RSAJournal
2025, vol. 36
ISSN: 1592-4467

DOI: 10.13135/1592-4467/11659
rsa.aisna.net

From the Mill to the Home

Women's Work and Separate Spheres in Henry C. Carey's Political Economy

Matteo M. Rossi

University of Turin
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4553-5095
Email: matteo.rossi@unito.it

Abstract

The article investigates how Henry Charles Carey (1793-1879), the most influential nineteenth-century US economist, conceptualized the social role of women, the economic relevance of their work within and outside the family and the power relationships between the sexes. The article seeks to overcome the shortcomings of historiography, which only rarely investigated the contribution of nineteenth-century US political economy to the ideology of domesticity and never took into serious account Carey's reflection on women's work. Placing Carey's early writings – especially his *Principles of Political Economy* (1837-1840), *Essay on the Rate of Wages* (1835) and *The Past, the Present, and the Future* (1848) – in the context of the history of capitalism and of the social history of women, the article argues that his political economy represented a relevant episode in the legitimation of women's subordinate employment in US manufactures, in the definition of a doctrine of separate spheres and in the conceptualization of the relationship between the home and the state. Overall, the article maintains that, far from theorizing a greater equality among sexes, Carey's political economy conceived the maintenance of sexual hierarchies as both a result and a necessary condition of capitalist development, with women having to remain subordinate to men whether working in the mill or in the home. Despite his support for an overall improvement in the condition and the treatment of women, then, Carey believed that such improvement could never undermine the patriarchal structure of US society. In

highlighting the gendered dimension of Carey's political economy between the 1830s and 1850s, the article shows how he theorized an inextricable connection between capitalist development and patriarchal relations in the family.

KEYWORDS

Henry C. Carey, Political Economy, Home, Women's Work, Separate Spheres

In the early-nineteenth century, the emergence of a distinctly US political economy happened in a context of capitalist transformation that fundamentally reshaped the economic and social functions of the family, as well as the relationship between men and women. However, historians have rarely investigated the way in which the first US economists understood this redefinition of gender roles. This article studies how early-nineteenth-century US political economy conceptualized the social role of women, the economic relevance of their work within and outside the family and the power relationship between sexes. It does so by focusing on Henry Charles Carey (1793-1879), the most influential US economist of the time, placing his writings between the 1830s and the 1850s in the context of the history of capitalism and the social history of women. In the past few decades, scholars provided new readings of the role of gender in the history of economic thought, both by highlighting the contribution of women to the field and by unveiling the gendered dimension of economic theory (Pujol; Bodkin; Nyland and Dimand; Becchio). However, they mostly focused on classical liberalism, on British and European thinkers or on the twentieth century, while overlooking the contribution of nineteenth-century US economists. At the same time, historians who reconstructed the emergence and the significance of the US ideology of domesticity in the early-nineteenth century (Cott; Kessler-Harris; Ryan; Epstein) failed to grasp the contribution of political economists in legitimizing the separation of spheres. Moreover, while only a few scholars of Henry Carey's work acknowledged his reflections on women (Conkin 293; Sklansky 87-88), others treated him as a theorist of gender equality (Helleiner 154).

This article aims to overcome the shortcomings of historiography by offering a first contribution to the investigation of women's role in nineteenth-century US political economy. It argues that Carey's political

economy represented a relevant episode in the legitimation of women's subordinate employment in US manufactures, in the definition of a doctrine of separate spheres and in the conceptualization of the relationship between the home and the state. It shows that, far from theorizing greater equality between sexes, Carey conceived the maintenance of sexual hierarchies as both a result and a necessary condition of capitalist development, with women having to remain subordinate to men whether working in the mill or in the home. In doing this, the article also seeks to contribute to the intellectual history of US capitalism, by showing the inextricable connection between capitalism and patriarchy theorized by one of its most important nineteenth-century apologists.

The Coming of Capitalism, Women's Work and the Ideology of Domesticity

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the coming of capitalism to the United States was not only crucial in introducing new hierarchies in terms of class and race, with the emergence of an urban proletariat in Northeastern cities and with the intensification of exploitation in slave plantations in the South, but also in terms of gender. By reshaping the productive relevance of the domestic space, capitalism decisively impacted the relations of power between men and women in the family. In the Northeast, the spread of manufactures, both water-powered mills in the countryside and workshops in urban settings, forced the concentration of labor in bigger workshops and gradually took production outside of the domestic spaces in which it had hitherto predominantly taken place (Wilentz; Laurie; Sellers). In other words, early US industrialization brought a slow but steady decline of the household as the fundamental productive nucleus, which was partially held back by the significant recourse to outwork by manufacturers but continued steadily in the first half of the century.

