Who Can Change the World?: Gendered Agency and Non-Resistance in American Abolitionism

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In her memoir *Eighty Years and More,* Elizabeth Cady Stanton traces her feminist awakening to London in 1840, when the World's Antislavery Convention fell into disarray over whether to allow female delegates from the United States to be seated alongside their male counterparts.[1] Despite the vital role women had played in the advancement of abolition, British and American abolitionists alike argued vehemently against women's inclusion in the convention. As an observer pointed out, "it appears that we are prepared to sanction ladies in the employment of all means, so long as they are confessedly unequal with ourselves."[2] This "woman question," as they called it, was new to British abolitionism, but it had been alive in America abolitionism for years. The conflict that inspired Stanton's activism was merely the aftermath of a contentious schism in America's national antislavery organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), earlier that year. This schism divided abolitionists into two camps: political abolitionists, who opposed women's participation, and nonresistant abolitionists, who advocated for women in the movement. Although both groups remained deeply committed to the cause, their methods and philosophies diverged sharply in the years that followed.

Historians attribute this schism in American abolitionism to two insoluble disagreements: the question of direct abolitionist political action, and "the

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[1] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1808), 78-86, accessed July 10, 2017, https://archive.org/details/cu31924032654315.

[2] *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, Called by the Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and Held in London, From Friday, June 12th, to Tuesday, June 23rd, 1840* (London: British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1841), 33, accessed July 10, 2017, https://ia800309.us.archive.org/9/items/oates71027137/oates71027137.pdf.

woman question," a phrase that stood-in for conflicts over women's place in abolition and in society at large.[3] They often present these issues as parallel but separate conflicts that worked to divide the movement. Indeed, as abolitionists relitigated the split at the World's Antislavery Convention in London, the various speakers could not even come to an agreement over the true cause of separation, with Wendell Phillips maintaining it was the question of political action, and James Birney blaming it on the distracting "the woman question."[4] However, upon inspection of abolitionist newspapers and published letters between abolitionists, a cohesive ideological divide emerges that unifies these disparate conflicts. As political abolitionists in the AASS embraced a gendered ideology of political agency and social change, influenced by the mythos of the American Revolution, they redefined abolitionism as a fight rightfully led those who already had the vote. Nonresistant abolitionists in the AASS, however, defined abolitionism as a moral battle for the nation's soul – one that could be fought by any moral agent, regardless of their political agency. Thus, political abolitionists promoted political action at the ballot box, which excluded women as agents of change in the movement, while nonresistants extended full rights to women within their organizations, but eschewed politics entirely. The implicit contestation of women's political agency allowed exclusionary practices to emerge within abolition, a movement with explicitly inclusionary aims. Put succinctly, the abolition movement fractured over the question of how to change the world, and consequently, who had the power to change it. By examining this schism within the American reform movement, I hope to shed light on how the intertwined concepts of virtue, race, and gender function in American discourse, and the way our conceptions of *how* to change the world so often define *who* can change it.

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[3] For a discussion of historical characterization of the schism, see "Abolition Emergent" in: Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).
[4] *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention,* 45.

Antislavery sentiment in America is older than the nation itself, originating in slave rebellions and abolitionist Quaker communities even before the American Revolution. By the 1830s, abolition societies were widespread throughout New England, and abolitionists formed a highly networked community of activists, writers, intellectuals, and politicians. These various abolition societies were united through a national anti-slavery organization: the American Anti Slavery Society. The American Anti-Slavery Society, or the AASS, was founded in 1833 and boasted hundreds of chapters throughout the United States and its territories by the late 1830s.[5] In the 1830s, William Lloyd Garrison, a founding member of the AASS and editor of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, began to promote a form of pacifism he called "nonresistance." The Garrisonian nonresistants believed that the world should be changed through moral action alone, and rejected violence, complicity in political processes, and the existing power structure itself. Therefore, he argued that a nonresistant agent of social change should eschew political resistance and instead embrace "moral suasion," an attempt to change the collective conscience of the nation.[6] Garrison and other nonresistant abolitionists hoped to influence politicians and voters to reject slavery and racism, but argued that founding an explicitly abolitionist party would sully the movement and make abolitionists complicit in the systemic violence of the government. Garrison had a powerful platform for his beliefs in *The Liberator* and his ideas attracted many of his fellow abolitionists – but his radical philosophy did not stand uncontested.

