

“Be an Efficient, Modern Housekeeper and Demand Votes for Women!”: Suffrage, Consumption, and the (Re)Creation of Ideology and Identity

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In a recent article of the *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Mary Chapman and Angela Mills argue that the history of women’s suffrage “may more usefully be conceived of as a pastiche rather than as a narrative—an endlessly expanding portrait of contributors and contributions, with each addition expanding and altering our sense of the rest.”¹ This progressive model of history has already begun to take form as contemporary historians of the American women’s suffrage movement assemble the pieces of nuanced historical accounts into a comprehensive record of the mass mobilization of suffragists. The pastiche of suffrage history has grown appreciably throughout the end of the twentieth century. Work by historians like Glenda Gilmore focus on specific geographic spaces, which provide anecdotal representations of more pervasive cultural issues and their relation to suffrage politics.² Other historians, including Ellen Carol DuBois, have helped contextualize the class relations influencing and influenced by the political dimension of the suffrage movement.³ More work, however, lies ahead. In this essay, my objective is to reveal the limitations of the current conception of the

¹ Mary Chapman and Angela Mills, “Eighty Years and More: Looking Back at the Nineteenth Amendment,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (2006): 7.

² See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

³ See Ellen Carol DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

American women's suffrage movement by examining artifacts from the late 1890s to the early 1910s. These artifacts, including postcards, posters, and pamphlets, occupy the intersection between the forces of politics and economics – a relationship that complicates historical accounts grounded exclusively in one force or the other.

A pastiche of suffrage history must recognize and expand conventional assumptions about the political elements of social movements. Currently, a more comprehensive conception of the suffrage movement is confounded by narrow definitions of political participation and mobilization, and limited considerations of the social forces and institutions that affected suffrage ideology and strategy beyond suffrage organizations, particular leaders, political events, etc. As historian Margaret Finnegan contends, “Researchers of women’s political history have actually divorced the suffrage movement from its cultural contexts...[their] arguments stress traditional historical texts—letters, political writings, memoirs,” at the expense of less conventional forms of political media, like consumer products.⁴ In fact and as this paper will argue, consumption and consumerism within the suffrage movement are two areas of study ripe for analysis. In particular, the intersection between the discourses of economics and politics in the suffrage movement presents possibilities for tracing the development of non-radical rhetoric and images (and what voices and populations they excluded), questioning the autonomy of the movement, and examining the larger social interactions that worked within the suffrage campaign.

My essay draws heavily from the work of historians of consumption and culture who emphasize that suffragists “mobilized mass-culture technologies and consumer-culture practices (like shopping and advertising) to promote their politics... [which] became heavily implicated in the powerful politics of consumer capitalism.”⁵ Therefore, as a means of discussing consumptive practices and the larger politics of consumer capitalism that intermingled with many elements of the suffrage movement, I turn my focus to particular commodities and theorize specific goods within the historical pastiche.⁶ Specifically, my

⁴ Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 4.

⁵ Michael H. Epp, “The Traffic in Affect: Marietta Holley, Suffrage, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Humour,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (2006), 94.

⁶ I use the term *commodities* throughout my essay to specifically mean: objects exchanged and integrated within a market system. Therefore, suffrage commodities would include pins, fashion accessories, books, sandwich boards, magazines, spoons, postcards, even advertisements, but exclude such things as picket-signs, political pamphlets, billboards, etc.

work examines artifacts of material culture such as posters, postcards, and advertisements found in the Rare and Manuscript Collections of Cornell University. I will contextualize, historicize, and read these objects within the broader themes of political consumerism and locate them within the current research on women's suffrage. Such a focused analysis of particular commodities also critiques many of the problematic assumptions about the political nature of artifacts and the intimate connection between the economic, the social, and the political.