While this complex and often non-linear process started to deplete the home of its productive function, leaving it as a place of reproductive labor only, at the same time it forced working-class women, particularly young and unmarried ones, to go to work outside the home in order to contribute to the family's subsistence (Kessler-Harris 25-28). Early industrialization

thus brought about a widening of class distinctions. Whereas most women became "mill girls" working for wages, while continuing to be burdened by the family's reproductive labor, some could become "ladies" (Lerner) by staying at home to engage only in those activities that came to be increasingly regarded as women's specific duties.

Thus, since men's independent work resisted longer to the pressures of competition, women constituted the vast majority of the early manufacturing workforce in the United States, particularly in textile production, in which their specific competencies proved useful. However, the mechanization of production soon determined a decomposition of the labor process and the introduction of more repetitive tasks that determined a de-skilling of female labor, a reduction in women's wages and the overall worsening of their situation (P. Foner 20-37). Particularly after the crisis of 1837, the conditions of working women drastically deteriorated and continued to do so until the late 1850s. The exploitation of women as a low-paid and de-skilled workforce in the mills (and as an unpaid workforce at home) constituted a crucial factor of early US industrialization (Kessler-Harris 46-60).

Working women reacted to this process by actively participating to the first labor insurgencies between the 1820s and the 1830s, starting to strike and organize for higher wages and shorter hours (P. Foner 38-54; Roediger and P. Foner 44-64). Moreover, the exit of women from the home was accompanied by an increasing activism, both in anti-slavery and in other reform movements. In fact, women, both black and white, both middle and working class, constituted the rank-and-file of the abolitionist movement (Sinha 2-3) and this militancy was crucial in laying the grounds for the emergence of a women's rights movement later in the 1840s, giving them a critique of personal dominion that could easily be translated from the denunciation of the enslavement of African Americans in plantations to the denunciation of women's subordination in the family (Dorsey; Sinha 266-98; Rudan 86-99). Despite being driven by white middle-class women and largely ignoring the condition of black and working women, the movement was still evidence of US women's increasingly loud political voice (Kraus).

It was precisely the combination of these historical processes that made an ideological redefinition of their role more urgent. In particular,

the household that was gradually becoming a place of consumption, of non-labor for man and of reproductive labor for women, started to be increasingly described as a space of family and affections: as a "home" set against the outside world and sheltered from its dangers, in which women could perform their supposedly natural roles as wives and mothers. Thus, in the same years in which most women had to leave the home to be employed in manufactures, a new domestic ideology emerged in the United States, reproposing traditional visions of womanhood as the purer sex and the home as a sanctuary against the increasing competitiveness of the new market society (Kessler-Harris 49; Boydston).

Moving from an acknowledgment of the biological differences between men and women, this ideology of separate spheres aimed to naturalize their distinct social roles and the home as women's proper space, as well as to re-legitimize their dependence on husbands, at a time when their work outside of the home and their increasing political activism threatened to challenge sexual hierarchies. The founding element of this doctrine was thus the ideological construction of the "home" as the physical space proper for women and of "domesticity" as the set of occupations to which women would be more inclined, as well as the opposition of the private space of the home to the public-political space of society and the state. In doing so, the domestic ideology reinforced women's exploitation in workplaces, since it devalued their work outside the home and made it possible to consider their wages as only accessory to the family's income, thus justifying their compression (59).

The most clearcut formulation of this domestic ideology, which was starkly at odds with (and tried to react to) the US social and economic reality, was proposed in the 1830s by Alexis de Tocqueville in his pages on American women. In his view, Americans had understood that "democratic improvement" could not consist in removing the "wide differences between the physical and moral constitution of man and woman," but rather in having each of them perform their specific task. Americans had applied "the great principle of political economy which governs the manufactures of our age," that is the division of labor, through which they carefully distinguished "the duties of man from those of woman, in order that the great work of society may be the better carried on." For Tocqueville, then, democratic equality could not erase a difference that seemed to be "eternally

based in human nature" but had to value it by functionally separating and hierarchically ordering the social roles of men and women (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, 224-25). Democracy, then, must not bring about "the subversion of marital power," since "in the smaller association of husband and wife, as well as in the great social community, the object of democracy is to regulate and legalize the powers which are necessary, not to subvert all power" (225). Thus, far from challenging patriarchy as a form of domination, American democracy had to regulate, legitimize and appropriate it as a necessary power, by naturalizing the social roles of men and women.

