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Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage

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Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign against Woman Suffrage, by Susan E. Marshall. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. xii, 347 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendixes, bibliography, notes, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY CATHERINE E. RYMPH, UNIVERSITÄT GREIFSWALD, GERMANY

Women's historians continue to be puzzled by those women who have organized on behalf of causes that seem to go against women's own interests. Particularly confounding are the women who formed the anti-suffrage movement in the decades before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Susan Marshall has done much to demystify those women, presenting them as rational actors whose role in the suffrage battle was independent, dynamic, and complex. As she notes, her study reinforces "caveats against the conflation of feminism and women's politics" (235).

Marshall, a sociologist, combines sociological method and theory with the traditional archival work of historians. Central to her study are databases compiled from the records of the nationally influential Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women. This approach enabled Marshall to assemble a clear picture of the economic status and family background of the movement's membership. For comparative purposes, Marshall also investigates the male antisuffrage movement and attempts to assess the broader appeal of antisuffrage beyond organized elites. She examines the changing rhetoric of the movement through a content analysis of writings by male and female antisuffragists. In addition, she applies the insights of social movement theory to her subject, investigating the movement's evolving strategies for mobilization within the larger political and social context (which included increasing immigration, the rise of patriotic societies, World War I, antiradicalism, and the progress of the suffrage movement).

One of Marshall's central projects is to test the picture presented by suffragists of antisuffragists as elite, sheltered women who acted against female interests either by serving as the pawns of men (particularly in the liquor industry) or by blindly adhering to cultural traditionalism. Certainly the women who organized against suffrage were elites. Marshall demonstrates that they were not merely wealthy but, unlike their prosuffrage counterparts, came primarily from families of old wealth. A main argument of her book, however, is that these elite female antisuffragists, far from being sheltered or naïve, were agents acting in their own self-interest.

Their self-interest derived, Marshall argues, from the remonstrants' "gendered-class" position (12). They viewed the vote as an inferior form of political power to what they already possessed. Elite female anti-suffragists were typically related through kinship or marriage to male political and business leaders, relationships that offered them political access. Their roles as heads of charitable and other voluntary institutions gave organized antisuffragists additional influence in shaping their communities. The vote would have to be shared with all other women; and like the men in their families, these women were unenthusiastic about any expansion of the suffrage to Americans they considered inferior. Remonstrants' gendered-class position also worked against their ability to organize. Initially, antisuffragists were able to take advantage of elite social networks and thereby organize quietly with little fanfare. Their reluctance to defy the norms of elite society by organizing openly, publicizing names of supporters, and speaking in public, however, ultimately worked against their cause.

Marshall demonstrates that women antisuffragists were not the dupes of men, as many of their prosuffrage opponents assumed. In fact, Marshall makes clear that women often had to cajole men of their class to organize against votes for women. As further evidence for the agency of the antisuffragists, Marshall maintains that they did not merely react to suffragists but actually influenced their tactics. She suggests that it was the very effectiveness of antisuffragist arguments against the vote that compelled suffragists in the 1890s to begin arguing that women deserved the vote for reasons not of equality, but of expediency.

Eventually, those women who opposed woman suffrage had to decide how they would react to the reality of its ratification. Although Marshall explores the political transformation of antisuffragists after 1920, she unfortunately is unable to explain adequately the connections between women's mobilization against suffrage and later mobilization against an activist state, leaving many unanswered questions about the relationship between gender, class, and antistatism.

Marshall's book, although written in a sociological style that general readers may find tedious, is an important contribution to the history of the suffrage movement, as well as to the history of women and politics. Marshall rightly sees parallels between female antisuffragists and more contemporary female anti-ERA activists, and concludes her book with a discussion of such comparisons. Her study addresses the seeming paradoxes of conservative women political activists in general. Such women seem to present paradoxes only when one assumes that women's autonomous political mobilization will always be progressive. Marshall's book importantly emphasizes the agency of one group for whom this was not the case.

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