

The First Age of Reform

by Ronald G. Walters



The Fruits of Temperance, by Nathaniel Currier, published by J.B. Allen, New York, 1848. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

“In the history of the world,” Ralph Waldo Emerson declared in 1841, “the doctrine of Reform had never such scope as at the present hour.”^[1] Not much a joiner of causes himself, Emerson had in mind a remarkable flowering of reform movements from roughly 1815 until the Civil War that were striking to observers at the time and to historians ever since for their energy, variety, and occasional strangeness.

Even the role of a “reformer” that emerged before the Civil War was relatively new. With some exceptions, earlier American do-gooders were mostly people like the Puritan minister Cotton Mather or Ben Franklin, for whom reform was part of a wider range of occupations and activities. By the 1830s there were men and women like Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who devoted most of their adult lives to reform causes.

Three of these movements remain especially well known. The first in time, as well as the largest nineteenth-century reform movement, was a diverse assault on alcoholic beverages arising shortly after 1800. It is commonly called the temperance movement, although by the 1830s, the goal usually was not moderation in drinking, but rather total abstinence from alcohol. By the 1840s a portion of the movement advocated a legal ban on alcoholic beverages.

The second of this trio of best-known antebellum reforms was a new, more radical anti-slavery movement that emerged by the early 1830s. Its program for ending slavery stood in stark contrast to the “colonizationist” position earlier advocated by some prominent Americans and embodied in the American Colonization Society (1816–1964). Colonizationists maintained that the right way to end slavery was gradually, either voluntarily by masters or with some compensation, and by sending freed African Americans to the ACS’s colony in Africa, Liberia. Some colonizationists (including the few African American ones) genuinely disliked slavery and believed black people had

no future in the United States; others were more concerned about eliminating a growing free black population in the South and North. Although relatively small in numbers, post-1830 abolitionists included African Americans and whites, and women and men, and were generally less distinguished than the leaders of the ACS. They rejected every aspect of colonization. For them slavery had to be ended immediately, not gradually, without compensation to masters and with freed slaves remaining in the United States. Where colonizationists placated slaveholders (and included them in their ranks), abolitionists condemned them as sinners. This position had little appeal outside the free states, and even there abolitionists faced enormous hostility, especially in the 1830s, but their passionate rhetoric and deeds helped shape political debates as the nation headed toward secession and civil war.

The third of the best-remembered antebellum reforms was a women's rights movement, its arrival signaled by a stirring "Declaration of Sentiments" issued in 1848 by a convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments condemned men for the oppression of women and put forward a broad platform for women's emancipation. The latter's most controversial plank—and the only one not passed unanimously—called for full voting rights for women. A high proportion of those present at Seneca Falls were abolitionists. In that sense, the women's rights movement owed much to the anti-slavery movement; but it also foreshadowed what would become, after the Civil War, a powerful and eventually successful campaign for women's suffrage.

To focus only upon the antebellum reform movements that attract the most attention in textbooks, however, is to slight the explosion of reform movements Emerson had in mind. From a present-day perspective, some of these seem more like fads than reforms, but that can be misleading. Consider the case of Sylvester Graham, a Presbyterian minister and temperance lecturer, who, by 1832, had become convinced that bad diets, alcohol, and poor hygiene threatened the body and spirit. A terrible cholera epidemic in 1832 gave him an audience for his belief that a plain vegetarian diet without stimulating spices, coffee, or tea was the key to good health and ensured immunity from destructive impulses (including sexual ones). Graham's regimen—memorialized in a cracker—promised individuals that they could perfect themselves physically. For him, the focus of reform was not on the condition of others, such as slaves and drunkards, but on one's self.

Among those who differed with Graham in that respect were men and women who dealt with issues that remain troublesome today—poverty, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, and world peace, for example. Those reformers often addressed the issues in ways radically different from twenty-first-century approaches. In the name of reform, for instance, antebellum states built new-style prisons and asylums. The initial goal was not to isolate criminals and the insane from society, although they certainly did that, but to remake them into model citizens. In the twentieth century, later generations attacked these institutions, again in the name of reform.

As one might expect from the diversity of antebellum reforms, they had different points of origin and different trajectories, but there were some common patterns. They most frequently looked less like a unified movement than a shifting collection of organizations with occasional schisms and different constituencies and agendas. The majority of reforms also rested on a base of "voluntary associations," local groups—sometimes loosely affiliated with a national organization—dedicated to a common purpose. European observers, including the most famous of them all, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted with some bemusement an American penchant for joining voluntary associations. These associations could serve a number of different purposes, from religious to purely social, or anything in between. They were, nonetheless, effective tools for sustaining reform movements on the local level.

There was also a degree of overlapping membership within antebellum reform. Enough existed that a former abolitionist, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, looking back after the Civil War, could speak fondly of a “Sisterhood of Reforms” interconnected by common supporters and shared beliefs. (Abolitionists, for instance, tended to endorse temperance, although temperance—one of the few reforms strong in the South—did not necessarily mark one as an abolitionist.) Finally, reform movements were all subject to economic and political fluctuations. A devastating financial panic and subsequent depression beginning in 1837, for example, made funding scarce for reform organizations generally. And territorial expansion in the 1840s, which triggered controversies over slavery, directly affected abolitionism and less directly affected other movements, including women’s rights and temperance.

