen the sphere of republican motherhood as a proto-feminist movement that has come to be referred to as “domestic feminism.” Although scholars have long denied the progressive narrative that sees republican motherhood as one stage in the inevitable development of contemporary feminism, they repeatedly underscore the strength that women developed through the female associations.13 It was an arena that taught women to identify social relationships that they saw as illegitimate and organize to contest them. To the extent that motherhood represented a unique means of empowerment for women, it indeed functioned in the way that Fraser characterized the subaltern publics.

However, it is my argument that Fraser’s implicit connection of these associations with females per se and her subsequent dismissal of any “common” communicative framework oversimplify the matter. To begin with, if public spheres are cut along the lines of social stratification, as Fraser suggests, then one would expect that these female-led associations

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12 The first major text to focus on the female solidarity and empowerment constructed by woman’s sphere is Smith-Rosenberg (1975). Since then a dual approach to the study of separate spheres has developed with some characterizing it as a tool of patriarchal domination while others present it as a source of sisterly empowerment. For a detailed account of the pros and cons of this duality, see the 1980 symposium on gender history in Signs.

13 The origins of liberal feminism as a prominent social movement in the United States remain a somewhat contested topic. The most direct link made between the motherhood movements and the birth of modern feminism comes in studies of women’s involvement in abolition. The link between the condition of the slaves and that of women in society was a common refrain of some female abolitionists such as Sarah and Angelina Grimke, though other female abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe retained a motherhood paradigm. In any case, the rhetoric of abolitionism was used with dramatic effect as a consciousness raising mechanism for early modern feminism, but there is no direct link between republican motherhood and feminism. For a more detailed account, see Lutz (1968), Medler (1977), and Yellin and Van Horne (1994).
constituted a relatively isolated and structural cross-section that was relatively unified ideologically. We would expect to think of it as the “female public sphere” or, at the very least, as the white, middle class, urban, northeast female public sphere. However, the evidence suggests an internal heterogeneity among women, even women of the same class, race, and status positions. Moreover, it suggests a significant amount of alliance and support on the part of men in both of the ideological positions on the proper public boundaries of motherhood. To begin with, many of the most vociferous opponents of the increasingly public nature of the female reform associations were themselves women. These women embraced the ideal of true womanhood as well as the notion of republican motherhood, but they disagreed with the extent to which motherhood should function as a public sphere in the strict sense. Perhaps the most famous example of this ideological position comes from Catharine Beecher, one of the most widely read female writers of the nineteenth century. Beecher was a prolific writer on matters of “woman’s sphere” and was very clear about the proper confines of female influence. As she wrote in a letter urging feminist Angelina Grimké to avoid giving public lectures on abolition,

[a] man may act on society by the collision of intellect, in public debate; he may urge his measures by a sense of shame, by fear and by personal interest . . . and he does not outstep the boundaries of his sphere. But all the power, and all the conquests that are lawful to woman, are those only which appeal to the kindly, generous, peaceful and benevolent principles. (Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis 1988)

The problem with female participation in the abolition crusade, according to Beecher, was that the character of abolition was too unseemly for women to get involved. “If [my] principles are correct,” she continues,

they are entirely opposed to the plan of arraying females in any Abolition movement; because . . . it brings them forward as partisans in a conflict that has been begun and carried forward by measures that are any thing rather than peaceful in their tendencies; because it draws them forth from their appropriate retirement, to expose themselves to the ungoverned violence of mobs, and to sneers and ridicule in public places; because it leads them into the arena of political collusion, not as peaceful mediators to hush the opposing elements, but as combatants to cheer up and carry forward the measures of strife. (p. 128)

For Beecher, then, the “influence” of women on the public sphere must stop whenever women are brought into an element of public life that is too conflictual, too volatile, or, put differently, too masculine. This shows that even for women of the same class and status background, speaking within the same ideological lens of republican motherhood, there were disagreements about the subversive nature of female-led social reform. Such disagreements, moreover, persisted well into the twentieth century, as the heated debate between female supporters and opponents of suffrage illustrates (Jablonsky 1994; Marshall 1997). This suggests that Fraser’s conception of “distinct multiple publics” overstates the unity of the female dialogue on motherhood. Just as Fraser claims that the bourgeois public sphere was never the public, claiming that the public sphere of republican motherhood represented the female counterpublic is equally dubious.