Between the 1830s and the 1850s the ideology of domesticity was popularized by a booming literature on housekeeping, on "true womanhood," on child-rearing and on the religious significance of family life (Cott; Ryan; Epstein). These essays, journals, poems and novels were in many cases written by women, like Lydia Maria Child, author of *The Frugal Housewife* (1832), Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* magazine, and Catharine Beecher, sister of the more popular Harriet Beecher Stowe, who in 1841 published a *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, after having founded and directed the Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut (Sklar; Cossutta 78-86). Under Tocqueville's direct influence, Beecher recognized the separation of spheres as an axiom derived from a Christian interpretation of American democracy. At the same time, she argued that this division of social roles left women with "a superior influence" in matters pertaining to their own sphere, like in "the education of their children, [...] in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals or manners" (Beecher 33). Thus, the separation of spheres took on a peculiar significance precisely because of the insistence on the pedagogical role of women. If women's specific task was to educate the future citizens of the American nation, the "peculiar responsibilities of American women" (37) to Beecher had a broader political significance that eventually broke down the fences between spheres, transforming the separation between the public and the private into a dichotomization of the public space itself (Baritono xli). In this sense, Beecher, like other contemporary thinkers, made an extensive and strategic use of the doctrine of separate spheres that identified a distinctly female public sphere of intervention on the issues of

education, welfare for the poor, philanthropy and charity, thus legitimizing a social and political role for US women (Baker; Lasser; Mocci).

Man's Improvement and Women's Work

It was in this context that Henry Charles Carey, a former publisher from Philadelphia, elaborated his political economy, in the *Essay on the Rate of Wages* (1835), in the three-volume *Principles of Political Economy* (1837-1840), which would soon become one of the most read economic texts in the early-nineteenth-century United States and in *The Past, the Present, and the Future* (1848). In these writings, he outlined a vision of the economic and social role of women (which historians so far failed to investigate) strongly influenced both by the increasing employment of women in manufactures and by the spreading ideology of domesticity.

Carey sought to demonstrate that individual improvement represented the truth of capitalist development. The "elementary proposition" of his political economy stated that "man desires to maintain and to improve his condition" (Carey, *Principles of Political Economy*, vol. I, 1). It was this refusal to opt for mere subsistence that in Carey's perspective distinguished humans from animals, driving them to labor and to cooperate for productive purposes. Moving from this premise, Carey reassessed the status of political economy no longer as a science of wealth but as a "science of improvement," aimed at finding the natural laws that allowed humans to better their condition and the "disturbing causes" that could prevent them from doing so (vol. I, x-xii; vol. II, 13). These laws could be found by overturning the principles of scarcity proposed by British classical economists.

On the one hand, against Malthus's principle of population, Carey argued that the growth of population could exponentially boost production, by increasing the possibilities of cooperation and technological advancement. On the other hand, against Ricardo's theory of rent, he maintained that land could yield increasing returns both extensively and intensively. These principles of abundance allowed Carey to identify a dynamic according to which industrious individuals could expand their possibilities of consumption and their capacity to access the ownership of property, gaining economic independence and following a path of upward mobility.

Carey's political economy thus depicted the United States as a classless society in which permanent distinctions based on birth did not exist, while individual conditions reflected a scale of talent and effort. To Carey, this representation was not only a way of rejecting the British principles of scarcity but also a way of legitimizing the new class hierarchies imposed by capitalism against the critique to wage labor brought forward by the first movement of white workers between the 1820s and the 1830s (Rossi).

However, the path of social and economic improvement traced by Carey's political economy, while being formally open to everyone, could actually be realized only by white and male workers. In his writings, in fact, not only did the path of improvement appear explicitly precluded to women, as well as to slaves and natives (and arguably to non-whites in general), but men's improvement appeared to involve and to rest upon the increasing subordination of women within the family, their intensifying exploitation within manufactures and the strengthening of sexual hierarchies.

