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"PRACTICAL IDEALISTS": WOMEN'S POLITICS AND CULTURE IN THE NEW DEAL YEARS

Sharon Hartman Strom

Lois Scharf. *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady of American Liberalism.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987. x + 202 pp. Photographs, chronology, genealogy, notes and references, bibliographic essay, selected bibliography, and index. $24.95 (cloth); $10.95 (paper).

Susan Ware. *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. xix + 327 pp. Photographs, notes, and index. $25.00.

When the history of women began to receive focused attention in the 1970s, Eleanor Roosevelt was one of a handful of female Americans who were well-known to both historians and the general public. Despite the evidence that she had been important in social reform circles before her husband was elected president and that she continued to advocate different causes than he, she held a place in the public imagination largely because she was the wife of an influential president. Her own activities were seen as preparing the way for FDR's election or as a complement to his programs. The titles of Joseph Lash's two volumes of sympathetic biography, based on the first perusal of her private correspondence, reflected this assumption in their reference, implied or direct, to FDR: *Eleanor and Franklin* (1971), and *The Years Alone* (1972). Her reputation had been rarefied, as in the case of her equally famous counterpart, Jane Addams, by the notion that she was a mother on a national scale, tending to the interests of the country's most vulnerable citizens. Yet Lash's biography revealed a complicated, often tortured woman, who found in political activity personal salvation and escape from upper-class domesticity. She seized the openings given her after 1917 to flee both inner misery and to promote causes in which she passionately came to believe, but still appeared to be a nearly idiosyncratic figure, somehow self-generated, not amenable to any generalized explanation. She emerged from the Lash volumes as a saint or a busybody, but hardly as a social type.

Feminist scholarship initially took this analysis at face value. As historians

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of women began the challenge of documenting "ordinary" lives, the relevance of Roosevelt and of politics in general seemed more obscure than ever. But recent work on feminism of the post-suffrage years allows us to see Roosevelt and her colleagues in a different light and to bring them back into a more richly detailed context. This new work also illuminates modern American political history, and these fine new biographies of Roosevelt and Molly Dewson could be used to good effect in a variety of courses. Both books depict a generation of privileged women, born in the late nineteenth century and maturing in the twentieth, which had to bridge the transition from old patterns of female association to the new.[1] Their views and their lives were full of contradictions. They maintained homosocial networks but integrated women into mainstream politics; they demanded equal treatment but also argued that women's maternal responsibilities made them both wards and representatives of the public interest; and they generally advocated what Nancy Cott has described as "Feminism's characteristic doubleness, its simultaneous affirmation of women's human rights and women's unique needs and differences" (*The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 1987, p. 49). These books augment growing evidence of the continued vigor of women's social reform and political organizations in the twenties, the connection between these groups' legislative platforms and the social programs of the New Deal, and mounting confusion over what political planks should go into a feminist platform.

Partner and I is a breezy, readable account of the woman who became "America's first female political boss" and of her fifty-year Boston marriage to Polly Porter, the International Harvester heiress. Born in 1874 in Quincy, Massachusetts, Molly Dewson's early history reads like something out of Alcott's *Little Women*. Her father, a leather consignment merchant, suffered from a vague illness diagnosed as neurasthenia, and could not get out of bed for days at a time. Her patient, self-sacrificing mother devoted herself to family, church, and charity, while Dewson and her siblings attended private schools and played in the idyllic countryside of the village. Dewson was tall, athletic, and never very interested in boys. Having heard of M. Carey Thomas, she was determined to go to Bryn Mawr, but settled instead for nearby Wellesley College. President Alice Freeman, one of the first graduates of the University of Michigan, was establishing a fine faculty of women academics there, including Vida Scudder and Emily Greene Balch. In a course taught by young Katharine Coman on the "Statistical Study of Certain Economic Problems," Dewson did independent work on the state administration of poor relief but did not adopt her teacher's interests in settlement house volunteer work. Instead, she revelled in campus activities and friendships with upper-class women. At a time when many young working women were exploring heterosocial leisure, Dewson played basketball, dressed up like a man for cam-

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pus skits and parties, and ran a hard-fought campaign for class president in 1897; her classmates predicted she would someday become president of the United States.