Within her book, *Selling Suffrage*, Margaret Finnegan provides the foundational insight that in “emulating popular commercial strategies, they [suffragists] strove to sell the movement like a modern commodity.”⁷ Indeed, the mass production and distribution of suffrage paraphernalia allowed suffragists to give a tangible form to their beliefs, thereby reifying ideology within the colors, rhetoric, and pictures of otherwise innocuous objects.⁸ In essence, products became useful, albeit invisible, political tools for suffragists. For example, many (seemingly) pedestrian postcards “Endorsed and Approved by the National American Woman Suffrage Association,” or NAWSA, bear such overt political statements as: “Parents have the training of their children’s mind, and it is their sacred duty to rear them, regardless of sex, to believe in EQUAL RIGHTS both socially and politically. Be not afraid to teach JUSTICE” and “It’s up to the PARENTS to teach the rising generation of BOTH SEXES that PATRIOTISM, CITIZENSHIP, and SUFFRAGE should know no sex.”⁹ As the messages reveal, mass-produced suffrage postcards fused political discourses (of equal rights and citizenship) with concepts of the traditionally feminine private sphere. Note that both abovementioned messages place an emphasis on childrearing – itself a traditionally feminine, domestic duty – as a way of participating in the political. These examples illustrate the unique evolution of the public and private realms and new negotiations of the spaces themselves – abstract developments that were prompted by very real social changes.

⁷ Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, 3.

⁸ Ibid., 8. For more on the physicality of suffrage commodities, see Marian Sawyer, “Wearing your Politics on your Sleeve: The Role of Political Colours in Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 6, no. 1 (2007): 39-56.

⁹ National American Woman Suffrage Association, postcard, 1910, Box 10, Folder 13, Lindseth Collection of American Woman Suffrage, #8002. (Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY).

As Aileen S. Kraditor explains in her classic text of suffrage history, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*:

The triumph [of achieving the suffrage] would not have been possible without the movement, but the movement would not have been possible without the social transformations that permitted women to participate, outside their homes, in activities that inevitably led them into politics.¹⁰

The acceptance of women's participation in activities outside their homes occurred as a result of the intense industrialization during the turn of the twentieth century. Nancy F. Cott elaborates on the new conduit to political resources created by economic transformations noting:

These were important years for women's educational, occupational, and professional advancement. Obvious to all were the growing numbers of women wage-earners in urban industries and services, and the inchoate army of white-collar workers, from telephone operators to shop-girls in shirt-waists, who went to and from stores and offices every day.¹¹

Due to the rising number of women workers in the economy (primarily in cities), women gained experiences and skills that aided them in taking collective, political action. This also gave working-class women opportunities to participate in political and social causes as women. For example, "in late 1905, Helen Marot and Leonora O'Reilly of the Women's Trade Union League launched daily street meetings at noon and closing time near factory gates in New York City."¹² The participation of women in economic activities, therefore, renegotiated the spaces available for women to access and utilize skills and resources necessary to foment the national mobilization for suffrage.

Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the postcards I have analyzed do not acknowledge or depict the increased presence of working-class women in the public sphere. This finding reflects the classist rhetoric of suffrage consumer goods, whose messages recognized only a certain conception of moneyed womanhood that suffragists (and businesses) molded and promulgated (and to which they advertised). For

¹⁰ Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), x.

¹¹ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 22.

¹² Linda J. Lumsden, *Rampant Women: Suffragists and the Right of Assembly* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 27.

while working women's entrance into the public was not part of the discourse adopted by suffrage consumption, the (perceived) intrusion of the political into the domestic realm did prompt suffrage rhetoric to insert a unique conception of womanhood into the political arena.

