The British Suffragette Movement: Overcoming patriarchy and class

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In the early years of the Twentieth Century women were oppressed in many ways. The denial of the vote was both a manifestation and a cause of their oppression. But women were far from passive recipients of this oppression. Two main campaigning societies emerged to challenge the status quo: the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). These societies dominated the suffrage movements between 1905 and 1914. It seems fair to speculate that the activities of the women in these societies has shaped the modern agenda for women and, without their efforts, the lives of women today would be far worse.

Introduction

Two years ago I began my doctoral studies investigating these women and their societies. My initial research into the many activities and events carried out by these societies continually raised the following questions: How did they do it? Who were these women and what were they trying to achieve? What and whom were they fighting against?

The size of the many demonstrations they held pointed towards clarity of purpose and an ability to gather together like-minded women to aid the fight for their cause. The participation of women in society and political life had been, and continued to be, severely restricted during both the Victorian and Edwardian eras. This was primarily due to the existence of patriarchal systems and, for many women active in these two groups, class relations.

From the 1860s and with gathering momentum, groups of women began to work together to reflect upon the factors that limited their involvement in society and politics. Their predominant concerns were with issues such as a lack of higher education for women and their exclusion from the professions, such as law and medicine. At the time the franchise for *all* men was also a contentious issue. Women had not been included in the debate and many women and men believed that by gaining the vote, other rights would follow. Numerous women were convinced that winning the vote should be their priority.

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better together

Despite being constrained by the relations of patriarchy and class, the two main groups of the NUWSS and WSPU emerged to lead the suffrage movement. How these societies dealt with the intersection of patriarchy and class is central to the study and questions how, between 1905 and 1914, they carried out a substantial variety of well-planned and successful activities. These women organised massive demonstrations, disrupted hustings at by-elections, organised propaganda, edited and sold their own newspapers. Both groups administered their own headquarters and employed large numbers of women both in London and the provinces. In addition, these women carried out very successful marketing campaigns, opening shops to sell memorabilia. All of this raises an important question:

Given the constraints of patriarchal and class relations and, therefore, intersectional relations, how did the women in the NUWSS and the WSPU manage to organise significant political actions and events?

This broad question encapsulates several sub-questions: Given the restrictions of women in the early Nineteenth Century, how did these societies overcome the constraints of class and patriarchy? Can their experiences be used to analyse oppression of women in the early Nineteenth Century more broadly? What was their understanding of oppression and what methods did they use to fight patriarchy? Did the two organisations represent the class structure of women outside the suffrage movements? Were structures of class replicated both at headquarters and in the regions, or were class structures re-interpreted according to the needs of the region?

Central to their activities was communication, and central to communication are the formal and informal networks these women used as a method of communication. They set up and maintained large and very successful connections. These networks enabled both groups to bring together women from across the country who were willing to stand and march together in order to draw attention to their cause. The use of massive spectacular marches and demonstrations were well ordered and planned and are an example of both the formal and informal networks evidenced in both groups. The societies grew in strength and size, rapidly moving their operational headquarters to London with the expansion into regional centres in order to aid membership growth. Both groups formed a national network of societies and the growth in the South West of the United Kingdom is one focus of the debate.

My research considers both the regional networks and their relationship with London. Indeed, my research will examine the links between the needs of the headquarters and the regional networks and how these were set up and managed. The expansion of both societies within the South West is a new area of exploration. Bristol, as the hub for the South West region, is one focus that will enable a development a greater understanding of women's networks and networking behaviour.

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Current research into both societies has not fully drawn on, or explained how, these women networked so successfully to oppose the patriarchal and class power which so firmly resisted their cause. Investigations into the forms and structures of the networks will provide a greater understanding of the networks used and will include an overview of their organisational structures and systems. My research will address the hierarchical structures of the headquarters of both societies as a means to assess how they utilised this structural power inside women-only groups. It will also draw on the way networks were used to organise processes and procedures to raise their public visibility. In order to understand the function of networks within both pressure groups leadership styles within these two groups will be addressed.

