

Two Sides of the Same Coin:
The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Lauren Aguirre

Abstract

Elizabeth Cady Stanton is one of the most prominent and influential women's rights activists of the nineteenth century. While Stanton is considered one of the founders of the women's rights movement, she was not immune to influence from outside sources. I aim to assess and answer the question: How much was Stanton influenced by her personal and political environment? Examining Stanton's influences is important to understanding the origins of her political thought and, by extension, the women's rights movement. I delve into Stanton's writings and speeches and then compare them to primary and secondary sources to determine Stanton's influences. Stanton follows traditional liberal thought by arguing that women should be treated as equal citizens and focusing her analysis on the individual. However, she strays from this in her conception of the role of government. While Stanton's ideas are firmly rooted in the liberal tradition, she also brings a new dimension of positive liberty to American political thought.

Introduction

Elizabeth Cady Stanton is one of the most influential women's rights activists of the nineteenth century. However, Stanton was not immune to influence from outside sources. I aim to assess and answer the question: How much was Stanton influenced by her personal and political environment? Examining the origins of her political thought is crucial to understanding the beginning of the women's rights movement.

Stanton's "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" will serve as the backbone of this analysis. The document was drafted at one of the first women's rights conventions in Seneca Falls, New York, and is arguably the beginning of Stanton's career as a women's rights advocate. Stanton's Declaration closely mirrors much of the rhetoric and structure found in the Declaration of Independence, allowing this document to serve as an outline of grievances and goals for the women's rights movement. Even in her later writings, Stanton never strays far from the points laid out in this founding document and continues to expound upon them.

While Stanton's ideas are firmly rooted in the liberal tradition, she brings a new dimension of positive liberty to American political thought. Interestingly, Stanton firmly argues both for negative and positive liberty in the pursuit of women's equality. She argues for negative liberty in regard to laws that discriminate against women, stating that the government should treat women as full citizens of the Republic as dictated by the U.S. Constitution. On the other hand, she also argues for positive liberty in the social setting, claiming that simply making women equal in the eyes of the law will not end all discrimination. These two pieces of her argument both stem from the liberal tradition and are grounded in Stanton's political and personal environment.

Negative Liberty

America's liberal tradition began with John Locke and the Founding Fathers. Both organize their political thought through the lens of the individual and both declare that people are given natural human rights. The Founders were primarily concerned with tyranny in government, and believed that liberty could only exist when the government stayed out of the people's lives. Stanton followed this train of thought in her campaign to secure women's rights. She believed women were already given equal rights as citizens under the U.S. Constitution and discriminatory laws against women should be repealed or overturned. The political, economic, and legal rights that Stanton wanted all call for a negative conception of liberty. This conception is directly in line with the political thought of the Founding Fathers.

Political Rights

Stanton was a strong supporter of women's representation in government, arguing most prominently for women's suffrage. She believed women were being denied their natural human rights by not having a voice in government. The U.S. Constitution guaranteed these political rights to all citizens and arbitrarily ensuring that only men received them deprived women of their liberty.

Stanton firmly states that women are equal to men for the same reasons stated in the Declaration of Independence, and therefore, women are being deprived of natural rights. The Declaration of Sentiments is essentially Stanton's revision of the Declaration of Independence with a new focus on women's rights. Stanton's Declaration states "that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain

inalienable rights” (Stanton 2010b). This is almost an exact replica of the original language in the Declaration of Independence, but with the noticeable addition of the word “women.” Stanton cleverly uses her political context to make her point. By this time, the Declaration of Independence would have been cemented in the American consciousness. Men have had the right to vote for over a century while women were deferred to second-class citizen status. By including women in the original rhetoric of the Declaration, Stanton shows that women have been present in American society well before this time, but have been left out of the political arena for no substantial reason. Stanton is making a bold statement for women’s equality without bringing in any new political ideas. She is simply retreading the traditional liberal ideas set by Thomas Jefferson while ensuring that women are included – as, she believes, they should have been from the very beginning.