During the turn of the century, the public sphere and its political implications were depicted as invading the private sphere in novel ways. The Progressive politics of social reform and more obvious regulation of factors affecting citizens' everyday activities dealt a heavy blow to the figurative boundary between private and public. As Kraditor explains, "The historic sphere of woman was more and more influenced by political life, as governments passed laws concerning food, water, the production of clothing, and education."¹³ Suffragists appropriated this unprecedented presence of governments in the day-to-day lives of their citizens into their rhetoric. That governments were encroaching on women's prescribed sphere became a common reason for women to gain stronger representation within suffrage arguments. An 1896 suffrage poster entitled "Madam, Who Keeps Your House?" best highlights this claim.¹⁴ After an impressive pictorial web of local laws and regulations impacting women's "duties" in the home, the advertisement ends with the statement: "Madam, if you want your house well kept, you MUST meddle with politics, because politics has already meddled with you." But to whom specifically is the advertisement addressed? Who is the incessantly repeated appellation "Madam"? As we will explore, suffrage language created a unique identity for women, built on fundamentally consumerist assumptions, to mobilize a particular class, race, and, to some extent, region of women around the campaign for the vote.

Historians of consumerism are quick to point out the numerous ways that the economic transformation of mass consumption during the turn of the century affected people's conceptions of themselves and their relations to others. Historian Nan Enstad examines in her book, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, how "consumer culture offered working-class women struggling with extremely difficult material and ideological constraints a new range of representations, symbols, activities, and spaces with which to create class, gender, and ethnic identities."¹⁵ Her subsequent analysis highlights a grassroots (re)articulation of identity through working-class women's habit of wearing upper-class clothing

¹³ Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 67-68.

¹⁴ "Votes for Women," Woman Suffrage Association poster, 1896, Box 10, Folder 50, Sarah Brown Ingersoll Cooper Papers, #6543. (Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY).

¹⁵ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

styles within the realm of their factory experiences. Such practices reflect the construction of identity as the re-appropriation of agency – the reclamation of personal integrity – by the workers against the powerful elites. In the context of the suffrage movement, however, advertisers and suffragists crafted and disseminated identities in a top-down manner. Through this process, institutions behind the mass production of suffrage literature (e.g.: suffrage-affiliated and private printing companies) fashioned a new subjectivity that sculpted the assumptions, expectations, and inclusion of their participants.¹⁶ As Cott put it:

Advertisers hastened to package individuality and modernity for women in commodity form...[This] enabled advertising to become a visual medium with subliminal influence as never before, *intentionally selling women not only sales pitches for productions but also images of themselves.*¹⁷

The new identity that suffrage commodities crafted for women was intimately linked to the social consequences of the economic and political changes described above and depended heavily on women's new role as consumer. DuBois mentions this trend specifically in the California state suffrage campaign while discussing the movement in New York:

It [the New York Women's Political Union] based its suffrage advocacy on the proliferating devices of modern mass culture—forms of commercial recreation, methods of advertising, and the pleasures of consumerism...pioneered in the California campaign of 1911, in which billboards, automobile caravans, and suffrage postcards had been successfully used in a swift, diverse campaign that was marked by decentralization, variety, and a lack of bureaucratic baggage.¹⁸

¹⁶ The most prevalent printing companies of the archival collections I used include: Whitehead & Hoag Company of Newark, NJ; Bastian Brothers Company of Rochester, NY; the Cargill Company of Grand Rapids, MI; and the National Woman Suffrage Publishing Company, Inc. of New York City, NY.

¹⁷ Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 172-173 (italics mine).

¹⁸ DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage*, 149. This discussion of consumption is noticeably absent from other books on California suffrage politics due to the narrowness of historians' political definitions and sole focus on institutions. For example, Gayle Gullett only "examines how women created organizations to enlarge women's public opportunities, how those organizations coalesced into a movement, and how women in that movement developed a dynamic sense of themselves as something greater than their many parts." *Becoming Citizens: The Emergence and Development of the California Women's Movement, 1880-1911* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 2.

Because of its conflation with consumptive discourses and “the pleasures of consumerism,” the underlying assumption of the new suffrage subject was that she acted wholly within the public sphere and was therein affected by advertisements, engaged in monetary transactions, and socialized with various vendors and patrons. Identity construction was fixated on woman as rational consumer acting in the traditionally masculine public realm with values and motivations still associated with those of caring, domestic wife and mother contextualized through consumption.