All attempts to understand the experience of the women who were active in NUWSS and the WSPU, and especially how they experienced and responded to constraints of patriarchy and class necessarily, requires a conceptual framework - implicitly or explicitly. This means that before we can start to analyse the activities of these women, we have to develop an adequate theoretical `toolkit´ as it were. It is, therefore, my intention to present some of my research in four articles, spread over forthcoming editions of the *CESR Review*. The first of three papers in this series will, therefore, be devoted to clarifying the basic conceptions of class, patriarchy and their intersection, as a prelude to employing these conceptions to analyse their activities.

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The first paper will focus on the development of gender analysis of patriarchy and class from the late 1960s up to the end of the 1990s. It was during the 1960s that women began to theorise a common sisterhood of oppression and argue that women had different interests to men who, generally speaking, dominated women.

During the 70s basic ideas moved from a position of a *shared oppression, notably class,* to one of *different life experiences* and in doing so emphasised the different needs of men and women. This decade saw a turning point where attention moved towards the diversity of women's experience. This challenged the notion of a shared class-based oppression. In the 'new history' emerging in the late 1970s the accounts of women's history rested upon whether gender could be developed as a category of analysis. The analogies of class and race were explicit and an interest in race, class and gender generated the first commitment to history that included stories of the oppressed. This included an attempt to understand how the inequalities of power were organised. The most commonly used concept of class tended to be Marxist, with its emphasis upon the ownership and control (or lack, thereof) of the means of production (Scott, 1986).

Feminists in the early 1980s began to examine the world of women from a new perspective. They sought a wider understanding of power relationships beyond that offered by a Marxist class analysis because they were looking to distinguish between women's subordination as a sex. They did this via the analytical tool `patriarchy´ - a concept that enabled women to 'see' a common cause.

The first paper will focus, therefore, on the developing and wide ranging conceptual frameworks that women explored in order to understand the nature and causes of women's oppression. This will involve

radical-feminist, liberal-feminist and Marxist-feminist analyses in order to consider different and emerging readings of patriarchy and class. The paper will also address the debate surrounding the term patriarchy.

The second paper considers the extent to which these three schools of thought (radical, liberal and Marxist feminism) still permeate contemporary conceptions of patriarchy and class. The role of the "Big Three" has been questioned by later academics. Other forms of feminist analysis have emerged since the 1990s and there have been many different forms of analysis to provide new methodological interpretations of patriarchy and class. One very popular method was to invoke the 'standpoint' of women. The paper will discuss the concept and why it has fallen out of favour with contemporary feminists. It will also provide an analysis of current research of class and patriarchy drawing on the work of feminists like Walby and Acker.

Paper three explores the concept of the intersectionality between class and patriarchy. The term emerged in the late 1980s as a rejection of a single axis framework such as standpoint analysis. By 2008 it had come to be regarded as a primary analytical tool for feminist scholars (Nash, 2008). Acker has also used this conceptual framework through her work on inequality regimes in the work place. She has developed the concept of inequality regimes as a way of understanding gendered, racialised and class relations. Acker argues that inequality is built into organisational dynamics at all levels (Acker, 2006). Using Acker's framework will enable an analysis of inequality regimes (Healy *et al.,* 2011). The concept of intersectionality will provide a basis for the study of the two suffrage organisations. It will enable an analysis of the disparities that may exist between those participants who have power and control of people, resources and

opportunities within each of the societies and the regions.

The final paper moves away from the consideration of theories, to describe the background to the study. I will make an analysis of suffragette activity in the South West regions, with particular emphasis on patriarchal and class structures within both movements. I will also address the communication links between headquarters and the region, considering questions like: What form did the communications take? Were they directives to be followed absolutely or could the regions interpret and apply, as they perceived necessary? Finally, I will consider the extent to which the concepts of patriarchy and class were identified within the regions.

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