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Historical Reflections on Votes, Brooms and Guns

Admission to Political Structures—on whose terms?

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RESUMÉ

Cette communication examine les liens historiques et théoriques unissant le féminisme et l'anti-militarisme dans une tranche particulièrement intéressante et riche de l'histoire du mouvement des femmes, la période allant de 1910 à 1918, en Angleterre principalement, par rapport à la question du droit de vote pour les femmes. La campagne pour le droit de vote était à son paroxysme de 1906 à 1914, quand la première guerre mondiale a éclaté et en a modifié le cours. On s'interroge sur les conditions auxquelles les femmes—qui obtinrent le droit de vote vers la fin de la guerre dans beaucoup de pays—sont devenues admissibles à l'intérieur du système politique.

This paper examines theoretical and historial links uniting feminism and antimilitarism in a particularly interesting and rich period in the history of the women's movement, between 1910 and 1918, principally in England, in relation to the issue of women's right to vote. The campaign for the right to vote was at its height between 1906 and 1914 when the first world war broke out and changed the campaign. This paper considers the terms under which women, who gained the right to vote toward the end of the war in several countries, were permitted to participate in the political system.

The campaign for the women's vote was building to a peak in Britain, as elsewhere in the western world, during the period 1906-1914, when its course was altered by the outbreak of the first world war. In this paper, I shall examine a few of the salient features of the women's movement from 1910 to 1918—features which are often ignored—and will examine the way in which the suffragists, and indeed feminism itself, were affected by the war. My purpose is to raise some questions about the terms on which women were seen to be admissible to the political system.

I shall suggest that an important section of the suffrage movement had recognized, by 1913-14, that the simple aim, to gain the vote, was not enough, and had begun to look towards much more radical changes in society, while still believing that the vote would be an essential step towards effecting these changes. These women had begun to see connections between different forms of oppression. In consequence, their emerging feminist theory made it impossible for them to accept the traditional view of women's support role in wartime, and led them towards criticism of the whole system of domination which fostered war and militarism.[1]

Historians have, until recently, paid little attention to the suffrage struggle; general histories of the period during which half of the population of the Western democracies gained the essential badge of citizenship, if they mention it at all, briefly cover only some of the actions of the militant wing, those few courageous (but at times misguided) women who chained themselves to railings, hungerstruck in prison, practiced arson, and were beginning, by 1913, to threaten physical violence. A far larger body, active on a wider front, is ignored. Recent feminist research[2] has shown that a major part in gaining the vote was in fact played by the women of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, impressive in numbers, highly organized, representative of all classes, sophisticated in political strategy, unrelenting in determination, and committed to nonviolence—indeed to legality—in their methods. My research centres largely on the ideas and activities of some of the leading members of this organization[3].

By the end of the nineteenth century women throughout much of the Western world had made significant gains, especially in relation to education, and in Britain they were now eligible for service on some elected local government bodies. The increasing number who looked towards the national vote as the next logical step had varied expectations of what it would mean to enfranchise women. Some saw it as simply a way of helping preserve the status quo; for example, there were those in the United States, Canada, and Britain who saw

a limited female franchise as a means to maintain the supremacy of class or race. Others, believing that societal limitations made woman what she was, seemed clear that the vote would transform woman, not woman the political system; political women would behave much as political men had done. Yet others saw the vote as extending women's traditional role from the private into the public sphere. That is, women would now housekeep for the nation, or at least be able to influence the nation's housekeeping by their votes. The area of government concerns had indeed greatly widened in the nineteenth century, with social legislation (public health, marriage laws, education and so on) becoming increasingly important, alongside traditional "matters of state" such as foreign policy, defence, and imperial affairs.

None of these visions of the use of the female franchise implies a radical critique of the existing male-dominated political structure. Indeed, perhaps it should not surprise us that the women striving to enter the liberal democratic parliamentary system viewed it very positively, as an excellent system needing only to be perfected.

There is some feminist historical controversy about the significance of the different arguments and expectations among the suffragists. Some writers belittle the social feminist polemic which did not deny the separate roles of men and women, as against the equal rights argument, which simply claimed that women had a right as human beings to the vote. Others question the implication of "sameness" latent in the equal rights argument. I find enlightening the work of Ellen Dubois, who distinguishes between "roles" and "spheres," and points out that, although accepting a female "role," the social feminists were breaking down the concept of a female "sphere" to which that role would be limited.[4] In doing this they challenged the fundamental dualism of public/private spheres, public for men, private for women. I would add that, in this way, they were indeed claiming a right to take into the public sphere a new approach. In other words, they were not saying, "Let us in, we won't change anything, because we'd really be just the same as men if only we had equal opportunities"; they were saying, "Let us in, we have something fresh to bring." Even this, perhaps, was not too threatening as long as it could be expected that these new brooms would indeed be used only to clean up the state's domestic areas—to help with the housekeeping, in fact.