Garrison's pacifism rejected both the state-led methods favored by political abolitionists and the institutionalized religion of the evangelical clerics. Although he emphatically did not require all members of the AASS to subscribe to his doctrine, other factions within the society grew more supportive of political

[5] "Introduction to Abolition and Antislavery in the United States." www.americanabolitionists.com, accessed July 10, 2017, http://www.americanabolitionists.com/introduction.html.
[6] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause,* 256-261.

action and more frustrated with Garrison's nonresistance. A faction that favored political action and allied itself with evangelical members emerged towards the end of the 1830s and began to challenge Garrison's control of the AASS.[7] The public debates between members of the two factions, captured in the pages of *The Liberator*, initially focused on whether voting should be compulsory for AASS members, while the "woman question" was tacked on as an additional grievance. A published exchange between Garrison and James Birney, former slave owner who became an outspoken abolitionist and AASS officer, displays the fundamental divide between the two emerging factions on how to change the world.

In his letter, published in the June 28th, 1839 issue of *The Liberator*, Birney contends that the AASS Constitution contains language that compels all members to vote for the abolition cause. By refusing to vote, he argues, the nonresistants "have ceased to consent to one of the principles of the Constitution, and are virtually no longer entitled to membership."[8] This argument, rooted in the AASS Constitution, positions Birney and his fellow political abolitionists as the true abolitionists, and Garrisonian abolitionists as subversive sectarians. Birney speculates that what he calls "no-government men" and "pro-government men" may ultimately be too different in their techniques and goals to function under the same parent organization, and suggests that the cause of abolition would be best served if the "no-government" men left the AASS.

In his response, which is nearly twice the length of Birney's letter, Garrison dramatically summarizes Birney's "truthless, slanderous, cruel" remarks as "caricatures of the pacific precepts of the gospel… satires on the obligations of Christianity – libels upon the character and conduct of the Prince of Peace."[9] In addition to questioning Birney's motives – they are "pregnant with sophistry" – he

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[7] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 257-259.
[8] James Birney, "View," *The Liberator*, June 28, 1839.
[9] William Lloyd Garrison, "Reply to James Birney," *The Liberator*, June 28, 1839.

attempts to dismantle Birney's core argument that the AASS Constitution requires political action. Garrison agrees with Birney's premise, that the AASS members must influence Congress, but objects to Birney's conclusions. Instead he argues,

> Abolitionists are bound by their Constitution to influence, not to create or assist in creating Congress. Therefore, they are not bound to resort to the ballot-box. Again: It is only to *creation*, but not to the exercise of an *influence*, that power is necessary. But the Anti-Slavery Society is pledged 'to endeavor to *influence*,' not to *create*. Therefore, the possession and exercise of the *creative power* are not requisite to membership in that Society [emphasis in original].

This passage makes clear the connection between *how* to change the world and *who* can change it. The distinction between political creation and political influence is key to Garrison's argument, as it reveals the power differential he sees in the elective franchise. While Birney does not mention the role of abolitionists without access to the elective franchise, Garrison highlights it. Under Birney's requirement, abolitionists who do not have political power, including "women, minors, aliens, Covenanters, nonresistants," would be disqualified from membership in the AASS.[10] While the elective franchise was restricted to white men, Garrison's focus on moral suasion and political "influence" removed the privilege of political agency as a prerequisite to work for freedom. Garrison emphatically rejects Birney's suggestion that nonresistants leave the AASS, but pleads for unity in the face of slavery, and warns against separation from "opinion on political or theological points."[11]