Upon graduation, Dewson helped prepare a study of why most working women preferred factory and sales work to domestic service for Boston's Women's Educational and Industrial Union. In 1900 she became the director of the probation and parole program of the Massachusetts State Industrial School for Girls. Like many social scientists of the period, Dewson attributed most juvenile delinquency among girls to "feeblemindedness." (Revealingly, most of the young women at the state school had been institutionalized by their parents for "stubborness" or "tendencies toward lewd or immoral conduct," p. 39.) While Dewson saw training for domestic service and marriage as the best solutions to her charges' problems, she was building a professional career and striking up a life-long relationship with Polly Porter, a lovely and well-to-do social worker ten years her junior.

Ware gives Dewson's love affair with Porter detailed attention. Its story is an important one because it is a rare glimpse into the lives of lesbian women on a day-to-day basis. A charming set of photographs from the Dewson-Porter scrapbooks creates a sense of the physical attraction this handsome pair felt for each other, the cheeriness of their lives, and the loving routine of their decades of domesticity. Dewson and Porter surrounded themselves with like-minded women. In New York City they lived in a cooperative apartment house dominated by women couples, including Eleanor Roosevelt's Val-Kill friends and associates, Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman. At Porter's rambling summer house in Castine, Maine, they entertained other "partners" as well as more sexually ambivalent friends like Eleanor Roosevelt. Ware's story documents the sheer joy Dewson and Porter felt in their control over their own lives, free both from parents and husbands, a joy bolstered, no doubt, by their financial independence and fairly luxurious lifestyle. Nothing was so important to them as their Ford automobiles, in which they stumped for suffrage, commuted between country and city, and until the 1930s, used for extensive touring vacations, including the North African coast. When they both joined the Red Cross during World War I and were sent to administer refugee relief in southern France, it seemed perfectly logical to them to have their car shipped over, even though driving meant changing flat tires, making repairs with hard-to-get parts, and negotiating hopelessly bad roads. One suspects these challenges were part of the fun. "We feel very much at home here," wrote Dewson, "because we are to have a little Ford" (p. 81).

Dewson's most important work began with her appointment to the Massachusetts Committee to Investigate the Minimum Wage in 1911. There she prepared a lengthy report documenting women's low wages based on nearly

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7,000 schedules, which helped convince the state legislature to pass the country's first minimum wage law in 1912. By 1923 fourteen states had such laws and the minimum wage law for women was a central component of social feminism. When the Porter-Dewsons moved to New York in 1920, Dewson immersed herself in the hectic whirl of social feminist activity in the Women's City Club, the Consumers' League, and the Women's Trade Union League, where she developed important political alliances with Frances Perkins, Florence Kelley, Rose Schneiderman, Roosevelt, Cook, and Dickerman. It was Perkins who later said the interlocking reform interests and friendships of these women made New York in the 1920s " 'a small world' " (p. 144). With the "shadow of unconstitutionality" hanging over minimum wage legislation, and, indeed, in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in *Adkins v. Children's Hospital* (1923), over all social welfare legislation, many social feminists began to see penetrating government itself as a substitute for the increasingly frustrating tactics of a separate women's lobbying campaign. After working with Felix Frankfurter on a lengthy, fact-laden brief for the unsuccessful Adkins decision and futile trips to Albany testifying on behalf of the child labor amendment, Dewson jumped at the chance to campaign for Al Smith in 1928 and watched with satisfaction the election of Franklin Roosevelt as governor of New York. Although she was far more interested in Eleanor's ideas than in Franklin's, she eagerly agreed to work for the Roosevelt presidency alongside Eleanor in the Women's Division of the Democratic Party and became its permanent director in 1933. The two women sought nothing less than complete control over every woman appointed through Democratic patronage, and hovered over the president until he named Perkins Secretary of Labor. Dewson was also behind the appointment of the first woman, Florence Ellinwood Allen, to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and tried to get her nominated to the Supreme Court.