The valuation of rationality as a characteristic of women targeted by suffrage paraphernalia served to commend women as both smart shoppers and politically-savvy decision-makers. The overlap between economic and political rationality is clear in examples like the statement made by suffrage supporter, Nathaniel C. Fowler: “He who believes that woman is unfit, incompetent to manage her own and others’ affairs, incapable of weighing values, should be confronted with the indisputable fact that woman is the majority buyer of the world.”¹⁹ As expressed here, the rational female consumer subject had proven her capacity to participate in the decision-making process of voting given her competency in the decision-making process of shopping. In fact, suffragists often compared women’s management of the family economy with the potential for their efficient management of the state and national economies. Given the vote, suffragists avowed that “by making their private housekeeping skills public, women would bring order to modern cities, just like they brought order to modern homes.”²⁰

As the rhetoric also suggests, the overlap between consumer conscientiousness and political prudence was framed within woman’s role at the center of her family. The domestically-intrusive politics of Progressivism, as previously mentioned, gave the suffragist construction of woman a motivation and justification for entering into the political: to protect her family. Finnegan elaborates that “suffragists contended that women shoppers/voters would vanquish unwholesome forms of commercial amusement, protect the food and milk supplies, and attack the high cost of living” all for the good of their families.²¹ Posters, like “Madam, Who Keeps Your House?,” emphasized that the family had become enmeshed in a complex web of public and private forces, which necessitated that women fight against the corruptive elements of these

¹⁹ Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

forces.²² It is little surprise, then, that suffragists often shared enemies with the members of the Progressive movement and “listed Big Business, Commercialized Vice, and the Liquor Interests as the core of the antisuffrage coalition.”²³ In particular, “the identification of suffrage with temperance and prohibition . . . sparked an antisuffrage reaction among brewers and liquor retailers.”²⁴ A 1916 pamphlet, “Women Suffrage and the Liquor Interests – Some Exhibits” communicates these sentiments by contending that the liquor industry would not support the suffrage due to its fear that the collective political voice of women stood behind temperance. According to the pamphlet:

While it may be perfectly true that that particular brewers’ organization, *as* an organization, may never have taken any direct stand against woman suffrage, this does not in the least affect the fact that brewers at large . . . are casting the weight of their influence with other branches of liquor interests which have never attempted to deny their hostility towards woman suffrage.²⁵

But even while suffragists shared similar frustrations and views as the family- and domestically-centered Progressive movement, they also peppered their rhetoric with allusions to motherhood and wifeliness in more obvious ways. In particular, Finnegan finds:

In sanctioning the representation of women in predictable, sentimental, and romantic terms, nonradical suffragists ultimately settled for an uncontroversial and unremarkable standard of women’s citizenship . . . [I]t taught women to see the vote as one more way to center their lives around home, children, heterosexual romantic love, and consumerism.²⁶

The re-centering of women’s lives on domesticity and consumerism manifests itself in postcards, like one with the headline,

²² For an alternative interpretation of this particular poster, see Suzanne M. Marilley, *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 193-194.

²³ Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 224.

²⁴ Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 156.

²⁵ National American Women Suffrage Association, “Women Suffrage and the Liquor Interests. Some Exhibits,” February 1916, Box 5, Folder 16, Lindseth Collection.

²⁶ Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, 137.

“Why Not Let Mother Vote” (Figure 1)?²⁷ This short message tersely reinforces the conception of women political actors as mothers and wives. Another postcard assures the reader, “this is not a ‘suffragette’ lecture, but a kind Greeting: Thanksgiving Day Greetings,” which whether intentionally or not, associates the movement with the domestic- and consumer-motivated holiday of Thanksgiving and family event planning.²⁸

