

THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN WESTERN EUROPE

209
15
Women History Research
2325 Oak Street
Berkeley, Ca. 94708

by Ann

The feminist movement of the nineteenth century had two basic goals: the self-actualization of women, and the growth of equality in all areas between the sexes. Specific demands differed, but as Katherine Anthony explains in her study of FEMINISM IN GERMANY AND SCANDANAVIA, "The woman movement of the civilized world wants the same things in whatever language its demands are expressed. In more or less unconscious cooperation, the women of the civilized nations have, from the first, worked for similar ends and common interests." Most European feminist leaders--such as Kathleen Courtney (Denmark), Frau Lecher (Austria), Lyda Gustava Heymann (Germany), Rosika Schwimeer (Hungary), and Maria Deraismes (France)--like the Swedish feminists wanted the right "to education, to work, to liberty"; they demanded equal education and/or equal access to higher education (though they did not seek basic changes in the bias-laden male-chosen curricula, methods of presentation, or departmental structures), better property and inheritance laws, more freedom for daughters, better marriage laws and easier divorce, and the extension of full citizenship to women.

Between 1850 and 1870, demands arose for vocational training, better employment, work protection laws, economic rights including the right to unionize, and more civil rights--primarily the right to vote and to equal representation (mainly in England). Also heard were demands for more maternal and familial rights (e.g. custody of children by their mothers); state protection and provisions for destitute mothers, for "illegitimate" children, and for unwed mothers (primarily in Germany and Scandanavia), the suppression of alcoholism, pornographic literature, and prostitution (proposed later at the 1892 Feminist Congress, which gave its name to the movement); and the right to birth control and state-provided abortions, which were often linked with demands for freedom of sexual expression and for "statutory holidays" from wedlock.¹

Obviously, most if not all of these demands were necessary, though few could reasonably be referred to as "rights." They were unconsciously divided into two great areas of concentration, and two feminist camps developed. As Katherine Anthony notes, "There are...two main currents of the woman's movement whose differences cannot be ignored. But in these differences lies no real conflict. Their relation is supplementary.... The difference is most strikingly brought out in the two most famous slogans...These are the English slogan, 'Votes for Women,' and the German slogan, "Mutterschutz," a phrase dealing with the "protection of motherhood" and authored by Ruth Bré, the famed organizer of the Bund für Mutterschutz.² The two camps--one containing primarily Anglo-Saxon, French, and Spanish feminists, the other containing primarily German, Austrian, and Scandanavian feminists--were not exclusive and soon found that a victory for one meant a victory for all. Though communications were not as extensive as possible between the two groups, leaders like Mme. Brunschwig, organizer of the French Union for Woman Suffrage, found much in common with the leaders of the German Society for Woman Suffrage, the (German) Men's League for Woman Suffrage, and the highly-successful Scandanavian suffrage unions.

"Mutterschutz" became effective through peaceful, lawful activity due partly to a falling birth rate, a rising standard of living, mounting public concern with poverty and welfare issues, and the "sacredness" of the idea of motherhood. The imbalance caused by overemphasis on societal rights and underemphasis on facing and destroying the basis and supporting stereotypes

of anti-feminism was to prove fatal to the movement (though the Fascists, Nazis and local conservatives). The emphasis on the rights of women as mothers, while necessary, intellectually and psychologically reinforced the male contention that women are born to to breed and become mothers, not to fulfill their human potential. This, in turn, led to the modern preoccupation with sex, since the exploitation of women through sex could be physically and legally regulated, whereas domination through love could not. However, there have been numerous positive results from the realization of this goal, including the creation of homes for unwed mothers, legal abortion rights, increased awareness of the poor and their needs, increased acceptance of the individual's right to free sexual expression (within 'reasonable' bounds), and (particularly in Sweden) recognition of marriage as a high-prestige career, with all career benefits, including "statutory holidays," usually spent at meetings and conventions. The achievement of the major part of this program has aided the growth of women's self-confidence and has made men more aware of the bisexuality of this species.