Until her resignation in 1937 Dewson was a female power broker in the Democratic Party, or as some called her, "a Jim Farley in Petticoats." The stamp of Dewson and her cohorts, or what Ware has described in her previous book, *Beyond Suffrage* (1981), as a women's New Deal network, was also felt on much of the social welfare legislation of the 1930s, including the NRA, the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act, the WPA bill, and the Fair Labor Standards Act. The latter finally made minimum wage legislation—for both men and women—agreeable to the Supreme Court. Frances Perkins, whose appointment did turn out to have historic impact on New Deal policy, would later say, " 'You and I, Mary, made Roosevelt's labor policy. . . . [I]t was the humanitarian . . . and effective action and administration under the political New Deal' " (pp. 210–11). This is a large claim, and from both Scharf's and Ware's evidence, one that has credence. While the extensive research re-

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quired to prove such a claim is beyond the scope of either biography, it will be one of the most important threads of inquiry for researching the New Deal years in the future. Scholars need to trace more precisely the routes by which the agenda of women's social reform in the 1920s got into the minds and agendas of Democratic politicians and the political rhetoric of mainstream liberalism in the 1930s.

Ware credits Dewson's considerable success to her forceful personality, consummate political skill, and cultivation of contacts. She used her friendship with the occupants of the White House to the hilt. But she was unable to build an empire that outlasted her tenure, and when she left Washington, much of the strength of New Deal women's politics went with her. Ware has some difficulty explaining why this is so. She notes that the New Deal's reformist tendencies slacked in FDR's second term and that women tend to be more successful in political movements in the early stages, before male hierarchies are solidified. While this is no doubt part of the explanation, I also think that Ware's relative disinterest in broader themes undermines her analysis by the time she reaches Dewson's years in Washington. Women like Dewson, Perkins, and Roosevelt had assumed a custodial position for working-class women in the teens; perhaps it was bound to be undermined as working-class interests became legitimized under the New Deal. By 1940 "protective legislation" was no longer necessarily bound by gender, many working people had unions through which to voice their own grievances, and the "lady bountiful" approach to industrial problems was increasingly inappropriate. The "small world" remembered nostalgically by Perkins had to be broadened to include a much wider range of voices, some of them proletarian and not feeble-minded, speaking about what was good for the working class. Ware is at her best in describing the political networking of Dewson and her subjects, but does not tell us enough about the intellectual constructs governing the choices made by them. Whether Dewson herself was an intellectual is not the point; she developed into an able administrator of social welfare agencies in the period when the social sciences were born, and when Progressives in government, corporations, and reform movements were most enthused about the possibilities of humane class control through scientific management. I would have liked to know more about why Dewson was such a powerful administrator, what conceptual framework went into her pathbreaking reports, and the distinctive style that made them so effective. Ware tends to take at face value Dewson and Roosevelt's assumption that they were speaking for all women, especially all "progressive" women. Both Scharf and Ware are so caught up in the debate between social feminists and Woman's Party advocates that they give no thought to the impact that the rise of a vigorous Left had on making social feminist women's politics more staid than

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visionary. Ware notes that Dewson's successor at the Consumer's League, Lucy Randolph Mason, left the presidency in 1937 to organize for the CIO, but seems to see no larger significance in this act. Polly Porter's interest in radicalism is treated as a kind of misguided contagion, rather like catching the flu.

Scharf has produced what might seem to have been impossible: a brief, accessible, and engaging biography that covers the significant aspects of Eleanor Roosevelt's life. She also fits Roosevelt into the social and political history of her time, weaving beautifully written summaries of homosocial culture, early twentieth-century reform, and Franklin Roosevelt's life into the text at appropriate but barely noticed moments. This is a reflective rather than an eye-opening biography, drawn from already published sources, particularly the Lash volumes and Roosevelt's own writings, but Scharf is often able to go over old material in a fresh and dramatic way. In a masterful opening chapter, she recreates the atmosphere at the Democratic Party convention in 1940, where Eleanor Roosevelt was instrumental in the nomination of Henry Wallace, and in so doing, paved the way for Franklin's nomination to a third term. The themes of this opening are repeated in Scharf's text and structure her analysis of Roosevelt's life; the frustration/powerfulness of being a president's wife; her ongoing personal alienation from, yet working partnership with, Franklin; the fractious discontent of her immediate family members; the contrast between much of the public's adulation for her and the loneliness of her personal life.