The commodities of the anti-suffrage movement also entered into the consumer-suffrage dialogue and recognized the romanticized, domestic construction of suffrage-supporting women. These arguments juxtapose the suffragists’ in their own mass-produced postcard medium by reaching different conclusions about suffrage and its familial effects. In fact, anti-suffragist products reached just the opposite conclusion as suffragists: that suffrage-supporting women intended to cast off their identities as familial care-takers and dash into the political for their own selfish, power-hungry interests. An authoritative woman is the apparent concern in one anti-suffrage postcard that comments, “My Wife’s Joined the Suffrage Movement, (I’ve suffered Ever Since!)” (Figure 2).²⁹ The picture on the card shows a woman scolding a man (presumably her husband) by grabbing his ear as he dusts the hearth in an apron. Aside from the presumed effort of suffragists to take power and disrupt contemporary spousal relations, the message also supports the contention of scholar Catherine H. Palczewski that “[anti-suffrage] postcards make visible the argument that men will be feminized, sacrificing their masculinity and full citizenship to woman’s sullied citizenship of equal suffrage.”³⁰ Such feminization pervades the representations of men in women’s clothing and women in men’s in the postcards I reviewed. In

²⁷ “Why not let mother vote?” postcard, 1913, Box 10, Folder 5, Lindseth Collection.

²⁸ “Thanksgiving Day Greetings,” postcard, 1921, Box 10, Folder 10, Lindseth Collection. In fact, the handwritten message on the back of the postcard is also rooted in domesticity as one woman invites another over to her house for Thanksgiving dinner: “Come eat Thanksgiving dinner with us – Write soon.”

²⁹ Bamforth & Co., “My wife’s joined the Suffrage Movement,” postcard, 1910, Box 10, Folder 8, Lindseth Collection. Lisa Tickner explains the presence of this British postcard amongst other paraphernalia from the American suffrage movement, noting that “England was seen as ‘the storm-center of the movement’” and, consequentially, many British materials were imported to the United States for the American suffrage movement, largely distributed through NAWSA. *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 266-267.

³⁰ Catherine H. Palczewski, “The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in 1909 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 4 (2005): 386.

another postcard, concern over the feminization of politics manifests itself metaphorically with a young boy saddened by his attendance at a “suffragette” tea party.³¹

Another common anti-suffrage fear was that “women suffrage would lead to neglect of children by politically active mothers and, consequently, to increased juvenile delinquency.”³² Neglect is the implication of one postcard that depicts a man in a pink night gown holding an infant (presumably his child) and crying out, “Oh! Where is My Wandering Wife Tonight?”³³ Above him reads the sarcastic caption: “Why Should Not Women Run the Government?” Thus anti-suffrage commodities adapted consumerist strategies and products to respond to and argue against major suffrage contentions “manifested by occupation of alternative cultural forms.”³⁴

But even as both suffrage and anti-suffrage commodities emitted specific assumptions about suffragists and their relation to the family and the political, such assumptions (and the consumer goods through which they were communicated) inherently excluded certain women based on racial, economic, and geographic backgrounds. Therefore, the contention of many historians that “women activists mixed various kinds of symbolic materials in order to attract and convert women readers and to bring them together as a community,” disregards those women whose lack of access or inclusion marginalized them from the political debate in consumption.³⁵

Nancy F. Cott, among other historians, has maintained that “modern habits of production, consumption, and recreation moved to homogenize long-standing differences between South and North, country and city.”³⁶ However, this homogenization – specifically in creating a national consumer-defined suffrage identity – was limited by certain populations’ access to resources and prevailing local customs. For example, Susan Porter Benson finds:

In the rural South, men continued to be the primary consumers through at least the mid-nineteenth century...African Americans’

³¹ “The Suffragette,” postcard, 1913, Box 10, Folder 11, Lindseth Collection.

³² Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 22-23.

³³ Bamforth & Co., “Oh! Where is my wandering wife to-night?,” postcard, 1916, Box 10, Folder 7, Lindseth Collection. Note also the feminization of the man depicted.

³⁴ Palczewski, “The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam,” 386.

³⁵ Linda Steiner, “Evolving Rhetorical Strategies/Evolving Identities,” in *A Voice of Their Own*, ed. Martha M. Solomon (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 183.