Moreover, throughout these social movements, female-led associations received a large amount of support from men. Many men who held on to a notion of true womanhood nonetheless agreed with the arguments of the female societies and often offered their services in support. In the case of moral reform, female moral reform societies began to
develop auxiliary societies of male supporters, inverting the previous paradigm of benevolent organizations by having the women’s organization seen as the parent organization and the men’s as the auxiliary (Whiteaker 1977:230). Men’s temperance associations organized alongside the female ones and, interestingly enough, often used the rhetoric of compassion and care themselves as their guiding principles. For example, rather than focus on the despicable condition of the male drunkard, the Sons of Temperance referred to a discourse of brotherly compassion that mirrored the sentiments of republican motherhood. “It is love,” they claimed, “that prompts us to open the hand of kindness to a brother’s want—to watch by his couch in sickness—to wipe from his brow the dew of death at last to bear his remains to the solemn place” (Ryan 1981:134). It seems that at least some of the prominent qualities of motherhood, even in the gendered arena of the nineteenth century, were not the sole possession of women.

The sphere of republican motherhood, we may conclude, was not a unified sphere with regard to its structural makeup. Not only were many women outside of this sphere, but they consciously opposed it. At the same time, men often were supporters of the maternal activism and in fact were themselves “maternal” in their associations. We may argue, then, that there must have been some source of symbolic common ground available across lines of social stratification. Positions on so-called women’s issues of maternal politics were as much a reflection of divisions in personal ideology as in social location. As a result, it seems the two primary assumptions of the multiple publics point of view—that representative publics form in a relatively direct way out of relations of inequality built into socially stratified societies and that there is no legitimate common ground to be shared between these unequal publics—need to be amended.

While Fraser’s model overlooks the source of common ground in the symbolic construction of nineteenth-century maternal politics, Alexander’s is founded on the assumption that the discursive referents of civility provide that very source. To be sure, there is much evidence to support his view. For example, at the start of the nineteenth century a decades-long movement for expanded female education was premised on the conviction that girls had as promising an intellectual capacity as boys did. As early as 1818, female education activist Hannah Crocker argued that

> although there must be allowed some moral and physical distinction of the sexes agreeably to the order of nature, still the sentiment must predominate that the powers of the mind are equal in the sexes. . . . There can be no doubt but there is as much difference in the powers of each individual of the male sex as there is of the female; and if they received the same mode of education, their improvement would be fully equal. (Flexner 1975:24)

The female education movement grew increasingly successful over the century and repeatedly referred to the ability of women to learn and to become educated in the strictest sense. In addition, by the 1830s an egalitarian women’s rights movement had begun in the United States and argued that women and men were equal not only in intellect but in character. Through the voices of leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Grimke sisters, William Garrison, and Susan B. Anthony, a humanist, “gender-blind” feminist movement asked that both sexes be given equal treatment and equal footing in political society. The egalitarian rhetoric of this movement was tightly structured by the discourse of civil society. For example, in the famed Seneca Falls women’s rights convention of 1848, the leaders of this movement published the Enlightenment-inspired “Declarations of Sentiments,” which began with a rewording of the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” they argued, “that all men and women are created equal.” With this rhetor-
Feminists attempted to place women and men on equal footing, while maintaining the conception of the citizen defined by Western political philosophy and represented in the Declaration of Independence. Natural rights and egalitarian arguments were indeed found throughout the century and undoubtedly worked to present women along the sacred qualities of the discourse of civil society.

However, it would be a mistake to believe that it was these egalitarian arguments that gained women any measure of integration into the nineteenth-century American public sphere. For most of the century, women’s rights arguments were not only few and far between but were nearly always thoroughly unsuccessful. In fact, before the last decade of the century, virtually all of the female-led civic associations dissociated themselves from the women’s rights movement in order to emphasize their acceptance of the separate spheres perspective. Therefore, although we may use the twentieth-century offspring of the early women’s rights movement as exemplary of Alexander’s perspective, it does not fit for most of the nineteenth century. Likewise, the calls for female education should not be understood as challenging separate spheres or as symbolically endowing women as equally competent civil actors. Across the country, female education was understood as the crucible for the strong republican mothers and virtuous true women of upcoming generations. Although females could certainly learn, the content for their education was domestic. All other pursuits were seen as unnecessary and in fact unseemly. Even when defending the intellectual capacities of women, defenders of increased education for women drew the boundaries clearly. As one reader of the incredibly popular *Godey’s Lady’s Book* put it, “The fact that woman has excelled in literature establishes sufficiently the principle that under propitious circumstances she may acquire intellectual greatness.” However, [1]

Though female education did much toward gaining women respect, women were to remain dependent and subservient in a public world that still belonged to men.