Explaining why reform movements emerged in antebellum America is no simple task. Their proliferation was the product of a convergence of multiple changes in American life, none of which necessarily caused the explosion of reforms, but all of which, taken together, enabled and shaped it. At the most basic level, reform movements require people who believe that human effort can—and should—change things. That has not always been the case. In their optimism about change, antebellum reformers were heirs of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century shifts in secular and religious thought. On the secular side was a new faith in human reason and its power to remake the world, a faith manifested in the American and French revolutions. Antebellum reform also drew heavily on an early nineteenth-century wave of Protestant revivalism, often called the Second Great Awakening. In complicated ways this form of evangelical Christianity encouraged some believers (not all) to engage in reform movements. That is not to say all reformers were evangelicals—non-evangelical sects like the Quakers and Unitarians were well represented among their numbers and southern evangelicals were markedly unenthusiastic about anti-slavery and women’s rights. Religion, nonetheless, gave antebellum reform its moral urgency, just as secular languages of reason and rights also molded it.

Economic, demographic, and technological changes likewise inspired and shaped antebellum reform. Although America remained predominately a rural and small-town nation into the twentieth century, its cities were growing after 1820. Urban areas provided some of the problems reformers addressed, but they and small towns also had the critical mass of people and resources reform organizations required. Urban growth and an expanding economy, moreover, produced a new middle class with a level of financial comfort and leisure time necessary to engage in reform. Among its members were educated women denied much of a public voice except in religious and reform activities. They were the backbone of many causes. Finally, by the 1830s improvements in printing technology and in transportation—notably canals, steamboats, and eventually railroads—made it far less expensive for reformers and their messages to circulate over wider distances. Especially striking, in fact, is how reformers used an extraordinary range of oral, print, and visual media to make their case to the public—among them, speeches, newspapers, plays, poetry, novels, children’s literature, songs, demonstrations, and cartoons. Antebellum reform propaganda aimed broadly at public opinion, not just elites, and used new media in ways that look modern.

The diversity of antebellum reformers’ tactics—like the diversity of their causes—masks a choice they all faced: If I want to change the world, where do I start? A common response would have been “with ‘moral suasion,’” a term that would be revived in the twentieth century to refer to ways of influencing economic behavior. Before the Civil War, however, it meant persuading people to do the right thing. Behind it was something of a religious conversion model of reform: change begins, and proceeds, one person at a time. Another notion of how to implement reform relied on coercion, not just persuasion—legislation, social pressure, or incarceration in corrective institutions, for example. In 1840, abolitionists split over several issues, among them whether to engage in partisan

politics or stick to moral suasion. At about the same time some temperance advocates similarly moved from encouraging abstinence from alcohol to using state legislators to ban it.

A third answer to “Where to begin?” was a minority one: create a model community, a concrete example of how society ought to be organized, and hope the rest of the world follows. Between the Revolution and the Civil War more than a hundred of these small utopian communities materialized, some religious in origin, some based on secular ideologies. Most were ephemeral, but all represented yet another way of imagining how to achieve social change and what the world would look like after it occurred. The fourth answer was likewise a minority one and the polar opposite of moral suasion. It was “with violence against evil.” Its most famous proponent was the abolitionist John Brown. The blow he struck against slavery in a raid on a federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on October 16, 1859, was a fateful step toward the Civil War. It was also deeply disturbing for many reformers because it posed a question that would haunt subsequent generations: “Is it right to use immoral means in a just cause?”

From the perspective of the longer history of reform in America, there were continuities, shifts, and discontinuities after the Civil War. The temperance movement gained strength in the second half of the nineteenth century and achieved its greatest victory in 1920 with the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” within the United States. The women’s rights movement came to focus more sharply—but not exclusively—on voting rights after the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1868) guaranteed suffrage for male citizens, but not for women. That campaign culminated in the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1920), long advocated by reformers with roots in the antebellum years like Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Many abolitionists retired from the field after the Civil War ended slavery, while others—notably Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips—remained faithful to a broad vision of human rights and economic opportunity that included women, African Americans, and immigrants. After the war, however, new approaches to achieving social change emerged. At one end of the spectrum there arrived from Europe a variety of anarchism advocating revolutionary violence. Toward the other end was the late nineteenth-century notion, associated with Progressivism, that professional expertise, science, and social science could lead to positive social change. Since the early nineteenth century, ways of thinking about *how* to achieve reform have evolved as dynamically as have ways of thinking about *what* needs to be reformed.

Beyond their successes and failures, insights and blind spots, antebellum reform movements put on the table a question of enduring relevance: In a political system like ours, with many layers and much inertia, what is the role of social movements that try to push the country one way or another? Are they safety valves that release discontent without necessarily addressing its root causes? Do they mark the outer limits of what is conceivable within the political system? Do they force into the open issues mainstream politicians prefer to ignore? Are they social clubs for cranks and fanatics, as critics claim? Are they the nation’s conscience and an essential part of American democracy? The men and women Emerson had in mind in 1841 would have answered “yes” to the latter.

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” January 25, 1841, in *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, and Co., 1841) 1:523.

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