

Suffrage Movements in France, England and the United States

By today's standards, First Wave Feminism may seem quaint and almost completely detached from what most people would call "feminism" in the contemporary era. However, like most philosophies tied to political movements, the first wave feminists of the late 19th century and early 20th century were laying the groundwork for women's causes that would create a movement that is still going strong today. This paper will focus primarily on the suffrage histories of France, England and the United States, however it should be noted that suffrage movements have existed, and still do, all over the world in a variety of countries; far too many to account for in this project. The movements of France, England and the United States are all tied to very similar authors and philosophers. However, each movement takes on a different form of its own. For example, the British suffragette movement experienced a great deal of violence in comparison to the others, whereas the French and American movements required more political maneuvering.

Feminist philosophy is intrinsic to the suffrage movements of these countries. To understand feminist philosophy, it is important to recognize that it might be broken down into four or five categories (depending on how they are posed) or "waves" as they are most commonly referred to. This paper will focus primarily on early feminism and the suffrage movements, but I will provide a brief overview of the entire philosophy.

Proto-feminism is a term usually referring to philosophies about women's rights prior to and during the French Revolution, or otherwise centered in the mid 18th century to early 19th century. *First Wave Feminism* is largely regarded as beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication for the Rights of Women* (1792), or at least by the point in

which the various suffragette movements throughout western Europe and North America began. It is hard to define a specific starting point for this as many scholars have debated this subject, movements began at different times in different countries, and philosophies were being written globally in different languages so as to make an actual starting point difficult to define.

Second Wave feminism is, by most scholars, marked as beginning with existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's two volume book, later combined in a single text, *The Second Sex* (1949). After WWII, the daughters of the "Rosie the Riveters" would take up this text in American universities in the 1960s, and along with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) would launch numerous women's rights campaigns based on these philosophies. Second wave feminism, like structuralism and modernism, fell into a period of criticism in the early 1990s that has been called the *Post-Feminist Critique*, marked largely by the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Post-feminism is even harder to define, as it serves as both a segue into *Third Wave Feminism*, but also as a standalone valence of criticisms of Second Wave philosophies, thus the reason it is possible to say there are more than three waves of feminism. Some scholars mark *Gender Trouble* as the start of third wave feminism, while others see it as the standalone critique of second wave. This is also complicated by the types of books coming out in the 1990s in which they were both critical of second wave and positing new theories for third wave feminism.

Understanding how the shift from first wave to second wave occurs is largely a matter of understanding the historical events surrounding these two schools of philosophy. It might be too easy to say that first wave ends with the end of the suffragette movements as that relegates all of first wave feminism to being about women's right to vote. Though

this is a large portion of the feminist movement of the early 20th century, and many of the movements ceased once women gained the vote, first wave feminism was about more than just voting rights. Moreover, suffragette movements were taking place all over the western hemisphere, and did not conclude simultaneously.

Historical Contexts and the Motivations for Movements

In the previous paper I covered the role of French women during the French Revolution and how this sparked a great deal of feminist philosophy pertaining to equal rights. As noted, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication for the Rights of Women*, written in support of the French Revolution, is noted as one of the texts beginning first wave feminism. In this section I will focus primarily on English and American contexts that lead to suffrage movements.

It is important to understand that feminism and political movements, such as the suffragette movements, are almost always linked. Unlike other philosophies, the history of feminism is as rooted in these political movements as they are in the philosophies. It is often a matter of recognizing that often one does not exist without the other, as much of the feminist philosophy being written was a result of what the political movements saw as injustice towards women. It did not simply begin with someone saying "women have the right to vote" and philosophies emerged. Historically, we can trace the first wave movements back to the charitable work of women in the early to mid 19th century.

Working with and for the poor became a major shift in women's work in the 19th century. It allowed women to leave the private sphere of the home and enter into the public sphere of society as men did. Charity work would thus become a catalyst for women's

movements. In a way, the charity work itself was a feminist movement as it allowed for women's entry into the public sphere in countries like England. Women had entered the public sphere in France, attending political debates and speeches during the French Revolution, only to be banned from such activities later on. Charity work was a less controversial means by which women could enter the public sphere and work as their male counterparts did in this sphere, though usually unpaid for their efforts. Prior to this, it was predominantly lower income women who entered the public sphere of the workplace, such as factories, where they had little agency and were still considered a subaltern community. Charity work allowed middle and upper class women to enter the public sphere, probably for the first time, and over time they would gain agency in this area.