Unfortunately, while "Mutterschutz" was implemented gradually and quietly, the civil rights program was not. The fight for the vote, particularly in England, produced a sex war with guerrilla war tactics. It did not begin that way, but mounting frustration created a "blaze of antagonism," consuming both sexes. Ironically, though the ensuing battles are still remembered, and with some degree of admiration, British militants were often accused of making it more difficult for other national governments to contemplate women suffrage; and despite militancy, Englishwomen themselves did not receive the unrestricted vote until 1928. Even the restricted (or "qualified") vote extended in 1918 was officially credited to the non-militant work done by women during the war, rather than to the suffragists.

Still, though the value of their conduct is debatable, the psychological results --increased male respect for all women, increased awareness of feminism and its demands, and (a somewhat) increased public concern about the merits and truth of ideas forming the foundation of sex bigotry (e.g. that it is unproven that this species is bisexual, that women are merely hommes manqués-- deficient men, as Aristotle and Moses and Freud insisted--and that "feminine nature" being what it is, according to the laws of Darwin and St. Paul, people can be people, but women will still be women)³--are not. Interestingly, many men who accepted the values of liberalism could not understand why women wanted the vote, why they were not content to live in their male-governed nation-states, satisfied with the goals already achieved. John Dewey's answer, in FREEDOM AND CULTURE, is as true of feminism as of any other movement so questioned:

Historically the great movements for human liberation have always been movements to change institutions and not to preserve them intact....these have been movements to bring about a changed distribution of power to do--and power to think and to express thought is a power to do--that there would be a more balanced, a more equal, even, and equitable system of human liberties.

This is why women wanted the right to vote in a highly-politicized world, and why they made the ballot the concrete symbol of their material desires. They wanted "to defend their particular interests, the interests of their children, the interests of their country and of humanity." Though suffragist leaders were aware there would be women "absolutely indifferent to the progress of humanity," they knew of many male voters with the same characteristic and they hoped that "with enthusiastic hearts and clear intelligences," female activists would more than compensate for the others and might even fulfill the suffragists' propaganda promises. Regardless of future results, however, these leaders deeply believed that "the minority of only one sex who make decisions in the public assemblies cannot

be suitable for an entire nation composed of men and women. Women, who suffer under the laws, should contribute to forming them." 4

If the German experience is typical and valid, the suffragists were correct in their assumptions of activist participation, but wrong in their often-used argument that once women had the vote, all the basic problems of society would be systematically attacked and destroyed, that woman suffrage would drastically change all nations, and for the better. Louise Otto, who in 1848 had demanded for German women the right to share in reforms of national scope, founded a suffrage organization in 1865 which later federated with the socialists. German women played active roles in World War I and received the vote after the war. They were active in political life and sent representatives to the Reichstag. They favored the "party of order" and initiated dramatic changes. They proved that their interest in domestic and international affairs was active, but not to the degree envisioned by the suffragists.

Many of the civil rights movements of the nineteenth century involved the extensive use of violence, but in few cases besides woman suffrage was frustration as keen and the resort so understandable. This was particularly true of the English suffragists. There had been much agitation in England for many years before a major women's suffrage organization was formed. Lydia Becker helped organize and lead the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, but had little success in gaining national attention. Little was heard of the suffragists until John Stuart Mill, then a recently-elected Member of Parliament and a well-known intellectual, publicly championed their cause. In 1867, supported by Florence Nightingale, he introduced the first national petition for women's suffrage to Parliament.⁵ Supported as well by the National Union, now led by Mrs. (later Dame) Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929), Mill proposed an amendment to secure women suffrage under the Reform Act of 1867 which would have substituted the word "person" for "man." Though it was defeated, suffragists retained hope since a later attempt by opponents to substitute "male person" for "man" was also defeated; under the then-operative provisions of Lord Romilly's Act, words of the masculine gender legally included women unless the contrary were expressly provided (these provisions were later repealed by Parliament).⁶

For the next thirty-six years, British suffragists held "parlor meetings," presented petitions to members of Parliament who ignored them anyway, queried candidates for election on their views, and generally met with no success.⁷ Suffragist faith in peaceful methods began to lessen and they became more forceful. Feminists who had been trying to convert factory workers in Manchester and other textile centers began to hold small outdoor meetings and to interrupt government speakers at public gatherings to ask where they stood on woman suffrage.