³⁶ Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 147.

family shopping, at least as reported by white home economists, was still handled predominantly by men well into the 1930s.³⁷

Regional and racial differences in consumptive practices, therefore, affected both the type of women who would have been in contact with suffrage messages expressed through commodities and the population of women toward and for whom advertisers and businesses would market and produce suffrage products. In fact, “at least until World War II, [historians] agree, most advertisers primarily targeted white middle class and discounted working-class consumers, especially recent immigrants and African Americans.”³⁸ Hence, the voices of certain demographics of women, for example those living in the rural South, do not resonate through the commodified forms of the suffrage movement. Even a brief look at the products and persons pictured amongst the postcards and other suffrage iconography depicts the audience of middle- to upper-class urban white women to whom they spoke.

Nevertheless, while the commodities themselves express the classist and racial biases of their producers, the suffragist movement – particularly in its close associations with working-class populations in the labor movement – attempted to democratize its consumer market (at least across classes). Enstad is right to assert:

Suffragists made use of the shopping spaces uniquely created for them as middle-class women: they often rented store windows for political displays and cooperated with department stores to promote suffrage paraphernalia, such as special hats, banners, and pins.³⁹

However, DuBois complicates the assumption that the use of these middle-class spaces available to suffragist women limited their audience. In her monograph on Harriot Stanton Blatch, she writes:

The suffrage movement sought to correct in a democratic direction. Associating oneself with the suffrage movement was made deliberately inexpensive: buying a button or a postcard, going to a movie or a suffrage dance cost little.⁴⁰

³⁷ Susan Porter Benson, “Consumer Cultures,” in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 277-278.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

³⁹ Nan Enstad, “Urban Spaces and Popular Cultures, 1890-1930,” in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 304.

⁴⁰ DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage*, 150.

Indeed even beyond the inexpensive commodities available for financially constrained women to purchase, suffragists, like Blatch, expanded their distribution of such commodities to communities hindered by access.

In late 1913, the WPU began to experiment with its own “suffrage shop”...The next spring, Harriot arranged to buy a used, horsedrawn lunch van and turned it into “a roving shop.” The van was moved from place to place every few days, sold campaign paraphernalia—buttons, pencils, even suffrage cigarettes—and disturbed suffrage literature...To Harriot the suffrage van reinforced the campaign’s democratic logic.⁴¹

In a very meaningful way, class-conscious suffragists were able to dispense suffrage commodities and more importantly encourage people, who would normally not encounter them in their everyday lives, to stop and look more closely at the cause itself.

Still, as some suffrage activists worked to include marginalized voices into the larger political conversation, other economic factors undermined their efforts. One example from DuBois’s research notes, “[a midtown department store] refused the request of a suffragist shop girl for time off to attend suffrage parades.”⁴² Such actions restricted working women’s political voice and frustrated their participation. These debilitating actions also raise an important question about the alliance between suffragists and the factories that mass-produced suffrage paraphernalia: what was each group’s stake in advocating or selling the suffrage and how did that stake shape their participation and commitment to the cause? With businesses pursuing profit and suffragists seeking political reform, an uneasy cooperation held their motives together as they promoted suffrage in the marketplace of ideas and goods. Turning to the commodities themselves in this essay, a related issue arises pertaining to ideological control. As Palczewski observes, “the most visually evocative images in the United States, as in Great Britain, came not from postcards officially commissioned by woman suffrage groups, but from ones produced by commercial postcard publishers.”⁴³ Given the superior fiscal coffers, productive capacities, and distributive channels of printing companies over suffragist-run operations, the significance of coherence and message manipulation reveals itself. Were the companies that mass-produced these postcards in tune with suffragist rhetoric or were they appropriating and changing the suffragist position for their own gain?

⁴¹ Ibid., 154.

⁴² Ibid., 153.

⁴³ Palczewski, “The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam,” 366.