Carey described in very different terms the consequences of economic development and technological innovation on male and female labor. In fact, while the introduction of new machines allowed the latter to perform the most repetitive and unskilled tasks, in which "attention is more required than bodily labour" (*Principles*, vol. II, 140), it gave the former the possibility to perform more skilled and remunerative jobs. Thus, the employment of women in mechanized manufactures to Carey was important not only to put to work individuals who otherwise would remain idle, as already argued by Alexander Hamilton in his *Report on Manufactures* (1791), but also and most crucially to free men from the need "to compete with machinery" and to allow them "to apply their powers in other ways that are more productive" (Carey, *Essay on the Rate of Wages* 88). Thus, the fact that women represented the vast majority of the workforce appeared to Carey as the cause of the superior productivity of US manufactures compared to their British counterparts. "The improvements that have been made in machinery in the United States," he wrote, "have enabled [...] to employ female labour for many purposes for which male labour is still required in England" (85). This had allowed US manufactures to develop a superior "economy of labour," which consisted in a specific division of tasks based on gender. Given that "the labour of men is so much more valuable," in US manufactures "none are employed except as superintendents, mechanics,

&c., and thus nearly the whole of factory employment is left for females" (*Principles*, vol. II, 153). In the United States, then, "the power of the male operatives" was not "wasted" in simple and repetitive tasks like in England (*Essay* 72). In other words, in Carey's view the mechanization of production was crucial to introduce a sexual hierarchization of the workforce in which women could be confined to the most unskilled and low-paid jobs, while men could devote themselves to the most creative, directive and remunerative ones.

It was therefore the devaluation of the work of women, who were presented as incapable of creativity and invention, that allowed Carey to justify their subordinate position in employment, as well as their low wages. In fact, since according to Carey's wage-fund doctrine the level of wages was a consequence of the level of productivity, the fact that "the labour of men" remained "generally more productive than that of women" (72) explained and legitimized wage differentials between sexes. Thus, in the same years in which his father Mathew, himself a well-known economic thinker, was denouncing working women's increasing poverty, including in their hometown Philadelphia (P. Foner 41), Henry celebrated the conditions and justified the low wages of women employed in US manufactures. More broadly, the far higher number of women (as well as a far lower number of children) employed in US manufactures was presented by Carey as a decisive factor of the country's economic and moral superiority. In his view, women's subordinate, repetitive and exploited work constituted the material condition of possibility for man's improvement.

> Every man [...] endeavours to improve his own mode of operation [...], the consequence of which is, that machinery is rapidly improved, the labour of females is substituted for that of males, and the latter are required only in those higher employments, where everything tends to induce habits of reflection, and to produce that desire of improving his condition which most stimulates the inventive faculties of the labourer. (*Principles*, vol. II, 155-56)

Moreover, not only the possibility for men to rise socially was predicated upon women's exploitation, but to Carey it was also the necessary premise for women's confinement to reproductive labor after marriage. In fact, he

explained, the more men improved their condition, the more, "when they marry, the necessity for the employment of their wives and young children in factories is unknown" (*Essay* 88). Thus, Carey envisioned economic development as a process in which women had to work in manufactures before marriage, but had to stop immediately after it, devoting themselves to domestic labor. In this way, while allowing individual paths of improvement for men, industrialization would favor the participation of women in the productive workforce until a certain age, only to make it unnecessary after marriage, thus guaranteeing both women's undervalued contribution to the accumulation of capital and the performance of their domestic duties within the family. In other words, for Carey US manufactures could represent a sort of apprenticeship for working-class women: a place where they could learn the discipline and the subordination crucial for their future role as wives. It was not by chance, he noted, that in Lowell out of one thousand women employed only eleven were married, since it was precisely this distinction between different phases in the life of women, that allowed US manufactures to guarantee "female chastity" even for women working outside the family and to maintain a "state of morals" far superior to that of English factories, where wives and mothers were forced to work (88; 141).

Far from granting equal opportunities, then, the improvement outlined by Carey's political economy proved to be a sexed concept, justifying on the one hand the confinement of married women to the domestic space, and on the other the stratification and hierarchization of manufacturing labor on a sexual basis, upon which in those same decades US capitalism was grounding its accumulation in the Northeast (Kessler-Harris; Rockman 355-59; Beckert 188-90). To Carey, then, capitalist development and the accumulation of wealth rested upon a widening sexual division of labor and upon women's increasing subordination and exploitation.

In the same years, Francis Wayland (1796-1865), a Baptist minister and president of Brown University, expressed an even more explicit devaluation of women's work. In his *Elements of Political Economy* (1837), Wayland argued that mechanization determined a hierarchization of the workforce thanks to which occupation was provided "for females and for children" and through which manufacturers could "pay for each portion of the labor

no more than it is actually worth." This, according to Wayland, allowed to "greatly diminish the cost of production" (77-78). Moreover, later in the treatise, he justified women's low wages insisting on the fact that "a large portion of the laboring class of females are supported, in part, by their relatives," which allowed them "to labor for a price far less than the actual cost." In Wayland's perspective this was the reason "why the price of female labor, especially of that labor which requires but little skill, and which can be done at home, is so low" (340-41). Thus, in Wayland's writings, as in Carey's, the doctrine of separate spheres allowed to treat women's wages as only accessories to the family income, implicitly delegitimizing women's work outside of the home and at the same time justifying their low pay.