In a pamphlet reprinted in London's *Alliance News*, Dora Downright documented her experience as a Poor Law Guardian in *Why I am A Guardian* (1888). In this piece she gives insight into both the type of charitable work women did, and the way in which women began taking on roles of power within these mixed gender organizations. The parishes in the Poor Law Unions were overseen by boards as part of the English relief system or Poor Laws. The members of the boards were called "Guardians," and by and large were predominantly men. As women began to enter into the public sphere through charity work, Poor Law boards were one example of the ways in which women began to slowly rise to power in that public sphere.

In Dora Downright's case, after being one of the first women elected to her parish's board, she found herself feeling useless. Either the matters she was assigned were "such a trifle" or she was waved off with statements that it was "clearly beyond a woman's understanding" (Downright 68). Her first success as a Guardian came when she managed to

acquire thicker flannel and warmer clothing for the poor in the winter following her election. Her work would take on a greater meaning, as she details the moment she realized what her course was to be in the organization. In describing the way in which their rural workhouse infirmary was being used by women "who were not paupers" and would go there "when the hour of their trial comes near," Downright paints the picture of the pregnant woman's role in that society saying, "and one may fancy what the feelings of a respectable married woman must be when for the first time she has to come before a Board of gentlemen, and be questioned why she wants to be admitted as an inmate" (69). She continues to describe a moment in which, as a woman, she was able to make change happen within the organization.

"She was a young, pale, pretty thing, not much more than a child, and her story was the usual one – drink! A day or two of pleasure, an evening of intoxication, and she was ruined, body and soul, unless God in His mercy sent her some friend to help her. And who should help her if not a woman who had daughters just about her age? As the poor young thing came into the Board-room, accompanied by the beadle, and looking ready to sink to the ground with shame, I saw a glance of curiosity, quite as insulting as compassionate, go round the table. 'Mr. Chairman,' said I, before they began to question her, 'will the Board let me hear this young creature's story, and I will send in my report.' It had never been done before, but a minute's reflection showed them that this was the only right and proper manner to deal with such a case..." (Downright 69)

Dora Downright's experiences such as this provide an insight into the way in which women began to slowly gain power within institutions such as the Poor Law parishes.

As a result of working with the prostitutes, children, and the poor in general, "Increasingly, female philanthropists constituted themselves as people who saw more than men, because they saw the domestic side of poverty" (Walkowitz 55). Though part of the public sphere, that sphere was often subdivided by class and locale. For example, the English west end women working in the east end of London saw a world many middle and

upper class men were unfamiliar with. In working with these people, women began to realize that "they too were subordinated and oppressed by men and man-made laws" (Riemer/Fout 60). These realizations were the beginnings of the mid-19th century movements that would later result in the suffragette movements. But there would be a learning curve, so to speak, in terms of how to organize for such movements, and much of these organizational skills stemmed from their work with charitable organizations.

First, communication became a necessary means by which to organize. Speeches, pamphlets, books, letter writing, and published articles and agendas allowed women a voice in the public sphere, but also kept them in contact with one another in a sort of ad-hoc or informal network of communiqués. Near the end of the 19th century politically active women throughout Europe and the United States were connected through various transmedia forms of communication. Both technology and the industrialism of charity work opened the lines of communication and connected these women so that "They read each other's books and periodicals, visited one another, shared their experiences and problems, and helped one another found new organizations and make existing ones effective" (Riemer/Fout 61).

As with charity work, the suffragette movement would also be born out of abolitionism, "The international linkages and travels among early feminists, particularly between Britain, the United States, and France, owed a great deal to the already extant international networks established by the movement for abolition" (Moynagh/Forestell 17). The abolitionist movement was also part of a transnational network of communication, and "Not only did anti-slavery women correspond with one another, and meet through their travels, they also exchanged financial support" (Moynagh/Forestell 18).