A facet of full citizenship is the right to vote, and Stanton makes similar arguments to Jefferson on this point as well. Stanton compares the struggle for women’s suffrage to the Founding Father’s similar struggles to lend credence to the women’s rights movement. In the Declaration of Sentiments, Stanton writes, “Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides” (Stanton 2010b). Women are oppressed because they have no choice in representatives and, by extension, are blocked from contacting the legislature with policy ideas or concerns. Stanton states that voice in government is an essential part of citizenship and makes it seem absurd to deny anyone, even women, that right. The Founding Fathers faced similar problems with gaining fair representation under the English king. Jefferson writes in the Declaration of Independence, “He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for

opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people. He has refused for a long time...to cause others to be elected” (Stamper 2011, 59). Jefferson argues that the king is infringing upon the rights of the people to have a voice in government. Jefferson states, similarly to Stanton, that this is a guaranteed right that cannot be infringed upon. Without an avenue to voice policy ideas and concerns, the colonies were just as voiceless in government as Stanton stated women were. Both Jefferson and Stanton faced tyranny and invasion of rights from the government, and sought to change that situation. Jefferson moved on to help found a government free of the king’s rule while Stanton became a strong advocate for women’s rights and suffrage. Through this subtle comparison, Stanton echoes the ideas of the Founding Fathers, giving the women’s rights movement credibility within the American dialogue of her time.

Stanton viewed the right to vote under the guise of a negative conception of liberty. She believed women already had the right to vote under the laws of the United States, and securing and protecting this right was a basic function of the government. As stated previously, Stanton argued that men and women were equal under God, and, by extension, the U.S. government. In her Address to the New York State Legislature, Stanton states, “We ask no more than the poor devils in the Scripture asked, ‘Let us alone.’” (Stanton 2010a). She is arguing for a limited national government, one that primarily serves to ensure and protect the rights of both men *and* women. This model is very close to the government the Founding Fathers created, with, of course, the exception of women as citizens. This laissez-faire approach to government requires negative liberty – freedom through lack of government intervention. Just as the Founding Fathers argued that they had natural rights and were equals under English law, Stanton states that women

should be afforded the same rights as men under the U.S. Constitution. In this instance, Stanton is fighting against governmental tyranny, pointing out that the national government is infringing upon the people's rights as citizens. Once the government takes a step back and allows women to be equals, women will be able to exercise their right to elective franchise freely and will have regained their liberty.

According to Stanton, women can only earn political equality to men through negative liberty. Once the government stops tyrannizing over its citizens, women will be able to step up as political equals to men. This train of thought closely echoes the arguments of the Founding Fathers, who fought for freedom from the king's tyranny over the colonies. With her conception of political freedom and negative liberty, Stanton brings nothing new to American liberalism.

Economic and Legal Rights

While Stanton is most known for her work to gain political equality for women, she also argued for certain economic and legal rights, which would ensure equality between men and women on these fronts as well as in the political realm. On these points, she also calls for negative liberty from the government, arguing for discriminatory laws to be repealed or overturned. In this manner, Stanton is still heavily influenced by liberal tradition the Founding Fathers set for future generations.

Stanton argued against restrictive laws that prevented women from holding property, whether single, married, or widowed. In the Declaration of Sentiments, Stanton writes, "He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice...He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead" (Stanton, 2010b).

This statement references the doctrine of coverture. This provision takes a married woman's legal existence and merges it with that of her husband's, therefore surrendering all individual legal rights the woman had before marriage to the man after marriage (Martinovich & Otto 1987, 271). Under this doctrine, a married woman has no legal identity. She cannot hold any property on her own, all property she did own prior to marriage goes to her husband, and she must rely on her husband to hold that property in her place. Stanton argues for this doctrine to be put out of practice on the grounds that it prevents women from achieving full and complete equality to men. Once again, Stanton is echoing America's liberal tradition in her argument. John Locke, a philosopher that heavily influenced the Founding Fathers, lists property among the basic rights that government should protect (Locke 1967). Furthermore, the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights expands upon this idea in the second, third, fourth, and fifth amendments, listing specific situations in which property rights should not be infringed upon without proper compensation to the owner (Stamper 2011, 26-29). Drawing upon these texts, Stanton argues that the doctrine of coverture is antiquated, restrictive, and tyrannical. Again, this is a situation that calls for a negative conception of liberty. Stanton, much like those that came before her, is arguing for the government to take a step back and allow women to be free to hold their own property while married.