We should remember, however, that Alexander’s ideal type of multicultural forms of incorporation might account for this and, in the process, enable his model to hold. According to Alexander, marginalized or stigmatized groups can gain integration into the public sphere by virtue of “particularizing the universal.” That is, they may retain their particularistic identities and still associate themselves with the discourse of civil society by arguing that their form of difference is a variation on the sacred themes of democracy. To some extent, this indeed occurred. For example, Sarah Hale, the editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, argued that the titles given to women in their various occupations and life stages should be amended in order to emphasize the dignity and relative independence that were inherent in womanhood (Tonkovich 1997:57–67). Hence, she emphasized the more sophisticated and respectful use of “lady” over “female,” and the magazine referred to occupational titles by the female alternative: “postmistress,” “telegraphess,” “waitress,” and so on. As Alexander
would expect, the intent here was to underscore the strength of character of women in public life. As Hale wrote in *Godey’s* in 1867,

> [t]he poetry of women is distinctive and peculiar; their acting is of wholly different parts; their manner of teaching has influences which men cannot reach; their medical practice is required for human preservation; and the language gains greatly in beauty, force, and power by conveying these differences in a single word. (Tonkovich 1997:67)

Here Hale exemplifies a means of instilling confidence and pride in her readership that was common in most of the literature of the sphere of motherhood: that the distinctly female form of action was a positive contribution to civil society and that it should be a source of strength and pride. To that extent, one might argue that the female character is being represented as a source of independence and autonomy.

However, I believe such a conclusion would be shortsighted. For there is no doubt that even in their push for moral authority, the activists of the sphere of republican motherhood never relinquished the ideals of submissiveness and passivity in public life. Although the empire of the mother was indeed a source of power and self-esteem for women, there is no doubt that republican mothers did not see themselves as autonomous actors in civil society. Let us remember that the most common refrain in the public action of the republican mother was that she did not choose to be a public figure but that she was compelled to it by the problems that she witnessed. Benevolence and sympathy propelled the republican mother into the various causes of reform. This was a consistent trope found throughout the century. Consider, for example, the defense of women’s right to preach given by temperance leader Francis Willard. Here she reiterates the arguments of a male supporter who claimed that

> [m]en may have a certain degree of argumentativeness and an undoubted skill in making Christ’s Gospel peculiarly hard to be understood, but they have not the sacred tact, the melting pathos, the holy patience, the exquisite sympathy, which belong to the omnipotent-weakness which is the incommunicable characteristic of womanhood.” (Willard [1889] 1987:15)

The very symbols of passion, empathy, and weakness that are profaned by the discourse of civil society serve here as the basis for women to assume a position of public authority. This is a position of authority that women repeatedly claimed they did not “choose” but were compelled to perform. As Willard herself claims,

> [w]omen’s active work in teaching, lecturing, evangelistic work, etc., has been a necessity of God’s providence; she has not simply chosen it, but she has had to do it, to meet the most powerful conviction of her mind. (Willard [1889] 1987:89)

Lucy Stone repeated this sentiment when she explained to the World’s Temperance Convention in 1853, with regard to overstepping the boundaries of woman’s sphere, “I know I touch upon delicate ground, but my only excuse must be the imperative necessity” (Stone 1853:35). Republican mothers, then, went to great lengths to reject any association with civil independence or autonomy, even as they demanded greater respect and recognition as public actors in civic politics. The ability to learn independently did not translate into the ability to speak in public on her own behalf. Even in the fight for suffrage, many women argued that the franchise was needed as a means to continue the benevolent impulse of the republican mother that was so important to national character. As suffragette Jane Addams
wrote in a tract called *Why Women Should Vote*, suffrage was not only not a threat to woman’s sphere but the only way to ensure its survival.

In closing, may I recapitulate that if woman would fulfill her traditional responsibility to her own children; if she would educate and protect from danger factory children who must find their recreation on the street; if she would bring the cultural forces to bear upon our materialistic civilization; and if she would do it all with the dignity and directness fitting one who carries on her immemorial duties, then she must bring herself to the use of the ballot—that latest implement for self-government. May we not fairly say that American women need this implement in order to preserve the home? (Addams 1912:19–20)

In short, in order to defend the increased incorporation of maternal associations into the American public sphere, reformers repeatedly associated their own intentions with sympathy, sentiment, and passion at the expense of autonomy and civic independence. This is not to say that such arguments convinced every listener, rather that for the female activists of republican motherhood, the *dissociation* from the discourse of civil society was a constant rhetorical endeavor.