British and Irish women sent money to the U.S. and Canada in the mid-19th century. Emblems of female slaves were used by women abolitionists that adorned crockery, coins, letterheads and folk art, and many of these emblems were sent across the Atlantic and throughout Europe.

Other factors would compel suffrage movements in both England and the U.S. Lunacy laws in England, such as those noted by Judith Walkowitz in her depiction of Mrs. Georgina Weldon, a famous spiritualist, and how her husband attempted to have her committed to an asylum in a conspiratorial manner with "mad doctors" and alienists led to court cases in which Weldon represented herself. Weldon's actions, and her status as a celebrity of the times, brought the unjust practice of women's commitment in asylums, what could also be viewed as unjust incarceration, into the spotlight of the media. Weldon also served as her own council in court, another instance in which a woman was taking on new roles in the public sphere.

The temperance movements of America were tied to domestic violence issues, in which alcoholism was linked to violence endured by women at the hands of men. Temperance organizations would see that voting rights for women would become necessary if they wanted to change the laws. As a result of alliances forged between temperance and suffrage groups, it "also caused the suffrage movement to inherit many enemies, including organized liquor interests and retail saloon operators" (Paxton/Hughes 36).

What is common amongst all of these historical examples is that women are moving into the public spheres for the first time in large numbers. Whether it was charity work,

organized movements for a cause, participation in court proceedings, or otherwise, these women were breaking cultural taboos and customs by not only working within the public sphere, but also making their voices heard publically.

The French Movements

Proto-feminism and first wave feminism was born largely out of the French Revolution. However, proto-feminism was being espoused by men and women before the revolution. As noted in my previous paper,

"This tradition of proto-feminism existed prior to the revolution, and in particular within the pages of papers and journals such as *Etrennes nationales des Dames*, *Journal des Droits de l'Homme*, and probably the largest circulated of the group the *Journal des Dames*, a monthly publication in France between 1759 to 1778 that held a subscription list that numbered between 300 -1000 readers." (Abray, McMillan)

One of the first hints of a suffrage movement began during the French Revolution. Women had participated in the political public sphere, attending rallies and speeches, but mostly in a passive way, "They were citizens who were excluded from the political body, but whose presence was necessary in demonstrations of unity, for, after all, women represented half the country" (Godineau 135). As the Constitution was being accepted in the summer of 1793, later that year Olympe de Gouges would be sent to the guillotine in November for her subversive and radical demands for women's equality in the new constitution. However, during the summer of 1793, other women were speaking out in the same manner, demanding that "equality" under the new constitution meant men and women alike. Female citizens in places such as Muret, Damazan, Clermont-Ferrand, Le Mans, Nancy, Beaumont, and others were critical of the Convention and the new constitution for "excluding them from the 'right to express their suffrage'" (Godineau 137).

These demands for equality were some of the first utterances of a suffrage

movement. It was the wife of Thiefaïne of Valognes who phrased these issues in such a way that they seemed to resonate throughout suffrage movements from then on when she said, "injustices to my sex must be overcome; they irrevocably seem to take away from us all public administration and forbid us even to express our feelings about the great interests of the country" (Godineau 137).

During the period of 1896-1901, three crucial "stimuli" would create feminist movements leading to suffrage in France (Hause/Kenney 28). First, women's congresses began to be held in Paris that would eventually lead to more militant assemblies. Second was the creation of *La Fronde*, a feminist newspaper started by the journalist Margeurite Durand in 1897. Durand and the paper would become a nexus of the French feminist movements, where the "feminist elite," including Caroline Remy, wrote articles, columns and op-ed pieces daily. Lastly, like England and America, women's work in already established charitable organizations formed a coalition called the *Conseil national des femmes françaises* (CNFF), which would become affiliated with the International Council of Women (Hause/Kenney 28).