This conception of negative liberty continues into Stanton's qualms with taxes. She discusses taxes on women in the Declaration of Sentiments. She writes, "After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it" (Stanton, 2010b). Stanton speaks of government exploitation of

property in this statement. Even though women cannot vote and have no control over elected representatives, their property is still taxed. Yet again, this situation mirrors what the Founding Fathers had faced prior to the American Revolution. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson lists the grievance: “For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent” (Stamper 2011, 59). Both the Founders and Stanton had no voice in the taxes that were imposed upon them, were outraged at the invasion of property rights, and therefore rebelled. While the Founders separated from the English government, Stanton and other women’s rights activists worked through the existing government to change the laws of the land. Still, Stanton is following the liberal tradition with a negative conception of liberty. The government should not tax the people without the consent of its citizens. Stanton once again argues that the government should step back and allow the existing laws to take care of the conflict. Under the U.S. Constitution, women are equal to men and hold full citizenship, which includes the right to vote. With the right to vote, women can decide which taxes they will pay and which they will not. The taxation-without-representation dilemma can only be solved with a negative conception of liberty, which falls directly in line with the liberal tradition.

Not only does her political influences lead her to these conclusions, but also her personal ones. By the time she drafted the Declaration of Sentiments, Stanton was herself married, and must have had personal experience with the doctrine of coverture and other property laws throughout her lifetime (Stanton 1971, 143). It is plausible to assume that she may have been frustrated with her lack of property rights in the context of marriage, and it was this frustration that pushed her to fight for them. While her ultimate argument on the subject reflects the ideas of traditional liberalism, her personal stake in the matter

offers a different take on fighting governmental tyranny. Elizabeth B. Clark states in her scholarly article that, “Women’s formulations of their own rights were not echoes of the eighteenth century; their definition of liberty was more personal than that of the Founders” (Clark 1988, 905). There is some truth to Clark’s assessment. While the Founding Fathers did have some personal stake in their fight against governmental tyranny, they had always had the rights they were asking for in the past. The Founders were fighting to regain the rights they had lost. On the other hand, Stanton and other women’s rights activists were not in the same position. Instead of fighting for rights they had once held and lost due to the government, these activists are fighting for rights they had never been granted previously. This creates a layer of desperation and frustration that the Founders never had to deal with. Stanton and other women’s rights activists of her time had a bit more at stake in their struggle than the Founders did. This frustration the women advocates carried around with them led to newer ideas within the context of liberalism. However, Stanton does not begin to shift from the traditional negative liberty strain of liberalism until she discusses the social equality that women deserve.

Stanton’s views on economic and legal rights still reflect the liberal tradition in America. If the government just leaves its citizens alone, all of these conflicts will subside and these complaints will become obsolete. Once antiquated and needlessly discriminatory laws are dissolved, women will gain more legal rights. Additionally, once women are seen as full citizens under the law, they will have a say in which taxes will apply to them. With her thoughts on legal and economic rights, Stanton is still influenced by traditional liberalism and does not reshape it in any way.

Positive Liberty

While Stanton does follow the liberal tradition set by the Founding Fathers for her arguments concerning political, legal and economic rights, she begins to break away from the negative conception of liberty when it comes to social rights. She becomes less concerned with tyranny by the government and more concerned with tyranny by other individuals. Stanton did believe that changing the laws of the United States would eventually change social values for the better, but that would be a slow-going process. Simply removing the discriminatory laws and accepting women as equals to men in the eyes of the law would not guarantee full equality in all aspects of life. When considering her arguments for equality in the social sphere, Stanton begins to move away from negative liberty to positive liberty – government involvement to ensure rights and create equality. With this, she brings a new layer to the liberalist tradition.

