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Book Review: Lori D. Ginzberg. Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

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Abstract

Lori D. Ginzberg's 1990 work, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, focuses on the ideas and socially benevolent practices of Protestant women of the prosperous middle and upper-middle-class during the 1820s to the 1880s in the northeast region of the United States. The author analyzes how contemporaries affirmed these values in women's benevolent work, which also promoted their status and brought about significant social changes in American culture.

Ginzberg, Lori D. *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Reviewed by Merritt Morgan (Independent Scholar)

In this study, Lori D. Ginzberg focuses on the ideas and socially benevolent practices of Protestant women of the prosperous middle and upper-middle-class during the 1820s to the 1880s in the northeast region of the United States. This well-written scholarly analysis explores nineteenth-century middle and upper-middle-class Protestant women's efforts in their benevolent work to forge a higher moral order and change their status. During the antebellum period, religious and civic values, particularly beliefs of female virtue and morality, were highly promoted by benevolent and religious societies among the class formations forged in linking New England to the frontier. Charting the various beliefs and interests of middle and upper-middle-class women who organized in benevolent work, Ginzberg views perceptions of the divine nature attributed at the time to women, particularly the character trait of virtue, concluding that contemporaries affirmed these values in women's benevolent work, which also promoted their status and brought about significant social changes in American culture.

Building on the organizational freedoms emergent primarily in charitable and missionary work during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Protestant women of the middle and upper-middle-class in the United States' northeast region applied their religious training to form a comprehensive network of female benevolent enterprises. Assembling conceptual ideas based much on the work of Nancy F. Cott, Nancy A. Hewitt, and Anne Boylan, Ginzberg begins her story showing us how women sought to draw new definitions of female identity, asserting Christian ideas for reform in their benevolent enterprises. She surveys how women asserted their ideologies of virtue and moral service in public life and benevolent work to expand boundaries of their status. The archetype of women possessing more virtue than men was common in the attitudes and rhetoric among the emerging middle and upper-middle-class to redefine social status boundaries, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 2 focuses on women's various charitable and relief endeavors between the 1820s and 1840s throughout New England and New York. Ginzberg explores the "business of benevolence" (p. 37) and its most common form of denominational organization among female participants. In the northeastern parts of the United States during the early nineteenth century, women's activism effected through benevolent organizations demonstrated an increased exercise of authority that elevated their status and brought men and women together in new relational ways in civic society. Chapters 3 and 4 address some conflicting ideas between women's moral stance and their involvement in American politics that antebellum ideology traced back to Greco-Roman concepts of gender spheres. In the first half of the nineteenth-century, women increasingly perceived their need to acquire new political means to keep up with the social changes, which they accomplished in their involvement in electoral politics. From the 1840s and into the 1850s, benevolent women and other reformers increasingly saw how political action, especially electoral activity, was a quicker way to accomplish their goals. In these chapters, Ginzberg explores various women's strategies of benevolence and analyzes numerous reformers in-depth, from some relatively obscure names to the famous Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott. Hosted by Stanton and Mott, the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in

New York launched a new era of women's ability to exercise rights and authority in social, civil, and religious arenas, particularly with increased interests for suffrage.

In culminating the fusion of ideas of female traits with benevolence during the 1860s, chapter 5 explores a new form of benevolence that incorporated a wartime discipline into the relief and transformation of society. Teeming with information about the Sanitary Commission and numerous other Civil War relief organizations, including some in-depth discussion on Mary Livermore (the co-director of the Commission's Chicago branch), the chapter addresses electoral strategies and corporate practices developed by benevolent women which made them more efficient during wartime. During wartime, the benevolent work and charitable aid societies exposed women to organizational and business strategies and allowed them to explore careers, particularly in nursing, teaching, and business management. Rounding out the volume is a chapter devoted to the decades of experiences women had built upon, especially emphasizing the valuable wartime lessons gained that opened a new era of trends and endeavors in benevolence work. In the 1870s, the woman's temperance movement that intertwined with benevolent concepts became the most effective way to increase support for demanding the ballot and a popular way to increase female involvement in public life. During the 1880s, President of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Francis Willard, the most famous woman of her day, grew the all-female organization to be the largest in the United States; its plunge into political activism is explored in detail in the last chapter.[1] The chapter closes by discussing popular ideas of benevolent reform, as well as women involved with governmental relief work that became most visible in the North during the postwar decades.

Tracing the promotion of benevolent work and the popularized values perpetuated by the newly emerging middle and middle-upper-class during the antebellum period's conducive social changes, *Women and the Work of Benevolence* illuminates the changing context of benevolence as American culture contested over ideas of morality, liberty, freedom, and justice. It must be said that a central oversight is the lack of focus on the Second Great Awakening, as religious revivals tracing back to New England connected women's reform of personal morals to their benevolent societies.[2] Benevolence and voluntary labor, intertwined with mission work along the Yankee trail of migration, make the study of benevolent societies, especially their origins, a somewhat arduous journey. Ginzberg's work is a valuable contribution to American cultural history as the United States became an imperial nation.

Notes:

[1]. Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), xxi-xxvi; 52-94.

[2]. Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family In Oneida County New York, 1790 -1885*, ed. Robert Fogel and Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19-59; John L. Hammond, *The Politics of Benevolence: Revival Religion and American Voting Behavior*, ed. Gerald M. Platt (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Company, 1979), 1-19.