Capitalist Development, the Home and Women's Duties

A decade later, in *The Past, the Present, and the Future* (1848), Carey went back to reflecting on women's social role in the context of an expanded theory of economic development. Through an allegory of progress, Carey described the story of "the first settler, the Robison Crusoe of his day" who started working "alone" on poor soils, lacking instrumental capital but "provided however with a wife" (9). It was precisely the presence of a woman at his side that gradually allowed the first settler to emerge from a life of mere subsistence. In fact, in addition to acting as his "helpmate" in labor, the settler's wife would give him children, who would help him "in removing the obstacles by which his progress is impeded." Thus, the settler would acquire the crucial advantage of "combination of exertion", which would gradually allow him to develop new instruments of work, to cultivate new lands and to obtain a greater yield from those already cultivated, thus increasing his overall "power of accumulation" (10-13).

Despite being primarily driven by man's actions, this potentially limitless growth of wealth to Carey involved a change in the condition of women as well. In fact, while in the earliest, poorest and most savage stages of society, the woman was nothing but the man's "slave, ever ready to prostitute herself to the stranger for a mouthful of food," instead "the man who cultivates the rich soils of the earth" saw in her "the source of

his greatest happiness," to whom he turned "for solace in the hours of affliction." The growth of wealth, then, tended to bring "an improvement in the condition of woman" and to balance the relationship between sexes, giving "to the weak woman power over the strong man" (262-68). Thus, Carey recognized the woman's productive and reproductive labor as essential to making men's improvement possible, while describing economic development as a process that produced greater equality between men and women. However, the meaning of this equality signaled Carey's adhesion to the contemporary discourse on domesticity.

In his perspective, in fact, the improvement of the condition of women clearly consisted in the possibility for them not to work outside the home after marriage and to devote themselves to reproductive labor in the family. To Carey, while the "poor" and "savage" man forced his wife to work in the fields or, like in England, in factories even after marriage, in contrast the wealthy and civilized American man, thanks to his economic and moral improvement, allowed her to devote herself solely to domesticity. "He labours, that she may rest. He economizes, that she may enjoy the comforts and luxuries of life," Carey wrote, concealing the burdens of domestic labor (262). It was precisely their confinement to the home, then, in relieving them from the drudgery of productive labor, that, in Carey's perspective guaranteed to US women an exceptional quality of life (271).

Carey reiterated the idea that insofar as women had to work outside of the home, they could do so only until marriage, legitimizing women's subordination in the family as a way of preserving them from the hardness and moral risks involved in factory labor. In fact, having become a wife to a husband, in Carey's opinion, a woman could finally follow her supposedly natural inclination towards domestic, reproductive and care work. The goal for women, in this respect, was to "obtain a home in which to devote herself to the performance of those duties for which she was intended" (272). Thus, the degree to which women could avoid wage labor outside of the home and the degree to which the home could become the specific place for women represented for Carey a crucial measure of economic and social development.

While according to Tocqueville (whose pages on the American woman are clearly echoed in *The Past, the Present, and the Future*), it was the affirmation

of a distinctly American interpretation of equality that produced men and women as functionally separate and hierarchically ordered individuals, to Carey it was economic development itself that increasingly distinguished the public, productive sphere of men from the private, reproductive one of women, gradually widening their separation. Improvement, then, was the process that allowed man to literally maintain the woman in the home, both in the sense that he guaranteed her subsistence and in the sense that he ensured that she did not leave it. If the United States to Carey was exceptional for its advancement in economic development, it was also so because of the extent of the separation of the spheres. Accordingly, the definition of the home as a private space of ownership in which men could exercise their power of self-government, appeared to Carey as the very culmination of men's path towards individual improvement.

> With each step in the progress of wealth and population, there is in each little community an increasing number of persons possessing each his *own* land, and *his own* house, upon which he concentrates his exertions for *his own* physical improvement; and *his own* wife, and his *own* children, in whom centre his hopes of happiness. (*The Past* 289-90)

In this respect, the family, enclosed within the space of the "home," was for Carey the fundamental unit of society and had to be prioritized above all others, by individuals as well as by public policies. The family stood "at the beginning of trade" and the "home" in which the family lived was the space of an exchange between the husband, who offered "his services in the raising of food and the materials of clothing" and the wife "employed in the preparation of food for the table, and the conversion of raw materials into clothing" (Carey, "What Constitutes Real Freedom of Trade" 130). This sexual division of labor in the family grounded, in Carey's perspective, the social division of labor.

