



Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote

Ellen Carol DuBois

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Reviewed by Shelby Shapiro. First published online 10 April 2020.

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In *Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote*, distinguished historian Ellen Carol DuBois tells the story of American women's struggle for the vote from 1848 to the passage in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted all American women the right to vote. DuBois points out that the the first women's rights convention, held at Seneca Falls in New York in 1848, occurred in the midst of the European revolutions for democracy, although calls for equal rights date as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) [71].

DuBois details many of the struggles within the movement as activists worked to define themselves and their aims. Throughout the book, DuBois places events, ideas and action within appropriate contexts. She chronicles the fault lines within the movement, and the consequences of decisions and actions in regard to those points of conflict – over race, immigration, prohibition and temperance. She discusses tactics, attitudes towards the major political parties, and stances on questions such as pacifism and American participation in World War I. She examines

geographical contexts – how suffragism played out in the Northeast, the South and the West - and we also see how the movement went from being universal to particularist: from seeing men and women as the same to emphasizing their differences.

DuBois looks primarily at two groups of suffragists: white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) and, to a lesser extent, African Americans. Attitudes and activities among other ethnic groups receive only occasional mentions. Unfortunately, this is a major shortcoming: mainline suffragists often used the threat of the immigrant masses as an argument for suffrage, giving the impression, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that immigrants were passive recipients rather than active agents. That many New York City immigrants voted for Tammany Hall candidates does not prove that these voters were dough in Tammany's supple fingers. Organizing for suffrage in New York City, Carrie Chapman Catt "... was suspicious of the immense immigrant population of the city, fearing its ignorance and susceptibility to the dictates of Tammany, the city's powerful Democratic machine." [202] This assumes that

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immigrant support for Tammany was not a rational choice based on what immigrants perceived and observed in their interactions in a new environment; it assumes that immigrants were incapable of figuring out who was friend or foe.

As noted in the Introduction, DuBois wishes to confront and confound two claims about the suffragists: (1) that they stood for a single issue; and (2) that the suffrage movement was tainted by racism. The first claim she disposes of easily. The second, however, is much more problematic. DuBois writes:

Nor was it true that the woman suffrage movement was voiced exclusively by and in the name of white women and that deep-seated racism was its fatal flaw. For much of its history, the demands for woman suffrage and black suffrage were bound together, but that statement must be carefully parsed. Women's right to the vote would not have been demanded and not have entered into the political discourse in the first place if its initial leaders had not been deeply involved with the abolitionist and black suffrage movements. *But in the post-Reconstruction years, this bond was broken as the mainstream woman suffrage movement excluded black women. This development was of a piece with the larger social and political reaction to Reconstruction. We have to recognize and examine that white racial exclusivity and its consequences for suffragism. The grand conclusions of the suffrage movement was tainted by the ironic fate of its coinciding with the very nadir of post-slavery racial politics.* [emphasis added] [3-4].

In other words: it *wasn't*, until it *was*. DuBois then tries to mitigate this conclusion by stating that:

"Still it must be said that every other white-dominated popular political movement of that era similarly accommodated to insurgent white supremacy. And yet only the woman suffrage movement – not the Gilded Age labor movement or the People's Party or even Progressivism itself – has been so fiercely criticized for the fatal flaw of racism." [4]

The Gilded Age labor movement exemplified by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) promoted immigration restriction and white supremacy (union

labels insured that the worker's hands were white); the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) – formed in opposition to the AFL – notably banned racism in its ranks and organized workers of all races and ethnicities. Progressivist "reforms" included Jim Crow laws as a way of handling the so-called "Negro problem." *Contra* DuBois, racism and nativism within the Gilded Age and Progressive Era has not been ignored. Any history of the Leo Franks case and lynching notes the rabble-rousing antisemitism of the Popular Party's Tom Watson. The defeat of the mass strikes among railroad workers led by later Socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs had racism as its fatal flaw. (It was during this period that railroad magnate and robber baron Jay Gould famously declared he could get one-half of the working class to kill the other half.)

This reviewer would like to have seen mention of Central European Jewish immigrants, the so-called "German Jews" who, beyond a few individuals, arrived long before their Eastern European cousins. Their views on suffrage had a more divided and conflicted tone than that of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Another group notably absent from this book are the Finnish-Americans, who stood out as among the most militantly pro-suffrage. In effect, DuBois, who is otherwise very informative about the differences between and among white Protestant Americans, is either conflating all so-called "white" ethnic groups as either allies of the WASPS or as having no well-defined attitudes or taking no action on their own initiative. Did all German-American women feel the same way about Prohibition and temperance as did their husbands, brothers and fathers (assuming, for the sake of argument, gendered unanimity)? What about Irish Americans? Did gendered attitudes about politics being part of the male sphere (as argued by Hasia R. Diner in *Erin's Daughters*) translate into being for or against women's suffrage? How did the fact that so many immigrants were Catholic play out, either within the communities themselves or among mainstream suffragists, many of whom disliked or distrusted Catholics? These, alas, are serious omissions.

This reviewer also takes issue with DuBois' later statement that "[h]istorically affiliated with the Republicans, black women had great hopes that the Republican presidential candidate, Warren G. Harding, would reverse the neo-segregationism of the Wilson

administration.” [279] Neo-Segregationism? It was under Woodrow Wilson that racism was injected into the Federal employment structure in Washington, D. C. Neo-segregationist? The first film ever screened at the White House was D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, based on *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon Jr. Woodrow Wilson commented that the movie was “like history written with lightning.”

To her credit, DuBois follows the twists and turns of suffragists in dealing with racism and with the “threat” of black voters: “Though Cady Stanton now spoke exclusively the name of ‘Woman,’ she did not really mean all women. ‘Woman’ became reduced to white and educated, and ‘man’ to immigrant and former slave. Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung . . . making the laws’ for women like Lucretia Mott, she frequently challenged” [73], employing stereotyped Irish, Black, German and Chinese names as stand-ins for entire ethnic or racial groups.

Where DuBois excels is in giving us the big picture, while paying attention to major leaders, the variation in tactics over time and space (what worked in one region did not in another), how suffragists of different tendencies worked with those inside and outside the movement, seeking allies and establishing boundaries, and navigating the rocks and shoals of changing circumstances and times. Even if significant battles are not considered, *Suffrage* provides a good general account of the American battle for women's votes.

Shelby Shapiro is an Independent Scholar who obtained his Ph.D. in American Studies with a dissertation on the Yiddish press and how various publications of differing political and religious viewpoints sought to construct different identities for Jewish immigrant women. He has written about Jazz, Anarchism, and the labour movement, and presently is Associate Editor of Records of the State of Connecticut.