While the prewar suffragists were inclined to focus on the service the vote would enable them to render in the protection of the rights of women and children, in industrial legislation and public health, those who were opposed to the extension of the franchise put their fingers on a problem: the same elected government is responsible for social issues as is responsible for the serious matters of the foreign policy and defence. Mrs. Humphry Ward (Mary Ward), the leading British woman antisuffragist, divided her time between active opposition to women having the vote, and equally active involvement in public affairs at the level of local government. For her, housekeeping and mothering had everything to do with public health, sewage, minimum housing standards, welfare, temperance. But they had nothing to do with the army and the navy, or with foreign policy, international relations, and the empire. In a speech (given in 1908) which might win approval from the "REAL Women" of the 1980s, she claimed that there was already a large enough "ignorance vote":

> and to add to it yet another, where the ignorance is imposed by nature and irreparable—the vote of women who in the vast majority of cases are debarred by their mere sex from that practical political experience which is at least always open to man—could any proceeding be more dangerous, more unreasonable?
>
> The women who ask it...are not surely true patriots...to embarrass the difficult work of men, in matters where men's experience alone provides the materials for judgment, is not to help women. On the contrary. We are mothers, wives, and sisters of men, and we know that our interests are bound up with the best interests of men, and that to claim to do their work as well as our own is to injure both.

She went on to say:

> if there were any practical possibility of dividing up the work of Parliament so that women should vote only on those matters where they were equally concerned with men, there would be a great deal to be said for a special franchise of the kind.[5]

But an important group of social feminists was soon to move far beyond the claim to housekeep in the national area, and to demand the right to have a voice in the very areas Mary Ward considered beyond the competence of women, but which they came to see as of vital concern to women.

The radicalisation of suffrage feminism in Britain before the war was associated with the alliance of the nonmilitant suffragists with the Labour Party, and with working-class women in large numbers. My focus is on the emergence, among a relatively small group of the leaders of the nonmilitants, of a new consciousness and a new theory. Among the most important of these women were Kathleen D. Courtney,

Helena Swanick and Catherine E. Marshall, none of them as well known as they deserve to be.[6] Before the war, they were a sort of "ginger group" within the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, playing a central role in rejuvenating the organization, democratizing it, recapturing working-class support, building a formidable pressure machine, and striking an alliance with the Labour Party.

Overtly, this alliance was for strategic purposes only; but for some middle-class suffragists it proved educational. Their thinking shifted towards the left, and they began to see connections between class oppression, race oppression and sex oppression. They came to hold a much more radical view of the changes necessary in society than could be accommodated simply by their own admission to existing political structures. Catherine Marshall, for instance, whose speeches in 1909 dealt mainly with women's need of the vote in order to look after her own domestic and work-related interests,[7] was, by the end of 1913, speaking frankly to Sir Edward Grey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, of the coming struggle between capital and labour, of the interconnectedness of women's position and that of the workers, and even of a sense of "kinship with subject races."[8]

The war divided the women's movement. On one side of the watershed, women, including many of the most militant of the prewar suffragettes, scurried to show how loyally and unquestioningly women could support their warring menfolk. On the other side of the watershed, there was a loud "Click!" as women saw the fatal connection between patriarchy and militarism. In my view, this was a major breakthrough for feminist theory. The lesson, for these women, was that they needed not merely to get inside the structures but to change structure and policy radically. Some of their erstwhile male supporters meanwhile were rudely awakened to the danger already perceived by the opponents of female suffrage—the danger that women, once within the system, might think they had a right to do their own thinking and even to question the decisions of patriarchy. On hearing of a large gathering of women meeting on the evening of the day Britain declared war, Lord Robert Cecil (a leading Conservative suffragist) was seriously disturbed; the women, unlike the jingoistic crowds in the streets that night, had angrily condemned the war and opposed British intervention. Cecil wrote the next morning:

> Action of that kind will undoubtedly make it very difficult for the friends of Women's Suffrage in both...parties. Even to me the action seems so unreasonable under the circumstances as to shake my belief in the fitness of women to deal with great Imperial questions[9]

Although there was no direct follow-up to this meeting, the leaders among the radicalised British suffragists were they who went on to form the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), at a conference held at The Hague in April 1915, to which came women from nations on both sides of the conflict, as well as from neutral countries. The story is told elsewhere.[10]

As the war dragged on, many of these women spoke out against militarism, against the prolongation of a war they believed might have been ended by negotiation, against war itself as a means of settling disputes. The Women's International League did not admit men to membership; but these women were not separatists. Individually, they gravitated still further to the left, many of them joining the Independent Labour Party, the only parliamentary party to oppose the war. In 1917, pacifists, antimilitarists, conscientious objectors to military service alike welcomed the coming of the Russian Revolution, seeing in it the beginning of the hoped-for mass refusal to accept the insanity of the war culture.[11]

