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Review of *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*. Anne Firor Scott. Reviewed by Leslie Leighninger, Louisiana State University.

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then again, as Liebow so eloquently argues, no one should have to live on the streets either.

Cheryl Hyde
Boston University

Anne Firor Scott. *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. \$11.95 paper cover.

Hillary Rodham Clinton has been credited with creating a new paradigm for First Ladies. According to one observer, she "is coming close not just to influencing policy but [also to] making public policy." Another notes that she succeeds through "just the right combination of . . . a woman's touch with a real mastery of the policy" (*New York Times*, 22 September, 1993, p. A18). Anne Firor Scott would most likely take exception to this notion of a new paradigm. In her book, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*, Scott examines the long history of women's activism in America, and documents the successful combination of "a woman's touch" (or an interest in applying the principles of a well-run, moral home life to the larger community) and the possession of organizational and political skills necessary for making changes. A major vehicle for learning and applying these skills has been the woman's association, which has existed in the United States in a variety of forms since the late 1700s.

Women's history scholars have for some time been producing dissertations, articles, monographs, and books on women's associations, generally focusing either on single organizations or on specific categories of groups, such as suffrage associations or Black women's clubs. Scott brings this work and her own research together into a coherent whole, presenting the reader with a compelling picture of the impact of women's associations on women's lives, on the lives of their communities, and on American society.

Scott's main argument is that women, "constrained by law and custom in the ways they could achieve goals that seemed to

them to be important, . . . used voluntary associations to evade some of these constraints and to redefine 'woman's place' by giving the concept a public dimension" (p. 2). To understand how women used organizations to move beyond the boundaries of family life, Scott begins with an analysis of the benevolent societies of the first several decades of the Republic, and then continues the story through the roughly sequential development of activist groups concerned with issues such as alcoholism and slavery, Civil War soldiers' aid societies, missionary societies, literary and selfeducation associations, women's clubs, organizations involved with "municipal housekeeping" in the Progressive Era, and the many single issue groups which emerged after the 1930s. Many of these associations looked both inward and outward; that is, while they often began by emphasizing self-improvement and the spiritual and intellectual development of their members, they soon moved to a focus on broader concerns, such as offering charitable services, improving the lot of working women, combatting alcoholism, promoting better public sanitation, and reforming municipal government. In order to pursue such goals and build their organizations, women discovered that they had to acquire essential skills in critical thinking, public speaking, conducting meetings, bookkeeping, fund-raising, and political lobbying. Restricted from exposure to these skills in business or professional life, women developed them within the "safe" confines of the women's association. This skill development was one of the major contributions of women's organizations.

There are certain challenges in this kind of history that Scott struggles with and is not always able to meet. As she notes, it is difficult to present an accurate picture of the goals of the rank and file, since the records passed down to us are kept mostly by the leaders of organizations. Scott deals with this problem most successfully when she presents detailed minutes from local groups. Other problems lie in determining how many women belonged to associations and in assessing the organizations' influence on women's lives (the impact on the outside world is easier to ascertain).

While these questions remain, for the large part, unanswered, the book's contributions far outweigh its gaps. Because

it pulls together so much material, the book abounds with wonderful references. Scott's coverage of the history of African-American women's organizations is excellent, yielding such discoveries as the fact that the first anti-slavery societies were begun by free Black women, and reminding the reader that inherent racism in American society generally kept African-American and white women's groups from making common cause. Scott also offers a rebuttal to the argument that the largely middle-class membership of women's associations had as its major goal the assertion of control over the working class and the poor. Concern for the wages of working women, she notes, was a fairly common theme. Beyond such insights, the book's greatest strength lies in its comprehensiveness. The reader is left with a sense of awe at the number and many accomplishments of women's organizations, and an amazement that their place in American history has been ignored for so long.

Leslie Leighninger
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Kathy E. Ferguson. *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993. \$40.00 hardcover, \$13.00 papercover.

Ferguson's provocative book, *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory*, is provocative in relation to her subtitle, rather than to the title itself. Her work presents a lively discussion of three models of feminist theory, defined as praxis feminism, cosmic feminism and linguistic feminism. The models are critically compared and contrasted with a delightful mix of scholarly insight and wry humor. While "male-ordered subjectivity" in regard to women is; decried, feminist-ordered subjectivity of women is given a thorough roasting. Each concept is first set forth in purist fashion, setting up a "straw woman" situation which no one could readily support (despite the fact that, truth be known, many do).

For example, praxis feminism faults the universalisms pressed on all women who, in fact, may not fit the mold. Cosmic feminism can be faulted for its amorphous quality, ranging from