

OPPOSITION TO FEMALE SUFFRAGE
IN THE UNITED STATES

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Investigation concerning the American women's movement has recently emerged with overdue abundance and eloquence. Although scholars have produced delving analyses regarding the movement's ideology, leaders and political history, one aspect of the post Civil War era has been largely neglected: the anti-suffrage resistance. Anti-suffrage ideology, however misguided or anachronistic, provides the historian with a rich source of information about the age's moods and mentality. Upon closer examination, anti-suffragist propaganda helps explain many of the period's peculiar social conventions and sexist idiosyncrasies.

With the flood of post-Civil War suffragist rhetoric came an equally full and passionate cry from the anti-suffragists, or "antis" as suffragists called them. Threatened by the suffragists' new "argument for expediency," they were forced to define as "city housekeeping" the suffragists' new conception of modern government.¹ Unlike the first half of the nineteenth century, now both groups essentially agreed on the nature of woman and the sepa-

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rateness of her sphere from man's; but whereas suffragists used this norm for the argument of women as saviors of government, "antis" were determined to maintain that women needed to stay at home. Therefore "antis" had to re-define the scope of woman's sphere and put government back into the male's sphere.

Anti-suffragists did not rely on one vague, all-encompassing rationale in their protest. Rather, they appealed to society's already solid conceptions of women, men and the relationship between the two sexes. Woman suffrage would violate the cherished cult of domesticity dominant in both Europe and America during this period. It would also give power to the "undesirable" portions of society, a complaint stemming from the bourgeois tone of the movement. Besides simply existing beyond the scope of womanly intelligence, "antis" asserted suffrage would also sever the chivalric ties between men and women, as well as go against the word of God, as written in the Bible. Using all these arguments, anti-suffragist men and women managed to hold back the passing of the nineteenth amendment, as well as change in American society's attitude about women, for generations. A steadfast and persistent social force in America, the anti-suffragists' ideology and power contain historical clues to social norms deserving much closer attention. In addition, the examination of anti-suffragist propaganda helps to place much greater perspective on a turbulent and complex age in American history.

The Victorian cult of domesticity in the United States rapidly developed as modernization produced a wealthy, conservative middle class. The image of the domestic wife was both a symbol of decent womanliness and the only female occupation worthy of any prestige or reverence. An anti-suffragist Florida Congressman remarked that woman "was made man's helper, was given a servient place (not necessarily inferior) and man the dominant (not necessarily superior) in the division of labor."² Therefore all middle class women were destined from birth to be full-time wives and mothers. To dispute this eternal truth was to challenge "true biology" and "true sociology."³ Male and female anti-suffragists reasoned that the domestic duty and inevitability of

motherhood left women no time or energy for the “monstrous oppression and and injustice” of female suffrage.⁴ Francis Parkman, an outspoken anti-suffragist and historian, compared the imposition of suffrage on woman to the idea of man in a state of nervous exhaustion “told by his physician to enter at once for a foot-race or boxing match.”⁵ Parkman further articulated this notion of the gentle shackles of domesticity when he said:

A man...has nothing to lose but life and property; and he has nerve and muscle to defend them...Without a radical change in human nature, of which the world as has never given the faintest sign, women cannot be equally emancipated.⁶

“Antis” maintained that women were forever bound exclusively to the affairs of home and family and that they should feel proud and content about it. They asserted that woman suffrage “would lead to neglect of children by politically active mothers, and thereby, to increased juvenile delinquency.”⁷ One rather puerile flyer entitled “Household Hints” read, “Housewives! You do not need a ballot to clean your sink spout...Good cooking lessens alcoholic craving quicker than a vote on local opinion.”⁸ This condescending rebuke struck a nerve at the movement’s strong roots in the temperance movement. Despite quick and varied rebuttals by suffragists, the overwhelming desire to keep women in their place by mainstream American male and female anti-suffragists made the cause for woman’s suffrage impossibly difficult at the turn of the century. “Close to the heart of all anti-suffragist orators,” observed historian Aileen Kraditor, “was a sentimental vision of Home and Mother.”⁹ Besides the child-like sentimentality and the paternalistic argument that accompanied it, there was always the underlying fear that the goal of the suffragists would result in “large-handed, big-footed, flat-chested, and thin-lipped” women.¹⁰ “Antis” perceived the ballot as the evil that would either freeze the feminine warmth of home or cause the unsuspecting housewife to neglect her numerous duties to home and husband. “Anti” George C. Crocker simplified the predicament by reasoning “If the husband is responsible for the protection and support of his wife and family, then the methods of securing that protection should be