But if women earned an increasingly greater acceptance as participants in the public sphere without reference to Alexander and Smith’s alleged universal referents of civility, then it would seem that there must be an alternative form of cross-gender solidarity at play. The implication is that the discourse of republican motherhood touches upon an alternative core of moral codes that appeals to the democratic public arena in a manner similar to the discourse of civil society. Indeed, I believe this is the case. In fact, I wish to argue that the rhetoric of the maternal associations of the nineteenth century illustrates a discursive binary that is clearly distinct from the discourse of civil society and equally relevant to our understanding of democratic legitimacy. This is a discourse of affection, nurture, and care that represents the bonds of love and solidarity that are as much an integral part of democracy as are independence, rationality, and autonomy. For democracy is not only about rights and freedoms but also about love and sympathy for a fellow human being. Although this discourse of affection was essentialistically gendered in nineteenth-century America, the fact that it served as such a profound symbolic catalyst for female integration into the public sphere shows its fundamental potential as a means of symbolic common ground in the democratic public sphere. It shows us that the ideal of *interdependence* is a powerful component of democracy, as it builds on the solidarity and respect for one’s fellow citizen that is implicit in notions of liberty and free association. While the discourse of civil society outlines the criteria attached to the ideal of autonomous self-determination, the discourse of affection is the rhetorical model for a communal bond that has been equally central to the democratic ideal.14

14 In many ways the symbols of these two discourses are played off one another in the contemporary debate between liberals and communitarians. However, it would be a mistake to think of the discourse of civil society as indelibly tied to liberalism and that of affection as intertwined with communitarianism. Alexander and Smith’s “civil” characteristics are often invoked on a collective level, such as in the rationalist tradition within Marxian philosophy. Here, humanity as such is treated as a historical actor, and its “independence,” “rationality,” and “reason” are at the heart of its legitimacy and strength. In this way, there may be a collectivist and communitarian rhetoric that utilizes the discourse of civil society for its moral order. Rather than connecting each discourse to a fully formed political philosophy, I suggest that they be seen as representative of two types of citizenship. The first is akin to the liberal form of citizenship, which emphasizes positive liberty, while the other results from the republican vision of citizenship, which stresses social bonds. The two are intertwined in the ideal of democracy, where universal social bonds are connected with individual and collective freedoms in the makeup of the good society.
How may we use our case study to help understand the boundaries of the discourse of affection and its relationship to the discourse of civil society? As I have shown above, the women who presented themselves as republican mothers necessarily dissociated themselves from certain qualities of the discourse of civil society. This suggests that the two discourses are, at least in some respect, in tension with one another. However, we should not think of them as inherently opposing discourses either. For the republican motherhood ideology did not wish to do away with the ideal of a rational, autonomous citizen with independent interests. Rather its proponents demanded that all citizens in society, regardless of gender, be required to be virtuous and morally accountable for their actions as well. The logic here is that the discourse of civil society and the discourse of affection are complementary and that the democratic public sphere required both to be successful. Although men were the only ones who were seen as fully autonomous civil actors, women and men alike should project a degree of compassion. Such compassion was often linked with the “purity” of the church, such as when a Reverend Wells told the New York City Female Moral Reform Society that

[t]he gospel and liberty are one. The men who go to the polls, therefore, should have a good degree of purity, as well as intelligence, or all is lost. (Advocate of Moral Reform June 1835:43)

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the direct reference to religion would not always be present, but the logic would remain the same: The good democratic citizen must conform not only to the ideology of rationality but also to that of affection. This political ideal was expressed clearly by Uncle Tom’s Cabin author Harriet Beecher Stowe when she wrote that

[t]he woman question of our day as I understand it is this—Shall motherhood ever be felt in the public administration of the affairs of state? . . . The state at this very day needs an influence like what I remember our mothers’ to have been . . . —an influence quiet, calm, warming, purifying, uniting . . . it needs a loving and redeeming power, by which its erring and criminal children may be borne with, purified, and led back to virtue. (Beecher Stowe 1871:37–38)