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst, "a small and gentle woman who hid a will of iron beneath a gentle voice,"⁸ the widow of a kindly professor and feminist, formed the Woman's Social and Political Union. She pursued "an unostentatious course" until a furor arose over the arrest of her daughter-lieutenant, Christabel, and a factory worker, Annie Kenney, who had attempted to heckle a Liberal Party leader and caused a near-riot. The resultant publicity convinced the W.S.P.U. that it had found a new, more effective weapon. Prompted by the repeated postponements and refusals of the Government to introduce or pass a suffrage bill, the W.S.P.U. resorted to "propaganda of the dead." Mrs. Pankhurst began developing new guerrilla tactics, never before used in any freedom movement in European history. She set about deliberately provoking police reprisals to gain more publicity, to embarrass party leaders, and to force positive government action. Her suffragettes, as the newspapers dubbed them after noticing their youth, besieged the Prime Minister, harassed Parliament, threw themselves under the feet of police horses, invaded closed political meetings and drowned out the speakers by ringing bells and shouting for the vote, attacked mini-

sters on their doorsteps, broke windows, burned mail boxes, threw stones and bombs, mutilated priceless paintings, burned down buildings, and rioted in the streets. With each escalation of violence, they courted arrest and created riots when arrested. They penetrated Parliament and halted the proceedings by chaining themselves to the grill of the Ladies Gallery and shouting "Votes for Women!" When imprisoned, they underwent long hunger strikes. In 1909, the Liberal Government officially began the policy of forcibly feeding the strikers. This "revolting" form of prolonged torture, often resulting in permanent disability if not death, won sympathy for the suffragettes everywhere but in England, where the government even refused to recognize them as "political prisoners" rather than ordinary criminals.

By 1911, the suffragettes were being told by Christobel Pankhurst:

We are here to claim our rights as women, not only to be free, but to fight for freedom. It is our privilege, as well as our pride and our joy, to take some part in this militant movement, which, as we believe, means the regeneration of all humanity. Nothing but contempt is due to those people who ask us to submit to unmerited oppression. We shall not do it....

Be ready when the hour comes, to show that women are human and have the pride and dignity of human beings. Through such resistance our cause will triumph. But even if it does not, we fight not only for success, but in order that ...our pride, our self-respect, our dignity may not be sacrificed in the future as they have been in the past.

Woman must stand erect now and for ever more. Then, even if they should not win success--and we know that they will win it--at least they will deserve success, and that is what matters more than all beside.⁹

The suffragettes steadily escalated, attacking public officials with whips or fists, biting policemen in response to arrests, slashing paintings in and out of galleries. And along with the violence grew a new sense of solidarity, of sisterhood, as is evident in Ida Alexa Ross Wylie's recollections:

To my astonishment, I found that women, in spite of knock-knees and the fact that for centuries a respectable woman's leg had not even been mentionable, could at a pinch outrun the average London bobby. Their aim with a little practice became good enough to land ripe vegetables in ministerial eyes, their wits sharp enough to keep Scotland Yard running around in circles and looking very silly....

The day that, with a straight left to the jaw, I sent a fair-sized CID officer into the orchestra pit of the theater where we were holding one of our belligerent meetings was the day of my own coming of age...Since I was no genius, the episode could not make me one, but it set me free to be whatever I was to the top of my bent....¹⁰

Finally the British public began to react, but not soon enough. By 1913, the suffragettes had "endured starvation and pain with mad fortitude, invited humiliation, brutality, and finally, ...even death."¹¹ On Derby Day, Emily Davidson, a very young suffragette, had dived under the horses' hooves so that, as she had written earlier, "one big tragedy would save many others."¹² Suffragette flags, with the purple, white, and green colors of the militants, hung low that day.