under his control.”¹¹ This statement epitomized the “end of discussion” attitude displayed mostly by male anti-suffragists.

Another strong theme in the anti-suffragist movement had to do with a traditional, Biblical argument. According to anti-suffragists, woman’s suffrage would not only wreak havoc on woman’s domestic sphere, but it would go against God’s will as well. “Those who seek to protect the older order of things as they relate to woman reverently appeal to the division of Divine purpose,” Grover Cleveland said, linking the domestic sphere with the ostensibly anti-suffragist implications of Genesis.¹² Harkening back to the old Puritan saying, “Our Ribs were not ordained to be our Rulers,” one Senator declared at the turn of the century “When God married our first parents in the garden, they were made “bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh,” implying that only the husband need and should vote.¹³ Francis Parkman fully understood this side of the anti-suffragist argument and fully exploited it. “Progress, to be genuine, must be in accordance with natural law,” he said.¹⁴ Playing on the double meaning of “natural law,” that is, the Biblical connotation as well as the Lockean idea of “natural right,” Parkman thereby suggested that woman suffrage went against both God’s plan and Mankind’s. Leading suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt complained of this kind of militant male “anti” by calling the group “modern Joshuas who command the sun to stand still and believe that it will obey.”¹⁵ The religious tone of the anti-suffragist resistance thus pervaded both sides of the movement. However, “antis” deemed woman’s separation from politics as a moral positive, not a social negative. Almira Seymour, anti-suffragist pamphleteer, claimed woman’s enclosure in the home was created “in recognition of the essential divinity of her nature.”¹⁶ Anti-suffragist rhetoric often likened the idea of the housewife to the priestly service for a temple. Senator Peter Frelinghuysen of New Jersey agreed when he said, “Women have a higher and holier function than to engage in the turmoil of public life.”¹⁷ This moral specialization of women succeeded in furthering their separation from men and public life. The “Restorer of lost Eden” had no business voting or participating in city

government.¹⁸ Often using Biblical imagery, anti-suffragists pleaded to the public and Congress as God's children attempting to save America from the evil of woman suffrage. "Let us labor earnestly," preached one 'anti,' "to save women from the barren perturbations of American politics...Let us pray for deliverance from female suffrage."¹⁹

Woman suffrage also seemed to threaten a less specified chivalric tie between men and woman. Twentieth century historian John Morton Blum pointed out that the sentimental vision of Lady Guinevere "persuaded self-conscious Lancelots that the right to vote was male as well as white."²⁰ The idealists among the male "antis" wished to preserve women from the disagreeable task of public responsibility, hoping they could clean up politics without feminine help. One representative from Florida commented only five years before the passing of the amendment in 1920:

I do not wish to see the day come when the women of my race in my state shall trail their skirts in the muck and mire of partisan politics.²¹

Coupled with this "knight in shining armour" notion was the continuation of women's social isolation. Mrs. Barclay Hazard, an active twentieth century anti-suffragist, insisted that women were not deprived of anything, but rather protected from the vileness of politics.²² Professor Kraditor made the distinction by noting, "it was wrong to say that women did not have the right to vote; rather, she had the right not to vote."²³ Suffragist Gerrit Smith observed about anti-suffragists at the time, "...these ladies...are so perverted and befooled by their ladyism as to shrink from the vulgarity of voting."²⁴ Smith had pinpointed the image of the "damsel in distress" exploited in anti-suffragist propaganda. If woman invaded the masculine sphere, she would forfeit her right to chivalry, that mode of male behavior which "antis" and the mainstream public considered the ennobling characteristic of society. Francis Parkman combined the Biblical theme of anti-suffrage protest with the Arthurian element to announce the dark flip side of the Guinevere-Lancelot relationship: "If report is to be trusted, Delilah has already spread her snare for the congressional Samson..."²⁵