Suffrage in France would be a slow and gradual process. René Viviani would introduce a bill that was limited in the ways women would be allowed to vote and would lie in opposition to other bills being drafted. Viviani's model would allow married women to vote, arguing that unmarried women already had greater freedom under the law since they did not fall under the rule of the husband (coverture). However, Hubertine Auclert had drafted a bill that was almost completely the opposite, arguing that unmarried women needed political power more than married women, and thus her bill was written to gain voting rights for unmarried women.

This sort of infighting amongst French suffrage groups and personalities would become a mainstay of their politics. Later on, Hubertine Auclert and Carrie Chapman Catt would butt heads in the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), leading to the later exclusion of French representatives in the alliance (Hause/Kenney 75). These contentions between French organizations, and later with international alliances, would lead to decades of struggle for women's voting rights. It would not be until 1945 that women began voting in France, and it would not be until the 1960s that legal restrictions, primarily centered around literacy, would be lifted allowing all women the right to vote in France. The infighting and contestations of the suffrage organizations in France are exemplary of the type of *political* militancy that affected the French suffrage movements.

The English Movements

In England, women's right to vote was brought up in the 1830s, "but sustained agitation for the franchise did not begin until later that century" (Riemer/Fout 71). In the later 19th century suffrage associations would begin to appear in most Western European countries. One of the earliest and best known instances that would give rise to suffragette movements was when Americans, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, were denied full admittance into the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840. Instead, the "American women delegates of anti-slavery societies found themselves voted out of the convention and seated behind a bar and curtain, screening them from public view" (Foner 77). The reason for this was because it was contrary to English customs and would be offensive to English gentlemen. As a result of this exclusion, it would later prompt them to hold the Seneca Falls Convention in New York.

The British suffragettes were also militant in their approach to the movement. However, unlike their French counterparts, their militancy would be one of a more *radically public* nature. British feminists and suffragettes held public meetings, the first of which was held in the Free Trade Hall in Manchester in April of 1868. Later meetings would be held in London, and a "suffrage pamphlet in the 1880s recorded that, during the movement's first 14 years, more than 1,300 public meetings had been held" (Wingerden 24). In the late 19th century, this was considered taboo in English society. Women having only recently entered the public sphere through charity work were seen as radicals and troublemakers for holding public political meetings. Women hardly spoke up outside of the home in this era, and to hold such meetings and espouse such sentiments as political equality to men was quite an upset for English society at that time, "For women to engage in any public business was still thought exceedingly unusual, and public manifestations of support for political aims was simply not behavior befitting a respectable female" (Wingerden 26). Like the French, a journal would emerge that served as a sort of nexus for the early suffragette movements in England. The *Women's Suffrage Journal* was founded by Lydia Becker in 1870, and would continue to document and announce meetings till 1890.

The events of November 18th, 1910 became known as "Black Friday," in which 300 women marched on the House of Commons and were met by police. Violence erupted as police tried to quell the horde of women. Newspaper reports would cite that much of this was not necessarily at the hands of the police, but that of angry mobs of men that had also gathered and would assault the women as the police pushed them into the crowds (Wingerden 123). In all, of the 300 women who marched, there were 119 arrests made that day. This is exemplary of another facet of the British movements in which being arrested

would become a badge of honor for the suffragettes, and were often noted by ribbons and pins adorning their clothing or sashes noting how many times the suffragette had been incarcerated.

The militancy of the British suffragettes would take on a more violent nature than most countries. Having been met with violence at the hands of men in England, they would resort to tactics that would be considered terrorism by today's standards. In 1909, Theresa Garnett attacked Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary, horse-whipping him as he descended a platform after giving a speech. Suffragettes smashed the windows of shops and anti-suffrage organizations. They attempted to set fire to the Theatre Royal, the tea pavilion at Key Gardens, and other buildings. The postal service came under assault as suffragettes attempted to burn postal buildings and otherwise disrupt mail service by destroying mailboxes.

"Suffragettes poured phosphorous, ink, paraffin, and kerosene into letter-boxes to destroy mail. Ordinary people living in a suburb of Birmingham came home one evening to find that suffragettes had filled their key-holes of their house doors with small leaden pellets... Suffragettes destroyed race courses and golf greens where off-duty MPs whiled away their time... Other suffragette actions included smashing a jewel case at the Tower of London... cutting telegraph and telephone wires between London and Glasgow, and sending bogus telephone messages to call up the Army Reserves and the Territorials." (Wingerden 143-144).