Addressing this question, Finnegan states outright, “It is difficult to say whether these businesses and entrepreneurs felt motivated by potential profit or sincere interest in the cause.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that businesses were changing the suffrage rhetoric to fit their own goals of selling products as many commodities demonstrate. For instance, a “Votes for Women” advertisement (Figure 3) sponsored by The Shredded Wheat Company of Niagara Falls seems to equate an affirmation of suffrage with the purchase of cereal, maintaining that “Every biscuit is a vote for health, happiness and domestic freedom.”⁴⁵ Another more humorous example is found in the advertising booklet, “Famous Women of the World,” which was composed and distributed by a brand-name liquid laxative company.⁴⁶ Herein each page proclaims the heroic, anecdotal biographies of famous women throughout history, while testimonies of women using the sponsoring product fill its top and bottom margins: “I found Dr. Caldwell’s Syrup Pepsin just exactly as recommended. It will always be in my home – Mrs. R. Houston, Oxford, Miss.”

Regardless of their motivations, companies were instrumental in distributing information and ideology about the suffrage. For example, the introduction of the aforementioned booklet practically reads like a suffragist manifesto.

It is not given to all womankind to be famous through some singular achievement, though as will be seen from this booklet, women have been famous in all fields of endeavor from the earliest times down to the present day, and considering their civil and political handicaps, some of which still exist, they have accomplished quite as much as men; *but their fame will always rest mightiest as the encouragers and patient helpmates of those who have struggled and have achieved.*⁴⁷

As this quote makes clear, industrial and suffragist messages were not identical in their politics – note the rhetorical back-step or appeal to moderation in the booklet’s last segment. But despite the differing rhetorical preferences of businesses and suffragists, “they [suffragists] applauded the piracy of suffrage slogans and spectacles [by

⁴⁴ Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, 126.

⁴⁵ Shredded Wheat Company, “Votes for Women,” advertisement, 1913, Box 4, Folder 24, Lindseth Collection. The cereal product itself stands in for a paper ballot in the illustration beside the text.

⁴⁶ Pepsin, Syrup Co., “Famous Women of the World,” booklet, 1918, Box 5, Folder 3, Lindseth Collection.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* (italics mine).

businesses], interpreting such acts as signs of their own success.”⁴⁸ There is little reason to doubt this claim considering Palczewski’s statement that “the social import of postcards during their ‘Golden Age’ (1893-1918) rivals the power of the Internet in contemporary times.”⁴⁹ The utility of suffrage ideology transmitted through such commodities simply could not be ignored. As a result, suffragist messages in mass production frequently entwined themselves with consumer capitalist selling techniques. This allowed both parties to see success in making the suffrage well-known, popular, and conducive to consumption (mentally and economically).⁵⁰

Throughout the course of this essay, I have attempted to shed light on many of the issues surrounding suffrage and mass-production that remain only partly addressed by the conventional suffrage narrative. Historians have yet to investigate the ways that the suffrage movement impacted larger, more diverse economic and cultural discourses, phenomena, and structures at the turn of the century. Susan Porter Benson shares my concern by writing, “a connected discussion of women and consumption has not emerged, so that there is not a uniform pattern in work that touches on the topic” and that “some aspects of the connections between gender and consumption have gotten far more attention than others.”⁵¹ Alexander Keyssar, citing the suffrage movement specifically, states that “success did not come to the suffrage movement until images and norms of gender roles began to shift under the gradual but sturdy pressure of changes in the social structure.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, 129. As E. Claire Jerry highlights, the mainstreaming of suffrage rhetoric was also true in the case of women-run newspapers: “Suffrage newspapers, which had functioned to provide news of the movement to supporters and rationale for passage to foes, were no longer necessary. The general circulation press was now serving these purposes” once the suffrage movement began to generate national interest. “The Role of Newspapers in the Nineteenth-Century Woman’s Movement,” in *A Voice of Their Own*, ed. Martha M. Solomon (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 26-27.

⁴⁹ Palczewski, “The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam,” 365.

⁵⁰ One caveat of this conclusion is that mass-produced media did not have a stake in winning the suffrage per se only in capitalizing off its prominence in social discourse. For this reason, advertisements, like one on “Woman’s Suffrage Stove Polish,” use certain elements of suffrage rhetoric, like legalistic language and structure (e.g.: “First,” “Second,” and “Hence”), but made no overt political efforts on suffragists’ behalves. See Phoenix Manufacturing Co., “Woman’s suffrage stove polish,” advertisement, 1900, Box 10, Folder 12, Lindseth Collection.