Parkman recognized a fear common to all “antis” and the mainstream in general—that female suffrage would ruin what they believed to be America’s innocence.

It was this same bourgeois mentality which caused “antis” to suggest that doubling the electorate would increase the preponderance of “undesirable” voters. Anti-suffragists reasoned that female suffrage would take power (and wealth) away from the middle class and give political power to the working class, or as they saw it, the proletariat. “Antis” publicized evidence that socialists favored woman suffrage, attempting to make the movement seem on the radical fringe of society. Suffragism was often associated with the frenzy of the French Revolution; indeed, according to the “antis” suffragism was worse because at least “the French had an excuse for their frenzy in the crushing oppression they had just flung off and in their inexperience of freedom.”²⁶ The Illinois Association Opposed to the Extension of Suffrage to Woman claimed “the propaganda of woman suffrage is part and parcel of the world-wide movement for the overthrow of the present order of civilized society.”²⁷ Discontented with the enfranchisement of blacks and immigrants, anti-suffragists believed the enfranchisement of women would mean certain doom to an already politically pressured middle and upper class. Ironically, many of the leading suffragists, also middle class women, agreed that “nonwhites and the foreign born” were unfit to vote. “Cut off the vote of the slums and give it to women,” suggested Catt.²⁸ No doubt this plea did little to further her cause. But Professor Rothman observed, “Implicit in all [suffragist] appeals was the notion that the middle class was to refine the lower classes.”²⁹ The suffragist progressives nevertheless held their bourgeois prejudices the same as the anti-suffragists did. “Antis” also enjoyed mentioning in their speeches that the majority of women did not desire the vote. By the “majority,” however, they meant the majority of middle-class, white, native-born women. Sometimes an anti-suffragist conveyed her racism in more abstract terms by saying woman suffrage would “lessen the influence of the intelligent and true, and increase the influence of the ignorant and vicious.”³⁰ The frequency with which

the words “ignorant,” “poor,” and “immoral” were interchanged showed that the combination fit naturally into both the anti-suffragist and middle-class mentalities. Unlike the rather emotional arguments discussed above, this side of the anti-suffragist resistance demonstrated a more clear-cut fear.

A more subtle argument came in the form of widespread sexist notions concerning females. Anti-suffragists agreed with one minister who spoke of “that logical infirmity of mind which constitutes one of the weaknesses, and I might also say, one of the charms of the feminine constitution.”³¹ According to the anti-suffragists’ “biological argument,” the political intricacies and implications of suffrage were simply too much for the frail female mind to comprehend.³² “Antis” praised woman for her “intuition” and “instinct,” but asserted that she had neither the intelligence nor the understanding to enter public life. Professor Kraditor said of the phenomenon:

Woman had a higher faculty than logic, “woman’s intuition,” which yielded a perception of truth beyond that possible to man, provided the intuition was employed in its proper sphere.³³

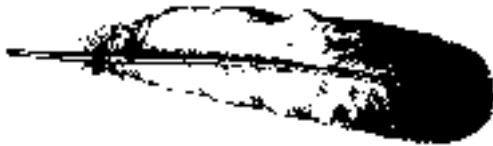
Here again woman was praised for her supposed mental and emotional difference to man, inferior in public society but superior in the home. The rhetoric—sometimes complimentary, other times merely condescending—served as another rationale to keep woman away from public life. Dr. William A. Hammond, a late nineteenth century “distinguished nerve and brain specialist,” described the feminine mind this way:

