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Review of Feminist Media history: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere, by Maria Dicenzo with L. Delap and L. Ryann

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7tc3h7tq>

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Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed

Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere

Maria DiCenzo with Lucy Delap and Leila Ryann 2011

Palgrave Macmillan

Viii + 239 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-24126-8

Should the success of a political movement be measured solely by the degree to which its particular demands are met? Or is the formation of a new political class whose collective identity and power are established through activism more significant than whether the specific target was achieved? To pose the question in such a polarised form may seem absurd yet that has often been the premise upon which historical interpretation has been made when it comes to the suffragette movement in Britain. How efficacious the militants were in winning women the right to vote has been the interpretive criterion of certain ‘mainstream’ suffrage historians according to whom mass feminist protests in the early twentieth century only obstructed the ‘inevitable’ outcome. For example, Brian Harrison has argued ‘(A) parliamentary majority for women’s suffrage was being built up after 1897 which the militants subsequently helped to destroy.’¹ In this interpretive model, the significance of early feminist campaigns is judged by the degree to which they contributed to winning over established parliamentarians and since the militants alienated the male parliament with their confrontational tactics, their contribution is deemed insignificant at best. Some interpretations reach the mystifying conclusion that though suffragettes actually hindered the cause, the vote was eventually won as a necessary conclusion to other big changes in society set off by the Great War.² The idea that women were the fortunate beneficiaries of a wider movement for reform is an odd one, negating as it does, the revolutionary forms of political practice in the early twentieth century that not only created a new political consciousness but also transformed existing ones.

Taking a more synthetic approach to the early women’s movement is *Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere*. Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap and Leila Ryan examine the women’s political movement through a detailed analysis of the feminist print media between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the Second World War; and establish how suffrage and feminist periodicals

¹ Brian Harrison, Women’s Suffrage at Westminster 1866-1928 in J Stevenson and M Bentley, eds., *High and Low Politics* (1983), 114.

² Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain* (1992) 4-5. See also M. Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women’s Suffrage 1866-1914* (2000).

facilitated collective action and constructed political identities for women. At the same time, they examine how women's periodicals negotiated with contemporary discourses. By examining the role of women's media in the making of the feminist movement, this book widens the interpretive framework, providing a valuable contribution to the extensive and growing literature on late-Victorian and Edwardian feminists. In addition, they demonstrate 'the crucial role print media played ... in a redefinition of 'politics' originating outside the formal institutional sphere(3)', skilfully situating early feminist politics within the discourses of social movement as well as press/media history.

The complexity of the multi-level approach this book attempts is expressed in the ambiguous title. *Feminist Media History* could indicate that the book is about feminist interpretations of media whether they themselves are feminist or not, or it could be a history of feminist media; the subtitle, 'suffrage, periodicals and the public sphere' tips the balance in favour of the latter, though not conclusively. The book is revealed to be both. The instability of the title also points to, as well as problematises, the permeable boundaries of media history itself. Quoting the inaugural issue of this journal, *Media History*, the authors of this volume, whose title echoes the title of the journal, foreground the 'paradox' of a field in which the object of its study work as an addition as well as a supplement to mainstream histories and media studies. They write, 'Feminist media history raises empirical, theoretical, methodological and professional issues crucial to media and cultural historians generally' (4) because it 'not only reveals gaps in history and media studies, but also rewrites and reconfigures their assumptions and narratives'.(10).

Part one is a thoughtful and detailed consideration of how three areas of concern – 'the public sphere literature, social movement theory and press/periodical history' – relate to the history of early feminist periodicals. Part two presents three lucid case studies of three types of periodicals based on the theoretical groundwork of part one. One of the strengths of this book lies in the power and clarity of its examples in the case studies section. The authors see the periodicals as 'embedded in a dynamic and widespread movement and part of a complex web of media and interests in the period' (200); and provide an indispensable delineation of how all the periodicals relate to one another as well as offering a penetrating analysis of each. The collective identities the periodicals imply span a wide range: 'militants, suffragettes, constitutionalists, radical suffragists, democratic suffragists, anti-suffragists, catholic suffragists, Irish suffragists, pacifists, labor women, freewomen, freelance feminists, social feminists and new feminists' (198-9). But the studies are helpfully organised into three parts: the first is on the official suffrage organs – *Votes for Women*, the *Vote*, the *Common Cause*, *Anti-*

suffrage Review; the second provides a pioneering discussion of the most neglected yet significant journal of the period, the *Englishwoman*, which was not officially part of a suffrage organization but which nevertheless declared its pro-suffrage intentions. The last section is a discussion of the *Freewoman*, an independent feminist publication which rejected an overt pro/anti position on suffrage.

Drawing fine and important distinctions between all these journals, the case studies offer a concrete and compelling account of the sheer heterogeneity of positions within the feminist movement as well as how they positioned themselves in relation to one another. The case study of the *Englishwoman* – “the only serious shilling monthly magazine” (130) – will be particularly useful to many scholars, providing as it does a pioneering study of the twelve year history of a magazine whose subheading was ‘a monthly magazine to further the enfranchisement of women’ but which also announced, exceptionally for a suffrage magazine, that it was ‘intended to reach the cultured public’ (125). In all, this book is an invaluable guide and resource which reclaims the history of women’s print media from the narrowest terms of debate and which provides a comprehensive overview of the development of feminism in relation to the media and the public sphere which had been rendered invisible in previous studies.

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