⁵¹ Benson, “Consumer Cultures,” 274.

⁵² Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 221.

Historians, therefore, need to take a greater role in tracing the influence of suffrage media within social contexts.

This essay provided an example of how particular commodities of the suffrage movement interacted within larger social discourses and as a result of broader cultural changes to effect political reform. However, the connection between consumerism and suffrage politics in particular raises many issues still to draw scholarly interest. Benson takes some time identifying these issues and contends that, although difficult, historical attention must be paid towards “ordinary people’s experiences of consumption,” not merely the production of culture through products and advertisements.⁵³ The effects of reorienting the focus of consumption history away from producers offer the prospect of questioning the role that the suffrage movement played in the eyes of nonradical women – those who did not wish to, could not afford to, or were otherwise impeded from engaging in direct political action. According to Kraditor, “there were undoubtedly many women outside the association who sympathized with the cause just as deeply as those who were enrolled in clubs.”⁵⁴ But who were these women? How did they see the suffrage movement and their own role within it? Benson points out that “these women were purchasers of goods, but not necessarily the only or even the principal users of them, and we know very little about their role as decision makers.”⁵⁵ Did they make their suffrage-supporting purchases with unease or pride? Did they think about their role in the larger movement? And did they make such purchases on impulse or after careful thought? The history of suffrage has yet to respond to all these questions, but their answers promise a more comprehensive pastiche.

⁵³ Ibid., 277.

⁵⁴ Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 7.

⁵⁵ Benson, “Consumer Cultures,” 277.

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And Identity

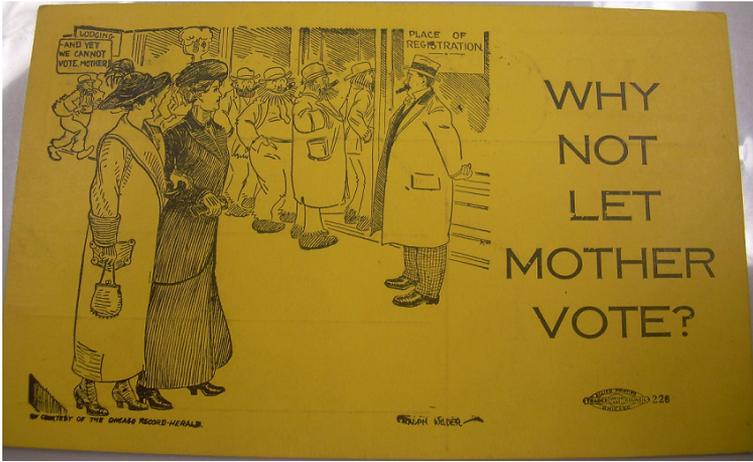


Figure 1 (Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.)



Figure 2 (Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.)

66 CENTURY ADVERTISEMENTS—FOOD PRODUCTS

“Votes For Women”



Two million women will have a right to vote in the next Presidential election. Twenty million women have voted for the emancipation of American womanhood by serving

Shredded Wheat

In their homes. Every biscuit is a vote for health, happiness and domestic freedom—a vote for pure food, for clean living and clean thinking.

The housewife who knows the nutritive value of Shredded Wheat and the many delicious fruit combinations that can be made with it may banish kitchen worry and household care.

Shredded Wheat is ready-cooked, ready-to-serve. It is a natural, elemental food. It is not flavored or seasoned with anything and hence does not deteriorate in the market. The consumer flavors or seasons it to suit his own taste. It is delicious for breakfast with milk or cream or for any meal with fruits.

The Only Breakfast Cereal Made in Biscuit Form

Made only by
 THE SHREDDED WHEAT COMPANY, NIAGARA FALLS, N. Y.

Figure 3 (Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.)

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