Scharf reconciles the divergent points of view which I introduced at the beginning of this essay; here Roosevelt is both the woman who typifies and stands alone. She was a much admired but not unusual participant in the fascinating group of moderate social reformers in the 1920s who were working for legislative change in New York state.[2] They were willing to throw the Republicans and Prohibition overboard for industrial regulation and the Democrats; they became experts at penetrating the system, at testifying before the legislature, writing reports, drafting legislation. Along the way many of them, especially Perkins, Dewson, and Roosevelt, became accomplished politicians in their own right. In an essay promoting the candidacy of Al Smith, Roosevelt termed him a "practical idealist," but Scharf argues that the term was as well suited to her. She was willing to take less than all she wanted if she got something of what she needed. Some will find this infuriating, others merely realistic, but it is a politician's mentality, and it is key to her personal style. This is in some ways remarkable, because she was by nature not a very flexible person. Her life began with a series of horrible abandonments: her adored father was an abusive, even violent alcoholic whom she saw rarely; her mother and a brother died before she was eight; further degra-

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dations and losses faced her in the home of her grandmother Hall. There seems to have been no one who loved her before she went away to England as a teenager and blossomed in a girl's boarding school. Scharf steers clear of openly psychoanalyzing Roosevelt, citing Roosevelt's own distrust of such methods: "she did not believe that her whirlwind of public activism and commitment to humanitarian service were compensatory ventures to gain the admiration and love so lacking in her childhood. She harked back to an older, more traditional explanation, a nineteenth-century concept of character. Individuals must develop self-discipline and willpower, have a sense of responsibility and duty" (p. 122).

But the patterns of Roosevelt's adult life clearly fit the description of a child of an alcoholic or of abusive parenting. She was responsible nearly to a fault, desperate for special attention but often retreated in the face of real intimacy, found sex distasteful, sought escape from her terrors in constant work, and was controlling to the point of badgering. What historians will find interesting is the way in which Scharf shows how this psychological profile enhanced her political effectiveness; her practical idealism was underlaid with a fierce tenacity, born out of personal need, that served her causes and the country well.

That personal need also found expression in a series of intense but circumscribed relationships with both women and men. Her friendship with Dickerman and Cook resulted in the only home of her own she ever had, free from the claims of the vast Roosevelt clan, both young and old, at the Val-Kill cottage and factory at Hyde Park. Scharf understandably finds the issues of Roosevelt's "sexual preference" a tricky one, and steers toward the noncontroversial, claiming that Roosevelt "could not and would not accept the reality of lesbianism" (p. 62). Yet she also describes the Val-Kill cottage as the place "where she lived and learned and loved. . . . These women with whom she lived and others with whom she worked were the emotional mainstay of her recovery and redefinition" (p. 74). The woman-centeredness of Roosevelt's life continued in the thirties, with her "friend" Lorena Hickok. But there was also Louis Howe, Earl Miller, and, after her brother Hall's death from alcoholism, several young men, including Lash. Obviously, sex was not the thing here, but something more fundamental; perhaps a recurring need to make new people love her and thus assuage the terrible guilt only an abused child can feel.

Both the Roosevelts, for very different psychological reasons, had this particular need and quality; to get people to fall in love with them, even people they did not know. They seem not to have been in love with each other for most of their married lives. What one tends to forget is that he was as odd a duck as she; reared by an elderly father and a nearly smothering mother, he

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was never a very popular boy in school, a star athlete, or even a particularly good student. Eleanor's side of the family called him a "feather-duster." But in some strange and felicitous way they complemented each other's strengths and weaknesses, and one of them cannot be imagined without the other. Eleanor's hard-won fight to be just one of the crowd in the homosocial culture of women's reform after World War I had of necessity to be abandoned when her husband ran for president. Her new notoriety evoked in her a desperate longing to flee. But, as usual, she did her duty. She was no longer a social type but a unique wife in a unique position. How she learned to use that position for larger political goals is a fascinating story, enriched and expanded by these two books.

Sharon Hartman Strom, Departments of History and Women's Studies, University of Rhode Island, is the author of " 'We're No Kitty Foyles': Organizing Office Workers for the CIO," in Ruth Milkman, ed., Women, Work and Protest *(1985).*

1. See Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 512–29.
2. The best account of this group is Elisabeth Israels Perry, "Training for Public Life: ER and Women's Political Networks," in Joan Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman, eds., *Without Precedent* (1984), pp. 28–45.

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