Despite Garrison's plea for unity, these tensions came to the surface at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society (MASS) in January, 1839. Political abolitionists introduced a resolution making voting in federal and state elections a requirement for all members of the MASS, along with one denying women the right to vote in antislavery societies. Although these resolutions were defeated, the conflict continued. After the contentious MASS

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[10] Garrison, "Reply to James Birney."
[11] William Lloyd Garrison, "Reply to James Birney," *The Liberator*, June 28, 1839.

meeting, political abolitionists and evangelical abolitionists left the MASS to form the Massachusetts Abolition Society (MAS), though the MAS was still recognized as an auxiliary of the AASS. Political abolitionists diverged further as they explored the possibility of forming an abolitionist third party.[12] In January 1840, political abolitionist Gerrit Smith made a comprehensive argument in the pages of *The Liberator* for direct political participation at the ballot box, and considered the formation of an abolitionist political party to compete with the existing two-party system.[13] As he argued, abolitionists needed a method "which does not depend for its success on the submission of the political parties to 'the power of moral suasion and eternal truth,' but on the appeal which we make to their selfish fears."[14] At the time of the article, Smith acknowledged that a third party could create "public suspicion of our motives" and "diminish our [abolitionists] 'power of moral suasion'."[15] By May of 1840, however, Smith had overcome these concerns. In a report for *The Liberator* slyly titled "A Sudden Change of Opinion," Garrison presented several quotations that suggest Smith's acceptance of third-party politics and even hint at the genesis of the abolitionist Liberty Party, one of the forerunners of the modern Republican party.[16] On the question of how to change the world, abolitionists seemed irreparably divided.

However, it was not just on questions of *how* to change the world that abolitionists disagreed. The second point of contention, the "woman question," explicitly asked *who* could change the world. The "woman question" again aligned Garrisonians, who favored women's participation, against the evangelical and political abolitionists. But the woman question was not simply one question – the evasive euphemism stood in for various conflicts over the proper place of women both in society and in abolition. At first, it centered on public speaking – female activists like Sarah and Angelina Grimké primarily drew

[12] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause,* 261.
[13] Gerrit Smith, "Political," *The Liberator*, January 31, 1840.
[14] Smith, "Political."
[15] Smith, "Political."
[16] William Lloyd Garrison, "A Sudden Change of Opinion," *The Liberator*, May 8, 1840.

criticism from evangelical abolitionists who objected to their "promiscuous" lectures to mixed-gender audiences, citing Pauline prohibitions against women teaching men. Soon, female abolitionists and their allies began demanding full voting rights within abolitionist societies. These demands further incensed evangelical abolitionists, but the push for women's participation was also condemned by many political abolitionists. As "the woman question" consumed local abolitionist societies, even abolitionists who once supported women's rights turned against the divisive issue.[17] Despite claims by many political and evangelical abolitionists, "the woman question" was not simply a distraction from the work of abolition. As Garrison had pointed out in his response to Birney, "the woman question" was inextricably tied up in the methods of abolition. Choosing a side on *how* to change the world invariably meant choosing a side on *who* could change it.

Resolutions regarding the rights of women within local and national antislavery societies had been debated at length, but at the annual AASS meeting in 1840, the nomination of female abolitionist Abby Kelley to the business committee triggered a walkout of evangelical abolitionists.[18] At this same meeting, the society passed several resolutions opposing obligatory electoral participation and supporting women's equal participation in the movement, although Birney complained this was only because "the majority was swelled by the votes of the women themselves."[19] The dissenters started a new society called the American and Foreign Anti Slavery Society (AFASS), which formally excluded women from participation as voting members. The formation of the explicitly abolitionist Liberty Party in 1841, and its endorsement by the AFASS in 1843, cemented the schism and reorganized a significant portion of the abolitionist cause around electoral change.[20] Thus, the abolition

[17] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause,* 278-279.
[18] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause,* 263.
[19] *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention,* 41.
[20] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause,* 264-265.

movement was permanently divided into two camps: one group dedicated to moral action and open to all, and one group dedicated to political action but restricted to white men.