In December, 1913, three suffragettes in beautiful gowns took a box opposite the king's at Covent Garden for a performance of Jeanne d'Arc. At the first in-

termission, they suddenly rose with megaphones to harangue him on the moral of Jeanne's fight for liberty. Never before had anyone attempted to publicly lecture the king--or any member of the royal family--on his patriotic duty.

Mrs. Pankhurst devised more plans. She told her followers: "We are going to try this time if more stones will do it. I do not think it will ever be necessary for us to arm ourselves...but there are women who are prepared to do that, if it should be necessary....We only go as far as we are obliged to in order to win.... One thing we regard as sacred: human life. With that exception, we are justified in using all methods resorted to in time of war."¹³

In May, 1914, Mrs. Pankhurst tried to storm Buckingham Palace with 100 supporters. Almost 1,500 policemen were waiting. In the riot that occurred, weapons, eggs, hatpins, filled the air; dresses were torn and policemen bitten. Mrs. Pankhurst and fifty-six other "furies" were imprisoned as a result. A general truce was called during the war (though a splinter group continued its harassment of the government all through the war years), and by mid-war, Prime Minister Lloyd George stated officially: "During the war the women of the country have rendered us an effective service in the prosecution of the war as any other class of the community. If you are going to bring in a new class of electors, on whatever ground of state service, none of us can possibly deny their claims."¹⁴ By 1918, most Englishmen agreed to a restricted extension of the vote (restricted in terms of property ownership or tenancy), and it was only a matter of time until the restrictions were lifted.

The suffragettes had their effect on Europe. In Russia, where British militancy had ignited female student intellectuals, feminism became associated with violent and revolutionary activity. After 1905, the feminists held political strikes and "mounted the barricades." In May, 1917, a few days before the Revolution, they held a mass demonstration in St. Petersburg and later took a large part in the October Revolution and the subsequent civil war. Throughout Europe, men suddenly listened to feminists and feminine complaints with more open ears--because of the militants.

The suffragists gained their goal in most of Europe from the first through the third decades of this century. Finland became the first European country to extend full citizenship to women. Norway and Denmark came next. The Soviet Union granted women equal rights officially in their new constitution in 1917. The major powers (exempting France who gave the vote to women only after the Second World War) acceded after 1918.

The suffrage victory was granted not because men had finally recognized feminist claims to real freedom and open equality, but out of fear of a renewal of militant tactics in a post-war world weary of fighting. Thus, for all its high hopes and shining dreams, the suffrage movement was a fiasco; the feminist movement a revolt and not a revolution. Today, when the task of human liberation requires new goals and methods, women are still the outsiders. Brigid Brophy's explanation of this problem provides an eloquent summary:

Women are free. At least, they look free. They even feel free. But in reality women in the western industrialized world are like the animals in a modern zoo. There are no bars. It appears that cages have been abolished. Yet in practice women are still kept in their enclosures. The barriers which keep them in now are invisible.

It is now forty years since the pioneer feminists, several of whom were men, raised such a rumpus by rattling the cage bars--or created such a conspicuous nuisance by chaining themselves to them--that society was at last obliged to pay attention. The

result was that the bars were uprooted, the cage thrown open: whereupon the majority of the women who had been held captive decided they would rather stay inside anyway.

To be more precise, they thought they decided; and society, which can with perfect truth point out 'Look, no bars', thought it was giving them the choice. There are no laws and very little discrimination to prevent western industrialized women from voting, being voted for or entering the professions. If there are still comparatively few women lawyers or engineers, let alone women presidents of the United States, what are women to conclude except that this is the result either of their own free choice or of something inherent in female nature?...