The war over, despite disillusionment, those feminists who had come to identify militarism as an enemy which women must confront continued to focus their interest on major areas of foreign policy, economics and international affairs, becoming extremely well informed. Now, at last, they had the vote in Britain and in many Western countries, and they had their own strong international vehicle in the WILPF. Yet it was hard for the feminists, despite all their skill, knowledge and practical political experience, to influence public policy. Lip service was paid to the contribution of women in, for instance, the League of Nations; a few token women were appointed to junior positions. But there was still a presumption that women would operate only in traditional or appropiate areas of concern—the control of prostitution, working conditions, marital laws. The fact is that these able, hardworking, knowledgeable women never did break through and make themselves heard in the international councils of the interwar world, nor in the Foreign Offices of their own countries.

Why was this? I refuse to accept the blame on behalf of those women themselves. I think rather that they did all that they could, at least until the late 1930s, when what finally debilitated them was an inability to hold together in the face of the failure of the League of Nations and the horrors of nazism.

I seek an explanation by returning to the concept of roles and spheres. The political and apparent enfranchisement of women in the Western democracies was a victory, and has in

fact brought good in its train. But men had laid down implicit conditions for women's entry; their terms were that women could come in only if they continued to leave the fate of the world to the decision making of men, and confined themselves to dealing with social conditions (not including major economic planning). And too many of us have tacitly accepted these terms. Or, as it has turned out, individual women could enter and reach the top echelon if they conformed, passed through a filter of male criteria, and learnt to think and act in the ways men have habitually acted; I refer, of course, to the Margaret Thatchers of this world. These conditions prevent women from making the contribution and bringing the fresh perspective that are proving to be needed desperately. The problem is still ours to solve. Can we, women and men, solve it in time?

NOTES

1. A fuller account is given in my paper, "Feminist Consciousness and the First World War," forthcoming in *Proceedings* of the Conference on Women and Education for Peace and Non-Violence, held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, September, 1984.
2. Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London, Virago, 1978); Leslie Parker Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies: 1897-1914* (New York, London, Garland, 1982); "Feminism and Democracy: the Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, with particular reference to the NUWSS 1897-1918," unpublished thesis, University of Stirling, 1980. See also Jo Vellacott (Newberry), "Anti-War Suffragists," *History*, 62, October, 1977.
3. I am working on a biography of Catherine E. Marshall. See also Vellacott, *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (London, Harvester, 1980; New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981).
4. Ellen Dubois, "The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement," *Feminist Studies*, 3, 1975-6, p. 63-71; Symposium, "Culture and Politics in Women's History," *Feminist Studies*, 6, 1980.
5. Mary Ward, "Speech by Mrs. Humphry Ward" (Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, 1908). See Janet P. Trevelyan, *The Life of Mrs. Humphry Ward* (London, 1923); Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres* (London, 1978).
6. Regrettably, the omission of these women from history was not merely accidental. There was conflict, accompanied by much pain and bad feeling, over the response to the outbreak of war by different members of the NUWSS. Those who supported the war turned out to be those who later wrote the histories of the NUWSS. See Ray Strachey, *Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (London, 1931) and *The Cause* (London, 1928); M.G. Fawcett, *The Women's Victory and After* (London, 1920), and *What I Remember* (London, 1924).
7. Various speech notes, Catherine E. Marshall Papers.
8. Notes of interview with Sir Edward Grey, December 15, 1913, Marshall Papers. See also Marshall, "The 'Entente Cordiale' between the Labour Party and the Women's Suffrage Movement," (about January, 1914?), Marshall Papers.
9. Cecil to Millicent Fawcett. Fawcett collection, London. Ironically, Fawcett was in fact in agreement with Cecil and did not like the tone of the meeting.
10. Vellacott, "Anti-War Suffragists"; Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1965); Jane Addams, E. Balch and A. Hamilton, *Women at The Hague* (New York, 1915). Extensive material in Marshall papers and in WILPF archives.
11. Vellacott, *Bertrand Russell*, Chapter 11.

At Birkenau

My sister, my baby,
Your tongue spits back
the bread I steal
and push between your lips.

Guards, dogs, electric wires.
Among them
is suicide easier?

Tell me whenever you
want, and I'll go too.
But not today, so warm.

Joan Selinger Sidney
Storrs, Connecticut

Hanka Haranin

Church orders not sheltering
Jews. Hanka Haranin
brings us bread, empties our bucket.

In the town of burnt corpses
Hanka heats the ground to dig graves.
It was as if all our corpses
streamed to heaven in
the full moon with its red ring.

Joan Selinger Sidney
Storrs, Connecticut