While political abolitionists privileging of electoral change led them to reject disenfranchised women from their movement, women were not alone in this disenfranchised status. Both African-Americans and women were excluded from political action before the Civil War. While political abolitionists planned to fight for the black man's right to the franchise, they were not sure if women should vote within abolition societies, let alone in federal elections. I argue that this apparent discrepancy stems from political abolitionists' acceptance of gendered ideas of freedom and political agency. In "Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse," Francois Furstenberg discusses a distinctly American ideology of freedom, drawn from "liberal, republican, and religious traditions," that created a link between liberty, masculine virtue, and resistance.[21] He argues that the mythologized narrative of the American Revolution suggested that freedom was the reward of those "virtuous" men who actively resisted tyranny, rather than an inalienable right, while continued enslavement was the result of an individual's choice to submit. This ideology of freedom provided a convenient exoneration for white Americans who supported the institution of slavery by conflating individual and collective resistance. Through this rhetorical slippage, individuals were held responsible for the overthrow of systems of oppression, and deemed unworthy of freedom if they did not risk their lives in the often-futile struggle against the powerful forces that maintained their subjugation.

The concept of freedom Furstenberg describes was both gendered and racialized to support the dominance of white men and to legitimate violence against slaves. Because this concept of virtue was inherently linked to

[21] François Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse," *The Journal of American History,* 89, no. 4 (2003): 1295-1330, 1296.

masculinity, "antinomies of virtue… were coded in both gendered terms (associated with effeminacy) and racial terms (associated with blackness)."[22] Both women and slaves were associated with a fundamental dependence and submission that marked them as ideal subjects of oppression. White women, rather than being wholly excluded from virtue, were assigned a separate "sphere" of sexual virtue and associated duties that were necessary to the Republic – namely, childbearing and mothering. A virtuous slave, however, "was a contradiction in terms."[23]

This concept of freedom was not the only version at work in post-Revolutionary America, but glimpses of this masculine revolutionary ethos are present in some early abolitionist writings, including those of Frederick Douglass, Theodore Weld, and David Walker. The Garrisonian doctrine of nonresistance presented a radical departure from the conception of freedom Furstenberg posits. While the ideology of the American Revolution awarded freedom only to those able to violently resist their oppressors, the Garrisonian principles of peace rejected violent resistance, even the revolutionary violence of the founding fathers themselves. As Birney notes in his exchange with Garrison in *The Liberator*, the nonresistant doctrine rests on a wholesale rejection of force. Birney further suggests the nonresistant doctrine would forbid forceful resistance even to protect one's wife or daughter from attacks "by the most brutal."[24] Birney's rhetorical choices, especially his appeal to the safety of (male) readers' wives, mothers, and children, suggest his acceptance of the conception of freedom as rooted in virtuous masculine resistance.

While evangelical abolitionists opposed women's participation on biblical grounds, many political abolitionists had not always opposed women's rights, at least in the abstract. As Lydia Maria Child pointed out in a scathing article in *The Liberator*, some of the most prominent men agitating against women in the

[22] Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery," 1310.
[23] Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery," 1311.
[24] James Birney, "View," *The Liberator*, June 28, 1839.

movement had been advocates for women's rights just a few years earlier.[25] Yet, as the question of how to change the world became contested, so did women's position within the movement. Some political abolitionists attributed their resistance to social propriety – Abby Kelley decried the political abolitionists' deference to "Sir Public Opinion," who has "legalized every sin that was ever committed."[26] Perhaps one anonymous letter-writer to *The Liberator* came closer to the truth, however, when he worried that Garrison's "wild notions" about women were equivalent to "a systematic determination to overturn the foundations of society - to crowd delicate and refined women into the masculine sphere of man."[27] As the letter writer implies, the sphere of political action was inherently coded as public and masculine. Political abolitionists aimed to bring the abolition movement into the public sphere of politics; female inclusion in this version of abolitionism indeed required "delicate and refined women" to cross over into the public, indeed threatening to upend the very foundations of society.