Social Rights in the Public Sphere

While Stanton is greatly influenced by her political environment concerning her arguments for political, economic, and legal rights, she is heavily influenced by her personal experiences in her arguments for social rights. Stanton fights for women to join men in the public sphere in education, professional employment and public speaking. In her advocacy of social rights for women, Stanton adopts a positive conception of liberty to reshape the still-discriminatory social environment. While Stanton does break away from her traditionally liberal political environment with this conception, she is very influenced by her personal experiences.

Stanton advocated for women to break through the ideology of separate spheres and move into the public realm. Prudence Flowers defines separate spheres as: “the separation of the masculine and the feminine spheres (or the public and the private)” (Flowers 2006, 14). Women were confined to the private realm, put in charge of child rearing and household management. Conversely, men lived in the public realm, put in charge of earning money to support the family. Stanton was a strong advocate of women moving to the public sphere and joining men in the workplace. She believes “that it is time [women] should move into the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her” (Stanton 2010b). Stanton plans to move more women into the public sphere through higher education. With this education, women can earn careers in professional employment and work alongside men instead of staying at home with the family. While Stanton believes that the aforementioned reforms in the political and legal realms will eventually change societal attitudes, this slow shift in opinion is not enough. A positive conception of liberty and government intervention is required to achieve full social equality between men and women.

A primary avenue to move women into the public sphere is education. In the Declaration of Sentiments, a listed grievance states that women have been “denied...the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against [them]” (Stanton 2010b). Without a proper education, women could not support themselves, manage their own finances or even properly raise their own children. With a higher education, women would be able to move into professional positions and earn a higher salary at a highly skilled job. Stanton’s conviction that women should be able to attend higher institutions of education did not stem from her political environment, but from her

personal experience. In her autobiography, *Eighty Years and More*, Stanton describes her outrage at learning that she would not be able to follow her male classmates to Union College. She writes, “I learned of the barrier that prevented me from following in their footsteps – ‘no girls admitted here’ – my vexation and mortification knew no bounds” (Stanton 1971, 33). Stanton had been in the highest classes of Greek and mathematics, one of the few girls at the Academy to do so. Her frustration at being denied the opportunity to pursue her education at the college level spurred her to argue and advocate for equal educational opportunities for women. While Stanton did attempt to persuade the public to allow women to compete intellectually with men in universities and colleges, she also argued for the use of government intervention to create equality in academic admissions. This solution calls for a positive conception of liberty. Unlike her assessment of political and legal rights, Stanton believes a positive liberty role of government will create equal opportunities for women in education.

Stanton also believes positive liberty will create equal employment opportunities for women in higher skilled professions. She states that men have “monopolized nearly all the profitable employments...[They] close against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction...As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, [women are] not known” (Stanton 2010a). In moving into the public sphere, women need to join the workplace as equals to men. In reaching this conclusion Stanton was not influenced by her political environment, but rather her personal life. In a letter she wrote to her good friend and fellow women’s rights activist Susan B. Anthony, Stanton stated, “I say adieu to the public for a time, for I must give all my moments and my thoughts to my children” (DuBois 1981, 56). This statement describes the conflicting feelings many women still

struggle with today. While Stanton is eager to move into the public sphere, society still mandates that she take care of her home duties as well. To leave her children for a convention or address would be seen as neglect by society and therefore Stanton is pressured to stay in the private sphere. This predicament is something Stanton wants to combat through advocacy and government intervention. By using the government to pressure employers to hire more women, women will become more prominent in the workplace and will eventually be seen as equals. It is only logical to assume that if men and women are equal in the public sphere, that they would also be considered equal in the private sphere. In this way, husbands and wives would shoulder the burden of both spheres together, sharing the duties of providing for the family along with childrearing and housekeeping work. Through a positive liberty role of government, equality in the public sphere can be achieved.