In Stowe’s view, rationality and affection may be seen as complements to one another, brother and sister criteria for the makeup of a good democracy. In order to understand the source of tension between these two discourses, let us remember that the enemy of the maternal associations was not the rationalized, autonomous citizen but rather the increasingly accepted masculine ideal of the ambitious male whose only concern was to satisfy his interests. This psychological disposition was encouraged by capitalist society and led many men to ignore morality for the pursuit of satisfaction and profit. The republican mother was intent on fighting against this dynamic and fighting to ensure that both men and women would be held accountable to standards of virtue. It was for this reason, for example, that the New York Female Moral Reform Society regularly published the names of male frequenters of city brothels. The assumption on the part of reformers was that men should be ashamed of their sexual aggression because it undermines the ideal of kindness and compassion that all individuals should live up to. As a result, we can understand the “enemy” of the discourse of virtue as the self-interest, pleasure seeking, and egotism that, as Kimmel has shown, characterized a common masculine ideal throughout the century (Kimmel 1995). This ideal was connected to the growing sense of the capitalist society as an “all-against-all” battlefield, in which one had to be
self-interested in order to survive. Indeed, as we have seen, many of the opponents of female political action argued that women were placing themselves in jeopardy by engaging with a world that was too harsh for their delicate sensibilities. Only a man, by virtue of his superior reasoning and detached rationality, would have the strength to fight the battles of modern public life. As a New Jersey senator, commenting in the first senatorial debate on women’s suffrage in the United States, put it in 1866, women possess

a milder, gentler nature, which not only makes them shrink from, but also disqualified them for the turmoil and battle of public life. . . . Their mission is at home, by their blandishments and their love to assuage the passions of men as they come in from the battle of life. . . . It will be a sorry day for this country when those vestal fires of love and piety are put out. (Flexner 1975:148–49)

The stress on self-interested conflict and struggle is antithetical to the notions of compassion and nurture that are typical of the discourse of affection. It was against this ideal that female reformers launched their crusades. However, this masculine ideal does share one significant element in common with the sacred side discourse of civil society: a stress on personal autonomy and self-determination. Moreover, the affectionate and caring disposition of the republican mother shared one significant element in common with the profane side of the discourse of civil society: a tendency to be ruled by passion and emotion, rather than autonomous, rational thought. It is on this particular ground that the discourse of affection remained at odds with the discourse of civil society throughout the maternal crusades of the nineteenth century. Hence we may conclude two things: first, that both of these discourses may be used as universalistic sources of symbolic common ground in the democratic public sphere and, second, that while they are often complementary discourses, they remain in tension to the extent that affection and care compromise autonomy and independence.

RATIONALLY, COMPASSION, AND PUBLICITY:
TOWARD A SYNTHETIC MODEL OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

What does the specification of a discourse of compassion as a means for democratic solidarity imply about how social scientists should conceive of the democratic public sphere in contemporary societies? To begin with, it suggests that neither Fraser’s “multiple publics” approach nor Alexander’s “fragmented public sphere” model is complete in and of itself. Fraser has never spelled out just how marginalized groups manage to get their issues on the agenda or why dominant publics should ever listen to them. The evidence presented here suggests that successful processes of incorporation and integration are achieved through symbolic connection made between and across publics in order to establish a unifying bond of solidarity and political sympathy. Alexander understood this well, though he was wrong to argue that the only democratic and universal referent of such solidarity may be the sacred attributes of the discourse of civil society. As I have shown, what we might call a discourse of compassion or affection was the central symbolic reference through which nineteenth-century women gained a systemic integration into the American public sphere. This code of social nurturing posits a different array of characteristics for the “good” democratic actor, institution, and social relationships than does the discourse of civil society, though they are not necessarily opposing characteristics.

In order to move toward a more complete model of the public sphere, then, we must make several steps. Following Fraser, I believe we may understand the relatively alienated enclaves of grouped identities as competing public spheres with various levels of material
and symbolic resources. Following Alexander, we should realize that in order for one group to win full recognition from another, they must feel that they share a series of social attributes that both see as “sacred.” These attributes should be understood as culturally determined and therefore as always subject to renewed contestation and representation. Moreover, we may isolate semiotically consistent discursive structures that repeatedly act as these universal, democratic referents. Finally, following the work presented here, we may say that there are at least two such discourses at play and that each may be a source of multicultural incorporation in modern societies.