A Woman’s brain evolves emotion rather than intellect; and whilst this feature fits her admirably as a creature burdened with the preservation and happiness of the human species, it painfully disqualifies her for politics.³⁴

In this widespread view, woman’s ‘mental inferiority’ was not only social perception, it was science! The anti-suffragist argument therefore identified femininity with inherent irrationality, a trait fully inconsistent with the proper exercise of suffrage. “Anti” George C. Crocker furthered this argument by insisting that women “believe that their property will be better managed by men

than it will be by women.”³⁵ In this way he implied that neither men nor women would trust a woman voter or politician. Francis Parkman feared the danger of “gynecocracy” by insisting “Government should be sane and not crazy. They should walk on solid ground, and not roam the clouds hanging to a bag of gas.”³⁶ Anti-suffragists, as well as the majority of American men and women, insisted that woman was fanciful, illogical, at times charming, but incapable of making sound decisions at the ballot box. Her “simple, primal notions of right and wrong” were fine for caring for her children and entertaining her husband, but did not belong in the gritty world of war and taxes.³⁷

Suffrage ideology reflected the tone of American progressive reform during the late nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. However, anti-suffragist literature during its period more fully exposed the conservative impulses that predominated in American society. The motives and rationales behind the anti-suffragist arguments demonstrated with unabashed lucidity the American mentality concerning women and men, the prejudices of the period, and the essentially conservative consensus of the middle class. More so than even the suffragists themselves, the anti-suffragists’ propaganda revealed the anxiety of the middle and upper class that was so prevalent at the time. Buried in the heap of discarded history, the anti-suffragists truly provide the historian with clear insight into a complicated transition in America.



¹ Stephen B. Oates, ed., Portrait of America, 5th ed., vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991) p. 139

² Aileen S. Kraditor, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1971) p. 14

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁴ Illinois Association Opposed to the Extension of Suffrage to Women, Address to the Voters of the Middle West (Chicago: 1900, n.p.) p. 1. Francis Parkman predicted that woman suffrage would be “a cruel and intolerable burden” for women as well.

⁵ Francis Parkman, “Some of the Reasons Against Woman Suffrage,” printed at the request of an association of women (n.p., n.d.) p. 3

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁷ Kraditor, p. 16

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23

¹¹ George C. Crocker, argument at the hearing before the Committee on Woman Suffrage (Washington: 1884, n.p.) p. 7

¹² Kraditor, p. 13

¹³ Oates, p. 138

¹⁴ Parkman, p. 10

¹⁵ Carrie Chapman Catt, presidential address delivered to the 6th convention of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance at Stockholm (London: International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1911) p. 1

¹⁶ Almira Seymour, “Home, the Basis of the State” (Boston: A. Williams, 1869) pp. 11-12

¹⁷ Oates, p. 138

¹⁸ Seymour, p. 13

¹⁹ Parkman, p. 16

²⁰ J. Morton Blum, Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1956) p. 116

²¹ Kraditor, p. 18

²² Mrs. Barclay Hazard, “How Woman Can Best Serve the State” (Chicago: Illinois Association Opposed to the Extension of Suffrage to Women, 1907) p. 3

²³ Kraditor, p. 19

²⁴ Gerrit Smith, “Woman Suffrage Above Human Law” (Peterboro: 1873, n.p.) p. 1

²⁵ Parkman, p. 5

²⁶ Ibid., p. 11

²⁷ Illinois Association Opposed to the Extension of Suffrage to Women, p. 2

²⁸ Oates, p. 141

²⁹ Sheila M. Rothman, Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978) p. 128

³⁰ Illinois Association Opposed to the Extension of Suffrage to Women, p. 14

³¹ Kraditor, p. 15

³² Ibid., p. 14

³³ Ibid., p. 15

³⁴ Ibid., p. 15

³⁵ Crocker, p. 6

³⁶ Parkman, pp. 13-14

³⁷ Clifford Howard, "Why Man Needs Woman's Ballot" (New York: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1912) p. 3