Stanton's views on gender equality in the public sphere are still somewhat tied to traditional liberalism. She still keeps the individual as the focus of her analysis and maintains that there are natural rights all people inherently have. However, Stanton is greatly expanding these rights from the political and economic realms into a right to equal opportunities in education and employment. Stanton argues for these rights because of her personal experiences in being denied opportunities while men received all the chances they wanted. These rights cannot be secured and protected under a negative conception of liberty because government intervention is required to prevent discrimination from other individuals. Stanton shifts away from traditional liberalism and eagerly adopts a positive conception of liberty to secure social equality in the public sphere.

Social Rights in the Private Sphere

Stanton also argued for equality in the private sphere in the form of rejecting the sexual double standard and putting husbands and wives on the same level of power in a marriage. She believed that changing the legal and political environment would eventually influence social traditions. In pursuit of these rights, Stanton also adopts a positive liberty model of government, but the potential impact of this model is not as strong as in the public sphere.

According to Stanton, ridding society of the sexual double standard is a necessary step to creating social equality in the private sphere. The sexual double standard was an extension of the ideology of separate spheres. Men and women carried different social stigmas concerning pre-marital sex. Stanton explains this dilemma in the Declaration of Sentiments, “He has...giv[en] to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man” (Stanton 2010b). These “moral delinquencies” refer to sexual misdeeds. Under the sexual double standard, women were punished much more harshly for sexual misconduct than men would be. Stanton does not have a personal account of conflict with this standard outside of her political documents and speeches. However, if only her political environment is examined as a possible source of influence, Stanton never would have advocated against the sexual double standard. Therefore, it’s logical to assume that her personal life had some impact on her philosophies on the double standard. While Stanton does embrace a positive conception of liberty in relation to social equality, government intervention in this case would not be quite as effective. Other than passing more stringent sexual delinquency laws for men,

there is nothing the government can do to move society away from the double standard. The government deals in tactile solutions and it is difficult for it to wrap its hands around an abstract social standard. In this case, Stanton would have had to rely more on her proposed domino effect – changing the political and legal realm will eventually influence the social realm.

In addition to moving away from the sexual double standard, Stanton also advocated for equality between men and women in marriage. This is one of the few topics that Stanton did not touch on in the Declaration of Sentiments. In a letter written to Susan B. Anthony, Stanton states, “It is in vain to look for the elevation of woman, so long as she is degraded in marriage. I say it is a sin, an outrage on our holiest feelings to pretend that anything but deep, fervent love and sympathy constitutes marriage.” (DuBois 1981, 55). Stanton believed both parties should enter into marriage willingly and happily, and those parties should be able to leave the marriage should they want to. Because both parties enter the marriage together, they stand on equal footing. They share both home and work responsibilities equally, free from the ideology of separate spheres. However in reality, the wife is put into a subordinate role under her husband and she is typically confined to her household duties. Unlike with the sexual double standard, Stanton does have direct personal connection with this dilemma. While her husband was fully supportive of her political advocacy, Stanton was still left with the bulk of childrearing and household duties (Ginzberg 2009, 51). As quoted in the previous section, Stanton even gives up attending women’s rights conventions to tend to her children. She advocates for equality between men and women in marriage because of her frustration at her own familial situation. If her husband would help her shoulder the childrearing and

household work burden, she would be able to move further into the public sphere. Stanton's proposed solution of a positive liberty model of government is even more ineffective for this issue than for the sexual double standard. There is no way to practically or legally govern over the dynamics in people's marriages. Once again, Stanton and other women looking for equality would have to rely on the domino effect of political and legal change to affect social dynamics.