In point of fact, neither female nature nor woman's individual choice has been put to the test. As American Negroes have discovered, to be officially free is by no means the same as being actually and psychologically free. A society as adept as ours has become at propaganda--whether political or commercial--should know that 'persuasion', which means the art of launching myths and artificially inducing inhibitions, is every bit as effective as force of law....Cage bars are clumsy methods of control, which excite the more rebellious personalities inside to rattle them. Modern society, like the modern zoo, has contrived to get rid of the bars without altering the fact of imprisonment. All the zoo architect needs to do is run a zone of hot or cold air, whichever the animal concerned cannot tolerate, round the cage where the bars used to be. Human animals are not less sensitive to social climate.

The ingenious point about the new-modal zoo is that it deceives both sides of the invisible barrier. Not only can the animal not see how it is imprisoned; the visitor's conscience is relieved of the unkindness of keeping animals shut up....The pressure society exerts to drive men out of the house are very nearly as irrational and unjust as those by which it keeps women in. The mistake of the early reformers was to assume that men were emancipated already and that therefore reform need ask only for the emancipation of woman. What we ought to do now is go right back to scratch and demand the emancipation of both sexes. (Emphasis mine. Note: historically, most feminists have agreed that men need liberating too. It was only the fervor of the suffrage campaign--especially in the U.S., where almost-illiterate black slaves-freedmen could vote because they were male, while black women, who had starved and fought and fallen beside them could not, because they were not male--that brought in the concept that only women should be concentrated upon. The early feminists assumed the need for male emancipation, but did not emphasize it because the societies in which they lived and fought, while led by a minority of men, were fashioned and maintained--in theory, at least--for all men and no women.) It is only because men are not free themselves that they have found it necessary to cheat women by the deception which makes them appear free when they are not....

Not only are the distinctions we draw between male nature and female nature largely arbitrary and often pure superstition: they are completely beside the point. They ignore the essence of human nature....

Civilization consists not necessarily in defying nature but in making it possible for us to do so if we judge it desirable. The higher we can lift our noses from the grindstone of nature, the wider the area we have of choice; and the more choices we have freely made, the more individualized we are. We are at our most civilized when nature does not dictate to us, as it does to animals...but when we can opt to fall in or better it...we are betraying civilization itself if we do not set both sexes free to make a free choice.¹⁵

- 1 Oliver Jensen, *THE REVOLT OF AMERICAN WOMEN*, Harcourt, Brace, and Co., New York, 1952, p. 43.
- 2 Katherine Anthony, *FEMINISM IN GERMANY AND SCANDANAVIA*, Constable and Co., 1915, pp. 3-5, 7.
- 3 This last attitude still seems prevalent today among intellectuals. Pamela Frankau notes in her Introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin's *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN* (1952) that Mary Wollstonecraft "is a woman crusading for women. Even today we prefer them not to."
"We can declare ourselves emphatically for the rights of the individual and still make reservations when it comes to the rights of the individual woman."
- 4 G. Martinez Sierra, *FEMINISMO, FEMENIDAD, ESPANOLISMO*, Madrid, 1920, pp. 249-265.
- 5 Oliver Jensen, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- 6 E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *THE LIFE OF EMMELINE PANKHURST*, Mifflin, New York, 1952, pp. 10-11.
- 7 Eleanor Flexner, *CENTURY OF STRUGGLE*, Harvard University Press, Mass., 1959, pp. 250-251.
- 8 Mildred Adams, *THE RIGHT TO BE PEOPLE*, Lippincott, New York, 1967, p. 130.
- 9 George Seldes, ed., *THE GREAT QUOTATIONS*, Pocket Books, New York, 1967, p. 983.
- 10 Quoted in Betty Friedan's *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1963, p. 62.
- 11 Barbara Tuchman, *THE PROUD TOWER*, New York, 1966, p. 447.
- 12 E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 124.
- 14 Charles Seymour and Donald Paige Frary, *HOW THE WORLD VOTES*, Mass., 1918, Vol. 1, p. 172.
- 15 From "Women," an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* of November, 1963, and included in Brigid Brophy's *DON'T NEVER FORGET*, New York, 1966, pp. 38-44.