I am, of course, not the first to suggest that in public life a discourse of compassion and a discourse of rationality sit side by side as symbols for democracy. This is exactly the claim of the “difference feminists” of the 1970s and 1980s. For example, in her connection between political reasoning and gendered forms of psychology, Gilligan makes a similar claim. She argues that the feminine ethic is “an ethic of care [that] rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt,” while the masculine ethic is an “ethic of justice [that] proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same” (1982:174). However, this difference model has been rightly criticized for accepting too easily and essentialistically the gendered nature of these ethics (Scott 1986). Activists and social theorists have argued that “maternal thinking” does not necessarily have to come from women and is certainly applicable to many public arenas heretofore colonized by the logic of rationality (Ruddick 1989; Tronto 1987). Certainly cases of both men and women appealing to the discourses of nurture and of rationality in contemporary political life are not hard to find in contemporary public discourse. In the contemporary United States, for example, social movements for the recognition of alternative family structures offer a clear case in point. The claim that their differing organizational makeups are equally built on love and commitment represents “alternative families” as variants on the generally shared themes of affection and care. The case of the nineteenth-century ideal of republican motherhood shows us that in fact such a perspective has a deep precedence in American political culture. Furthermore, the specifics of its history suggest ways for us to understand the cultural dynamics involved in how the discourse of affection may be used to “make” certain previously “private” matters into issues of common concern. Even though the characteristics of the nurturing ideal have historically been relegated to the private sphere, to the extent that we believe that democracy requires compassion and care, these attributes instantly gain public relevance and political salience. After all, it is only because the supposedly female forms of virtue were seen as publicly relevant to democracy that women could claim that the victimization of children, women, and the poor is wrong and that they are entitled to act on their behalf.

We may conclude, then, that there are at least two means of symbolic integration that can enable multicultural recognition. Just as excluded groups can argue that their “primordial” qualities are alternatives on the themes of civility, they can also present them as alternatives on the themes of love, sympathy, and affection. The rhetorical heart of the matter lies in first presenting a convincing argument that a given social field should succumb to either the logic of reason or the logic of care, or perhaps a mixture of both. However, this also implies that there are at least two fields of symbolic exclusion and domination constructed in the name of universalism and humanity. To be sure, these are not the only discourses that compete to represent the moral foundations of different public arenas. However, what makes them unique is that they are not inherently connected to any particular social group or institutionalized social sphere—even if they have been so historically. Each presents a symbolic common ground that can generate solidarity between different social groups and different public spheres in society.

The complicating point is that rhetorical positions do not and will not always agree across these two discourses, even as they both vie to represent the sacred orders of human-
ity as such. Problems of power and conflict may arise when each of these “human” modal-
ities lays claim to the same environment, as happened in the rhetorical debates on the
so-called woman question. Indeed, one of the most significant insights from this history is
that it suggests that these two universal moral discourses may remain irreconcilably at
odds with one another. The tensions between the discourse of civil society and that of
affection are inherent and systemic. “Autonomy” as an ideal is symbolically inconsistent—at
least to some degree—with “passion” and “care.” As a result, these two symbolic referents
may function to undermine each other, and there may be a prolonged competition between
alternative modes of democratic association. Mechanisms of exclusion may be seen as
present from one democratic modality while invisible to the other. While a social actor or
relationship may be condemned because of its irrationality or dependence, it may simulta-
naneously be accepted because of its kindness and affection. Similarly, though an individ-
ual may be seen as “heartless” or selfish on the one hand, he or she may be defended as
rational and level headed on the other.

These yin and yang alternatives of the narrative of democracy offer a systemic way to
understand how models of an egalitarian public sphere may not always see eye to eye,
even if each can legitimately be presented as “human” and “democratic.” In today’s Amer-
ican public sphere, the gendered nature of each discourse is not as strong as it was 150
years ago, and certainly the essentialist connotations of each discourse are disappearing.
However, as a result, it is perhaps more difficult today to pinpoint when one rhetorical
strategy is used at the expense of the other. That is, new ideological positions continue to
arise that attempt to paint sections of the public sphere in light of either of these dis-
courses. At times these two rhetorics may be complementary, though at other times, we
may see them in competition with one another. In such moments, social actors use these
two rhetorics in an ongoing translation game that can never be reconciled definitively and
is always in danger of reorganization. This gives us a new means of understanding the
multiple bases for “common humanity” that may serve as democratic means of solidarity
and social integration while developing potentially new lines of fragmentation, exclusion,
and domination.

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