Through electoral action, political abolitionists like Birney hoped to force the existing system to recognize black men as free political agents without challenging the gendering of freedom itself. Specifically, they wanted black men to be recognized as *men*. Extending the franchise to women, however, entailed a revision of the gendered conception of freedom and agency. After all, white women were not excluded entirely from virtue, as Furstenberg suggests black men were. Rather than an *acquisition* of virtue, political agency for white women required a *transformation* of virtue. White women occupied a separate sphere of sexual virtue, and although this feminine virtue did not confer political agency, it came with associated duties that were indispensable to the nation. It seems that the admittance of black men into the realm of masculine virtue was easier for political abolitionists to envision than a reconfiguration of virtue itself.

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[25] Lydia Maria Child, "The Woman Question," *The Liberator*, March 6, 1840.
[26] Abby Kelley, "Equality of the Sexes," *The Liberator*, March 27, 1840.
[27] "Thoughts on the Present Aspects of the Anti-Slavery Cause," *The Liberator*, June 12, 1840.

The conspicuous absence of black women in these abolitionist dialogues, suggests that both forces worked against black women's rights and suffrage.

Abby Kelley, who aligned with Garrison on nonresistance, addressed the heart of the dispute in an article for *The Liberator*. According to Kelley, "the means to be employed in changing the world are strictly moral." [28] As Kelley believed the mechanism of change is moral suasion, she concluded that women are just as qualified to work for the cause of abolition. To Garrisonian abolitionists, an individual's political agency, or lack thereof, did not prevent them from doing the work of abolition. Political abolitionists, however, became convinced that the electoral politics – a rather amoral institution that granted agency only to men – was the key to effecting change. As the political abolitionists increasingly focused on voting and running for office, women's full participation became unnecessary. The question of means and the "woman question" were not two separate points of contention in this schism. Instead, they were two interconnected consequences of one ideological disagreement.

Reflecting on the contentious position of women at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton commented, "It struck me as very remarkable that abolitionists, who felt so keenly the wrongs of the slave, should be so oblivious to the equal wrongs of their own mothers, wives, and sisters."[29] In this paper, I have argued that, although at first it may seem contradictory, the exclusion of women from the activities of political abolitionists was ultimately consistent with the ideology they espoused. The question of requiring political action and "the woman question" were not separate points of contention. Rather, they were both symptoms of a fundamental disagreement about how to change the world, with political abolitionists favoring change through political action and nonresistants favoring change through moral action. Because political abolitionists favored a gendered conception of political agency, the exclusion of women was a logical result. Political abolitionists and Garrisonian

[28] Abby Kelley, "Equality of the Sexes," *The Liberator*, March 27, 1840.
[29] Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 79.

abolitionists shared a desire to end the slave system, but that alone was not enough to unite their increasingly disparate ideologies. Thus, as the question of *who* can change the world was coupled to the question of *how* to change the world, exclusionary practices emerged even in the progressive anti-slavery movement.

Slavery was abolished during the Civil War, but the fundamental question of how to change the world – change from within or change from without, elite politicking or grassroots activism, incremental reform or revolution – lives on in contemporary discourse. Just as in abolition, the question of how to change the world today often generates questions of who can participate in that change, and how this exclusion is defined by gender, race, and class. Although the historical record does not appear to hold any easy answers to these questions, perhaps by examining the connection between *how* we want to change the world and *who* can participate, we can better understand the roots of exclusion in society today.

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