Moreover, the home was described by Carey, as by Tocqueville and Beecher before him, not only as a functionally distinguished space, but also as a hierarchical space, dominated by men's power and grounded upon women's subordination. For Carey, within "his own home" each man was the "sole master: except so far as he defers its management to its mistress, whose control, within doors, is most complete; but there she stops" (*The*

Past 276). The home was the domain of specifically feminine occupations, but it could not be a space for women's power, since they had to govern a home that remained under man's absolute control. Thus, in the same years in which writers like Catharine Beecher were strategically using the discourse on domesticity to claim a political role for women as mothers and educators of future citizens (Baker; Baritono), Carey reproposed a purely hierarchical interpretation of women's role in the family. The home was described by Carey at once as the space of man's freedom and independence and the space of woman's submission and dependence, and the former insofar as it was the latter, in a dialectical relationship that was not a contradiction, but rather the very structure of the concept of American freedom, concerning women as well as African Americans and natives (E. Foner). The capitalist development described by Carey, then, far from producing increasing equality between men and women, reinforced and naturalized sexual hierarchies within the home and throughout society.

From the Home to the General Home

It was precisely because of its separated and hierarchical character that the "home" could become, in Carey's view, the foundational element of society and the state, projecting onto them its power relations. It is relevant that the lexicon of home and domesticity entered powerfully into the political and economic semantics with which Carey conceptualized the building of society and the state. Indeed, in Carey's writings the lexicon of the "home" largely prevailed over the lexicon of the "nation," in a recurring domestic analogy of the political space. While this interpenetration of the political and domestic lexicon was due to a fundamental ambiguity of the English language, as well as to the still loosely defined character of the concept of nation, Carey openly and repeatedly played on this ambiguity as he theorized (and tried to enact) a strengthening of the state and the building of a national market through protectionist commercial policies.

In his view, in fact, in realizing the "association" and "concentration" of exchanges at the local level, economic development determined an increasing social and political "union" among individuals. This union

materialized first in the building of the "home" in which family members cooperated, then in the definition of a "community" in which several families exchanged, interacted and built institutions "for the maintenance of perfect security of person and property" and "for the settlement of differences." Finally, with the further expansion of wealth, the various communities would come together to establish exchange relationships, to build infrastructures that connected them, and finally to provided themselves with common rules that enabled them to form an ever-closer form of "union," up to the point when "a government is formed" (*The Past* 285-87). This political association, in Carey's perspective, had the shape of a "pyramid" that in many ways resembled the federal shape of the American state, in which superior levels had a decreasing relevance for individuals, with the "home" standing as the closest and most important form of union.

> First stands the home. Next, the common home of the original community: and, lastly, the general home of the several communities. In the first, each finds his chief source of happiness. In the second, he finds means of augmenting that happiness, by combination with his neighbours […]. In the third, he combines with more distant neighbours for the maintenance of roads which he sometimes uses, and for the regulation of affairs of general interest. [...] In time, [...] these little communities [...] are brought into connection with each other: and these numerous little pyramids now form a great pyramid, or State. (287-88)

In his political economy, then, Carey deepened a semantic interpenetration between the lexicon of politics and the lexicon of domesticity, suggesting the idea that the order and power hierarchy of the home defined a model for the construction of the social and political order. Thus, through this inextricable theoretical connection between the domestic and the political, highlighted by the domestic analogies of politics, as well as by the domestic micro-foundation of the state and society, between the 1840s and 1850s Carey tried to imagine the political space as being as hygienic, orderly and governable as that of the home, or, in other words, to conceive a domestication of politics and society. This was likely made all the more

urgent by the specters of the sectional conflict over slavery, of abolitionism and slave revolts, of strikes and class struggle, which increasingly threatened to fracture the United States and its social order.