The militancy of the British suffragettes had increased as a response to the violence women had endured at the hands of anti-suffrage mobs, multiple, repeated arrests by police, forced feedings during hunger strikes while incarcerated, and increased governmental measures to put down the suffrage movements once and for all. Unlike other countries, the English suffrage movement was far more violent and fought under tactics of war.

The American Movements

After being denied access into the World Anti-Slavery Convention, Stanton and Mott conceived of a women's rights convention. In 1848 the Seneca Falls Convention was held and Mott and Stanton came together "with many others such as Maria Weston Chapman, Susan B. Anthony, Abby Kelley, Lucy Stone, and a number of 'women's rights men,' met in Seneca Falls, New York, and laid the foundation of the woman's rights movement" (Foner 78). Using the Declaration of Independence as a model, Stanton drafted the *Declaration of Sentiments* and almost all of it was adopted by the Convention unanimously, except for one line in the declaration that read: "Resolved, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise" (Stanton *et al* 82). By contemporary standards, "it is difficult to fathom how controversial this simple claim was... Many feared it was so radical it would make the entire 'Woman Movement' look ridiculous" (McBride/Parry 61). While people were committed to improvements in other areas of women's lives, political equality was something altogether different.

At that time in the United States, common law and coverture, dating back to the English colonies and in line with the British laws at that time, was the mainstay of the private sphere. This was defined by William Blackstone in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* as the woman falling under the protection and rule of the husband, and that "By marriage, husband and wife are one person in law" (Blackstone 442, McBride/Parry 175). It was said that by marrying the woman is committing legal suicide, as she ceases to exist as an individual upon wedlock. The concept of women voting was an anathema to this way of life, and the "stability of the family and society depended on it. To separate men and women, which a doctrine of individual rights required, would threaten social peace"

(McBride/Parry 61). The "elective franchise" resolution would end up being passed largely due to the support of Frederick Douglass.

Coverture would slowly degrade over the century, primarily due to issues such as the *Married Women's Property Acts*. In the early 1900s a second framework, *separate spheres*, would be implemented. Marriage would then be seen somewhat as a partnership between man and woman, but one that fell under the separate-but-equal model of the law, at least in the private sphere. The male breadwinner and the female homemaker were seen as existing in separate spheres, but were considered equal under the law. Its relevance here is in the way it functions almost exactly the same way anti-slavery and civil rights issues would eventually play out for black citizens in the United States. There are many similarities between the abolitionist movements and the suffrage movements, as both were at one point, intertwined with one another, centered on issues of equality that endured a separate-but-equal phase, and geared towards similar goals such as voting rights.

However, it should also be noted that many white American suffragettes saw their right to vote relative to racist values; white women should have the right to vote before black men, "Some upper-class women thought the vote would ensure their supremacy over growing numbers of immigrants" (McBride/Parry 63). The 14th Amendment had theoretically created all citizens equal, yet only white men could vote. By the time the 15th Amendment was passed in 1869, black men were now being afforded a right to vote (something that would be a controversy and civil rights issue for the next 100 years), yet women were excluded. Stanton herself, though an abolitionist, "expressed outrage that other races should receive the vote while White women remained disenfranchised" (Paxton/Hughes 38).

In 1869, Stanton and Anthony would found the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA). The NWSA was considered a radical group and "it was considered justifiable to allow women's suffrage organizations to be segregated by race or to align with the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)" (Paxton/Hughes 38). The NWSA was seen as a group that would push their agenda by any means necessary and make alliances with questionably non-feminist organizations. As a result, Lucy Stone and others argued that the NWSA was "too extreme, and civil rights for women and Blacks could proceed hand in hand" (Paxton/Hughes 38). Thus, they began the American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA) later that year in 1869. Both organizations would later reconcile their differences and merge as the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890. In 1904, Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt, Millicent Fawcett and other suffragettes would start the International Woman Suffrage Alliance to take these issues of political equality around the world.