Just like her views on social equality in the public sphere, Stanton's ideas for equality in the private sphere still stem from traditional liberalism. She still places the individual as the base of her analysis and claims that there are certain natural inherent rights. Stanton strays from this model in terms of her prescribed role of government. For social issues, she willingly embraces a positive conception of liberty and relies on government intervention to create equality. However in the private sphere, government intervention is less effective the more personal the issue becomes. Instead of relying on positive liberty to create equality and ensure women's rights, women will just have to wait for political and legal changes to affect the social dynamics in the country.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Cady Stanton is firmly tied to the liberal tradition. The structure of the discussion provided above demonstrates that she followed closely behind John Locke in his ideas of "life, liberty and property." Stanton's equivalent to life rests in the social rights she advocates for. Her conception of liberty exists in her assessment of political rights and the protection of property is in her legal and economic rights.

For the more tactile rights, including political and legal, Stanton relies on a negative conception of liberty. She falls in line with the Founding Fathers and argues that the government should step out of people's lives and to allow the inherent equality of women to come to the forefront. Conversely for the less tactile rights, those in the social realm, Stanton relies on a positive conception of liberty. She breaks away from her political environment and supports the government stepping in and to take action against discrimination from other individuals. However, Stanton's choices in types of liberty create a catch-22 situation to creating an environment in which these proposed rights are guaranteed.

The government functions best in dealing with tactile problems and is limited to providing tangible solutions. Therefore, the more abstract a conflict becomes, the more difficult it is for the government to intervene. A positive liberty model of government would be most effective in the political and legal realms rather than the social realm. This is the direct opposite of Stanton's assessment.

In fairness, her assessment does make more sense in practice than in theory. Rather than writing a whole new set of laws to create equality for women in the political and legal realms, Stanton opted to work within the existing laws. She argued that women were already equal to men under the U.S. Constitution. In practice, this is a much simpler solution. As for her positive conception of liberty, government intervention in social issues can affect some change, but will not permanently alter the environment. Relying on the slow shifts in public opinion seems to be an unavoidable part of the process.

In answer to my research question, Stanton was heavily influenced by both her political and personal environment. However, she was not influenced by both pieces

equally on all issues. For the political and legal rights she advocated, Stanton was greatly influenced by her political environment. But for the social rights she fought for, she was much more greatly persuaded by her personal experiences. These experiences pushed Stanton to stray from the liberal tradition and add a new layer of positive liberty to the theory. Interestingly, these two sides of Stanton work well together, mostly because all of her issues were fought with the idea of women's equality at the forefront. Rather than two warring sides of her political thought, her separate applications of positive and negative liberty join together to form a cohesive whole – like two sides of a coin.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

DuBois, E. C. (Ed.). (1981). *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony: correspondence, writings, speeches*. New York: Schocken Books.

Locke, J. (1967). *Two treatises of government* (2nd ed.). London: Cambridge U.P.

Stamper, C. F. (Ed.). (n.d.). *The Constitution of the United States of America, with all of the Amendments; The Declaration of Independence; and The Articles of Confederation* (Kindle version.). Breathitt Classics.

Stanton, E. C. (1971). *Eighty years and more; reminiscences, 1815-1897*. New York: Schocken Books.

Stanton, E. C. (2010a). Address to the New York State Legislature. In K. M. Dolbeare & M. S. Cummings (Eds.), *American Political Thought* (6th ed., pp. 234–236). Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Stanton, E. C. (2010b). Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. In K. M. Dolbeare & M. S. Cummings (Eds.), *American Political Thought* (6th ed., pp. 231–234). Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Secondary Sources

Clark, E. B. (1988). Self-Ownership and the Political Theory of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Connecticut Law Review, 21, 905.

Flowers, P. (2006). White Ribboners and the Ideology of Separate Spheres, 1860s-1890s.

Australasian Journal of American Studies, 25(1), 14–31.

Ginzberg, L. D. (2009). *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: an American life* (1st ed.). New York:

Hill and Wang.

Martinovich, C. M., & Otto, D. L. (1987). Coverture - Does It Have Any Legal Vitality.

University of Detroit Law Review, 65, 271.