Analogies between the State and the home were frequent in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Among the most consequential, there was of course Abraham Lincoln's 1858 discourse on the "house divided" as a metaphor for the American nation torn apart by the sectional conflict over slavery. In the same years, Carey's disciple Erasmus Peshine Smith, in his *Manual for Political Economy* (1853) similarly wrote that "the true conception of a State is that of a Household, whose members have undivided interests" (149). Most crucially, however, other ideologues of domesticity proposed a similar semantic interpenetration between the home and the state. Catharine Beecher, for example, clearly interpreted the domestic space as a symbol of the political space, and housekeeping as a metaphor of government. Beecher's lexicon of domesticity was also strongly intertwined with the rhetoric of manifest destiny, which in those same years was ideologically legitimizing the US imperial expansion in the West, where the home could represent an element of order within a surrounding "wilderness" that needed to be domesticated (Kaplan). Thus, Beecher could describe women who performed their domestic duties as mothers and educators as crucial actors in the American imperial mission: as "agents" in the "building of a glorious temple" (*A Treatise* 38). Even if confined to the home, women's reproductive labor could be presented as foundational to the building of the United States as a republic and as an empire. This appeared crucial in front of the conflicts that, in the mid-nineteenth century, where threatening "the whole nation with a civil war," as Beecher wrote in her pamphlet *The Duty of American Women to their Country* (29). Since political divisions represented a problem of civic analphabetism, it was "in the power of American women to save their country" (64) through their pedagogic and domestic role, which could heal the nation by educating future citizens as to the importance of harmony and order.

In this conceptual movement from the domestic to the political, however, the search for a domestication of politics ended up undermining the separation of the spheres itself, overlapping them to make one analogous to the other. Thus, in a context of social crisis, the discourse on domesticity

took on a powerfully normative significance for political discourse, as the order of the home became an inescapable analogy for theorizing the stabilization of an increasingly conflictual political order. It was precisely the specter of civil war, which haunted both Carey's and Beecher's texts, which made it urgent for both to call for a domestication of the political space that would make it as harmonious, orderly, and governable as that of the home.

Conclusion

Between the 1830s and the 1850s, Carey's political economy was part of the ideological movement that aimed to naturalize the home as a feminine space and to re-legitimize women's dependence and subordination within the family, at a moment of increasing uncertainty for traditional gender roles. While concealing, delegitimizing and devaluing women's work outside of the home, then, the doctrine of separate sphere was instrumental in rejecting women's claim for equality in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.

However, as an economist, Carey was also aware of the importance of women's underpaid work in early US manufactures (while completely and willfully ignoring the work of enslaved women). For this very reason, he outlined a vision of capitalist development in which the mechanization of production would allow women to contribute to the accumulation of capital before marriage, and then to limit themselves to their roles as wives and mothers after it. Thus, describing women's trajectory from the mill to the home, from productive labor in manufactures to reproductive labor in the family, Carey legitimized both their exploitation by capital and their subordination to patriarchy. In doing so, he presented sexual hierarchy as a precondition of capitalist development – since the sexual hierarchization of the workforce and the devaluation of women's work were described as necessary to the overall accumulation of capital – but also as its result – since he argued that the growth of (men's) wealth would allow married women not to work, deepening the separation of spheres. In both respects, reflecting on the social and political conditions for US economic development, between the 1830s and the 1850s Carey theorized

an inextricable relationship between capitalism and patriarchal relations in the family.

It is true that, in the course of his long life, his vision of women's rights would not remain the same. For example, in his *Principles of Social Science* Carey argued that the recognition of "the right of the wife to the ownership of separate property, as well as her claim upon a husband's estate, in case of death" (vol. II, 374) was necessary to the advancement of women's condition. However, he still grounded the functioning of the "machinery of society" upon sexual, as well as racial hierarchies. Despite arguing that with "every stage of progress" the woman tended to acquire "increased importance," such importance appeared to be recognized only to the woman as a "wife" and "as being the mistress of the house, the companion of his joys and his sorrows, and the mother of his children" (vol. III, 368). In fact, with the diversification of employments, the woman could see her value growing and find "herself becoming more and more the equal of the man," but only insofar as demand grew "for her peculiar powers" (369). Thus, in Carey's perspective, women's improvement had to happen once more within the separate sphere of the home, within the realm of domesticity and within the patriarchal relation with the husband, in the end reinforcing their subordination based on gender.

Moreover, in the very conclusion of the *Principles of Social Science*, Carey addressed "advocates of women's rights" to stress that "the road towards elevation of the sex" laid only "in the direction of that varied industry which makes demand for all the distinctive qualities of woman." In other words, Carey warned, women's rights and gender equality could only be achieved by capitalist development. For this reason, rather than promoting women's rights, they should have supported those measures (such as a protectionist tariff) calculated to accelerate the accumulation of capital. In the same spirit, Carey also warned "anti-slavery advocates" that the abolition of slavery could only be reached through "that diversification of pursuits" and emphatically not through abolitionist agitation. Thus, published in 1860, on the very eve of the Civil War, Carey's invocations at the end of the *Principles of Social Science*'s third volume took on a markedly conservative, anti-women's rights as well as anti-abolitionist meaning, in an attempt to oppose the increasingly ungovernable movements of those subjects that threatened to overthrow the US social order.