Such ties to temperance movements were also a major force in suffrage movements in the United States in the same way the abolitionist movements were. Initially, temperance movements were women's movements, and voting rights for women were necessary if the temperance organizations ever wanted to enact a prohibition on liquor, which would later be enacted in the U.S. under the Volstead Act of 1920. This was similar to movements in France and England in which women's groups sought protection against domestic violence. Much of the temperance movement in the U.S. was a retaliation against domestic violence against women. Their linkage to suffrage movements bolstered the numbers of suffrage advocates, as well as bringing conservative and religious citizens into the debate. In general, American suffragettes would become a major force in international movements.

Stanton, Mott, Anthony and others were major influences on suffrage movements in France and England.

Conclusion

Like the motivations for the temperance movement in the U.S. and its ties to domestic violence, in France these issues had been taken up during the French Revolution, and in England "Maiden Tributes" espoused details of domestic and sexual violence committed against women. These are but a few examples of the ways in which feminists seeking equality was not just about political voting issues, but equality under the law, and in some ways, establishing women as a protected group under the law due to the violence so many women endured under coverture and common law.

Hysteria diagnoses and lunacy laws allowed men, particularly husbands, to incarcerate women in asylums under what famed spiritualist, Mrs. Georgina Weldon, referred to as "a little family conspiracy" (Walkowitz 189). Police in England would also take a heavy hand in arresting suffragettes. The ties of politics and incarceration are unjust if, like the women of those times, you have no political rights to vote or seek change in such governmental policies.

The biggest catalyst for suffrage movements and first wave feminism was women's entry into the public sphere. French women had been involved in politics during the French Revolution, although somewhat passively. In England and the U.S. charity work would be the initial entry into the public sphere for women. And it was through these charitable organizations that women learned to organize and mobilize for their causes, as these organizations already had well established lines of communication through a trans-Atlantic

network of groups. Journals would emerge that served as a sort of nexus for all things feminist or suffragist. Pamphlets espoused all manner of feminist philosophy. Having moved into the public sphere, women were beginning to use their voices within that sphere for the first time, which did not sit well with the standards and traditions of those times.

Abolitionist and temperance groups were also public sphere movements where women found a voice. However, those voices were often censored or altogether excluded, such as when Stanton and Mott tried to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. This exclusion would become a very important moment in feminist history as it was the catalyst for the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. The drafting of the *Declaration of Sentiments* would become one of the more important documents to arise from first wave feminist movements, as it sparked the beginning of the suffragette movement in the United States, and would eventually spread throughout Western Europe. Seneca Falls serves as the site at which it may be argued the suffrage movement truly began, as it led to the advent of numerous suffrage organizations in the United States and throughout Europe.

In 1918 English women gained the right to vote under the Representation of the People Act. Only women over 30 years old and who held property could vote. In 1928 the act was amended to include all women 21 and over. U.S. women would gain the right to vote in 1920 under the 19th amendment which prohibited states from applying sex-based prescriptions. However, state-based voting rights for women had come as early as 1893 in Colorado. French women would get the vote in 1944, several years after England and the United States, largely due to infighting amongst the various suffrage organizations and political maneuvering.

Though often taken for granted in contemporary times, voting rights for women are still somewhat new in terms of the history of democracy in the western hemisphere. Over the last fifty plus years, numerous instances dealing specifically with women's issues have become part of the political landscape. Currently, in the United States, women's healthcare debates have been a major issue in politics. Though much of feminism in the third wave have shifted to Queer theory and gay rights, time and again the issues of women's healthcare have resurfaced. Conservatism vs. middle range liberalism was at the forefront of the French elections in 2017. Violence against women has been another issue in both U.S. and British politics in recent years. The right to vote was once a topic that could lead to arrest for women in these countries, and going back far enough, even beheadings during the French Revolution. Arrests under a system in which an entire gender has been disenfranchised from voting in is an injustice that took decades to overcome. As more and more topics specific to women have become part of the political landscape of these countries, women's right to vote has become more important as once private issues are brought into the political public sphere.

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