Friesen on Wendt, 'The Daughters of the American Revolution and Patriotic Memory in the Twentieth Century'

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Simon Wendt explores the complicated history of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), one of the most influential women’s activist groups in recent American memory, in order to comment on issues of gender, race, and class, as well as historical memory and the concept of nationalism. Wendt, an associate professor of American studies at Goethe University Frankfurt, examines the sociocultural context in which conservative female activists during the twentieth century made notable efforts to commemorate and memorialize both male and female contributions to various American historical events. His argument centers on the DAR’s “remarkable agency in US nationalism and explains the tenacity of a particular nationalist ideology that deemed ingrained gender and race hierarchies vital to America’s unity and progress” (p. 2). Wendt’s purpose is to reveal the overt manipulation of historical memory by the DAR, which ultimately worked to reinforce American understandings of gendered and racial hierarchies during the twentieth century. Additionally, he tackles the social function of female activism and its internal struggles with issues like regional tensions between members hailing from the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the West.

Relying on the merits of cultural history, political science, sociology, and gender studies, Wendt synthesizes five different categories of historical analysis into one cohesive review of the social, political, and cultural implications of the prominent DAR organization. At first glance, his objective seems overly ambitious; however, Wendt manages to construct a powerful account of female agency, as well as conservative activism, through proposed nationalist beliefs and practices regarding their interpretations of historical memory. The deliberate choice to use a particular organization to explore the interests of conservative female activists during the twentieth century enables Wendt to avoid the pitfalls of a disorganized amalgamation of multiple activist groups and to instead concentrate his attention on how a single organization engaged with complex social, political, and cultural issues, specifically concerning American historical memory on the national, regional, and local levels.

Wendt opens by focusing his attention on the various DAR commemorative efforts and the exclusive and conservative DAR worldview that accompanied their activist energies, the racial prejudices inherent within the organization, and its rapid decline, particularly in the postwar period. To elaborate, the first chapter offers an analysis of twentieth-century DAR members’ attempts to
recognize female participation in the American Revolution, specifically in terms of patriotic motherhood and in the role of dutiful helpmates to the founding fathers. By shaping historical memory from this perspective, Wendt asserts that the DAR worked to preserve the gender hierarchy in place within larger contemporary American society. Chapter 2 relates the DAR’s purpose in exploring topics like western expansion and nation-building. Pulling from ample archival research of various midwestern and western DAR chapters, Wendt demonstrates that by revisiting the historical memory of the pioneer days, the narrative proposed by the Daughters could both “maintain strict racial boundaries of national inclusion while simultaneously upholding traditional gender binaries within white America” (p. 7).

In chapters 3 and 4, Wendt considers the contradictory attitude the exclusively white DAR members held toward other racial groups, and more broadly, the role race played in the United States’ white nation-building rhetoric. Chapter 3, for example, highlights the relationship between white Americans and indigenous Native Americans as an example of how the DAR attempted to bring Native Americans into the patriotic fold of the United States. Using deliberate historical amnesia to negate strained racial relationships and instead concentrate on friendship and cooperation, the DAR showed support for indigenous communities in historical memory that was unique, for it did not extend to African Americans. Instead of attempting to incorporate African Americans into cultural memory, Wendt contends, the DAR employed additional tactics of historical amnesia to promote a distorted image of American history, one that ignored the perpetration of racial violence and the positive contributions from Black communities. Lastly, the author concludes with a discussion of the DAR’s decline in the postwar period, as a result of the organization’s failure to adapt to the sociopolitical challenges posed by the social movements from the 1950s through the early 1970s.

Wendt’s monograph is based on a solid foundation of archival research from around the United States. His mountain of evidence ranges from DAR chapter collections to members’ personal correspondence to excerpts from the DAR monthly newsletter and DAR Magazine, to chapter scrapbooks and national and local news media platforms. Furthermore, he provides a variety of illustrations that clarify the types of commemorative practices these women engaged with, including the construction of historical monuments and geographical markers. Wendt’s work also offers an expansive bibliography, and his historiographical account of the field is impeccable as he balances the expectations of the various categories of historical analysis. His terms are always well defined and placed within the context of his argument, specifically in regard to methodological concepts like historical memory, gender, nationalism, and cultural activism.

Wendt ultimately supports his argument that this conservative female activist group, whose original intention was to emphasize the roles of women in American history, also made sure to safeguard traditional understandings of the gendered and racial hierarchies entrenched in twentieth-century America. If there is a downside, the fourth chapter seems to be needlessly split in its attention to race, with disparate discussions of ethnic nationalism through considerations of African Americans, the Civil War, and late nineteenth-century immigration patterns. However, Wendt provides a significant account of female activism and the important themes the DAR’s story might reveal about social, political, and cultural factors in the twentieth century.

In all, this monograph is a worthwhile read to those in a variety of academic fields, including but not limited to history, political science, sociology, racial and ethnic studies, and gender studies. However,
due to the clear and engaging style of his writing, this book might also intrigue non-academic readers interested in the DAR organization. *The Daughters of the American Revolution and Patriotic Memory in the Twentieth Century* is a wonderful read which will be immensely helpful to those who are interested in the intersections between race, gender, nationalism, activism, and historical memory.


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