Author's bionote

Matteo M. Rossi is currently an adjunct professor of US history at the University of Torino and at the University of Milano. After having received his Ph.D. in Global History of Empires from the University of Torino in 2023, he held a research fellowship at the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi in Torino. In November 2025, he will begin a two-year postdoctoral research fellowship at the Turin Humanities Program of the Fondazione 1563 per l'Arte e la Cultura. His broader research interests include the history of US economic and political thought, the history of US capitalism and the history of slavery. He serves on the editorial boards of *USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics* and *Il Mestiere di Storico*.

Works Cited

Baker, Paula. 'The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920." *The American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 620-47.

Baritono, Raffaella, ed. *Il sentimento delle libertà: la dichiarazione di Seneca Falls e il dibattito sui diritti delle donne negli Stati Uniti di metà Ottocento*. La Rosa, 2001.

Beecher, Catharine. *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*. Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, 1841.

—. *The Duty of American Women to their Country*. Harper & Brothers, 1845.

Becchio, Giandomenica. *The Doctrine of the Separate Spheres in Political Economy and Economics: Gender Equality and Classical Liberalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

Bodkin, Ronald. "Women's Agency in Classical Economic Thought." *Feminist Economics* 5 (1999): 45-60.

Boydston, Jeanne. *Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*. Oxford UP, 1990.

Carey, Henry Charles. *Essay on the Rate of Wages*. Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1835.

—. *Principles of Political Economy.* Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1837-1840.

—. *The Past, the Present, and the Future*. Carey & Hart, 1848.

—. "What Constitutes Real Freedom of Trade?" *American Whig Review* XII 32 (1850): 127-40.
—. *Principles of Social Science*. Lippincott & Co., 1858-1860.
Conkin, Paul. *Prophets of Prosperity. America's First Political Economists*. Indiana UP, 1980.
Cossutta, Carlotta. *Domesticità: lo spazio politico della casa nelle pensatrici statunitensi del XIX secolo*. ETS, 2023.
Cott, Nancy. *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835*. Yale UP, 1977.
Dorsey, Bruce. *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City*. Cornell UP, 2002.
Epstein, Barbara. *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America*. Wesleyan UP, 1986.
Foner, Eric. *The Story of American Freedom*. Norton, 1998.
Foner, Philip. *Women and the American Labor Movement*. The Free Press, 1979.
Helleiner, Eric. *The Neomercantilists: A Global Intellectual History*. Cornell UP, 2021.
Kaplan, Amy. "Manifest Domesticity." *American Literature* 70 (1998): 581-606.
Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*. Oxford UP, 1982.
Kraus, Natasha. *A New Type of Womanhood: Discursive Politics and Social Change in Antebellum America*. Duke UP, 2008.
Lasser, Carol. "Beyond Separate Spheres: The Power of Public Opinion." *Journal of the Early Republic* 21 (2001): 115-23.
Laurie, Bruce. *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America*, Noonday Press, 1989.
Lerner, Gerda. "The Lady and the Mill Girl. Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson, 1800-1840." *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*. Eds. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, Simon and Schuster, 1979. 182-96.
Nyland, Chris and Robert Dimand, eds. *The Status of Women in Classical Economic Thought*. Elgar, 2003.

Pujol, Michèle A. *Feminism and Anti-Feminism in Early Economic Thought*. Edward Elgar, 1992.

Roediger, David R., and Philip S. Foner. *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day*. Verso, 1989.

Rossi, Matteo M. "The Myth of the Classless Society: Henry Carey and the Anti-Labor Origins of US Political Economy (1820s-1830s)." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 106 (2025): 91-109.

Rudan, Paola. *Donna. Storia e critica di un concetto polemico*. Il Mulino, 2020.

Ryan, Mary P. *Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1830-1860*. Harrington Park Press, 1985.

Sellers, Charles. *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, Oxford UP, 1994.

Sklansky, Jeffrey. *The Soul's Economy. Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920*. North Carolina UP, 2002.

Sklar, Kathryn Kish. *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*. Yale UP, 1973.

Smith, Erasmus Peshine. *A Manual for Political Economy*. Putnam, 1853.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Adlard, 1838-1840.

Wayland, Francis. *The Elements of Political Economy*. Leavitt, Lord and Company, 1837.

Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. Oxford UP, 1984.