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The Militant Suffrage Movement. Citizenship and Resistance in Britain 1860?1930

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Laura E. Nym Mayhall begins her book by re-telling the familiar story of the arrest in 1909 of Marion Wallace Dunlop, a member of the Women?s Social and Political Union (WSPU), which led to her imprisonment and notoriety as the ?first hunger striker?. In doing so, she focuses on the action that led to the arrest. Dunlop stencilled the following words from the Bill of Rights (1689) on a wall near the House of Commons: ?It is the right of the subject to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal.? Mayhall suggests that Dunlop?s act connects the Edwardian suffrage movement to a long tradition of radical protest, and that militants used the language of constitutionalism to support their case for active citizenship. Her book aims to ?shed light on the rationale? at the centre of Dunlop?s protest by ?exploring suffrage militancy as a political idea and a range of practices? (p. 3).

Suffragette militancy has been the subject of extensive review and reinterpretation in recent years. Sandra Holton, in *Suffrage Days*, has already argued that a group of suffragists in the nineteenth century worked within a radical tradition, and that their theory and practice were part of the origins of Edwardian militancy. She has questioned the tendency to draw a rigid distinction between ?constitutionalists? and ?militants?, and has noted how definitions of what constituted a militant activity changed over time.(1) As Krista Cowman suggests, militancy could take numerous forms and, even at the height of the WSPU campaign, women

could choose from a range of different activities and were not obliged to engage in the destruction of property.(2) Both Hilda Kean and Mayhall herself, in an earlier study, claim that this diversity became lost as the dominant narrative, established in suffragette autobiographies of the inter-war years, equated suffrage militancy with imprisonment and hunger striking.(3)

To what extent, therefore, does Mayhall?s book provide a new perspective on this well worked theme? It is the first full-length study to look in depth at the nature of militancy itself and to place it within a broader political context. The book?s main concern is to view militancy as a crucial part of suffragette engagement with theories of citizenship and democracy. It is argued that suffrage campaigners viewed their citizenship as an active process and saw resistance to state power, expressed through militancy, as a key component of ?engaged citizenship? (p. 11). The author is careful not to equate militancy just with the WSPU. Instead, she attempts throughout to look at a range of militant groups and at the diverse forms and meanings of the actions in which they were involved. She suggests that the ?multiple representations of resistance created a continuum along which individuals and organisations articulated their understandings of the female citizen in relation to the state? (p. 97).

The first two chapters review recent literature and explore the origins of militancy. Drawing on the work of Collini, Rendall and Holton, who have re-interpreted both liberalism and suffragism in the nineteenth century, Mayhall notes how women?s suffrage was part of a more general debate about citizenship.(4) In the 1880s and 90s there was a new emphasis on the distinctive contribution that women could make to politics, while at the same time improving themselves through their participation in public life. Many women were attracted by progressivism, in which radicals and socialists were eager to expand the practice of citizenship to include resistance and rebellion and to re-assert the moral dimension of politics. These issues were debated further during the South African War, the focus of chapter two, in which questions were raised about when and where resistance to ?constitutional? authority might be justified and necessary. The war stimulated discussion about the nature of citizenship, but suffragists reacted in different ways. Josephine Butler and Millicent Fawcett thought women should have a role in politics because they would seek to save black South Africans from the Boers; this drew on a gendered model of service. Others, who were pro-Boer, argued that if the government were willing to go to war over the question of political rights for the Uitlanders, then women had the right to resist a government that did not acknowledge them as citizens. Dora Montefiore, a middle-class socialist propagandist and suffrage campaigner, resisted paying her taxes, and therefore raised questions about the obligations women had to a state that governed without their consent, and whether women should be governed by laws that they did not formulate.

The next four chapters contain the most original sections of the book. Mayhall examines the language and practice of suffrage militancy through selected themes and subjects. In chapter 3, ?Staging exclusion, 1906?9?, she looks at how different groups, in particular the WSPU, the Women?s Freedom League (WFL) and the Women?s Tax Resistance League, staged protests about their exclusion from political rights. In order to justify their resistance to an illegitimate government they emphasised that their protest drew on constitutional principles. In October 1908, for instance, WFL members chained themselves to a metal screen in the Ladies? Gallery of the House of Commons and shouted ?Votes for Women!? when a bill was being discussed, thereby disrupting male political discourse. The Grille was full of constitutional symbolism since it represented a twentieth-century exclusion of women, reminding politicians that, until the late eighteenth century, women could sit anywhere in the House of Commons. Suffragettes? use of spectacle and imagery to convey their message is well documented, but Mayhall suggests that it was not just the exhibition of women?s bodies in public that created an impact, but the fact that they drew on ?radical narratives of resistance? to make their case (p. 51).

Chapter 4, ?Resistance on trial, 1906?12?, looks at a less familiar form of protest ? the use made by suffragettes of legal appeals which were heard in the courtroom. They tried to use judge-made law to circumvent the government?s unwillingness to introduce women?s suffrage, for example, the case of Nairn versus Scottish universities (1908). When decisions did not go their way, they challenged the authority of the judiciary, and then later used the courtroom as a space to articulate and publicise their demands. The embodiment of the citizen as white, male and middle-class was also increasingly challenged. In chapter 5

Mayhall looks at the ways in which suffrage militants gave a ?physical dimension to their political agency? (p. 84), not through the familiar areas of hunger striking and forcible feeding, but through the idioms of femininity and freedom. She argues that a ?feminine embodiment of citizenship? took two forms ? Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale ? while freedom was explored through its opposite, slavery, in particular women?s sexual slavery to men. In both cases there were tensions between militants over how they understood the concepts of femininity and freedom.
The differences between militants became more acute in the period 1910?1914 when a minority introduced what Mayhall describes as ?forms of terrorism?. This led other militants to seek ways in which they could resist the state without the use of violence. Mayhall provides a subtle discussion of the critiques of violence in chapter 6, ?The ethics of resistance, 1910?1914?, and notes how disagreements about the nature of militancy led to the proliferation of suffrage groups. At the same time individuals did co-operate across organisational boundaries, for example, in free speech campaigns. Mayhall concludes that although militant resistance was contested in this period, it remained an important part of how suffragettes viewed women?s citizenship and ensured that the campaign retained its vitality up to the outbreak of war. Faced with a new context women, had to re-think what their citizenship meant, and in chapter 7, ?At war with and for the state?, it is argued that all militants viewed their role as one of service. Nevertheless, their understanding of service was not the same. The Pankhurst-led WSPU sought to support the state through engaging in anti-pacifist, anti-German and anti-Bolshevik propaganda, whereas others sought to mitigate the effects of the war on women and children. There is also interesting material on some women?s determination to carry on working for suffrage and their continuing use of resistance, for example, the refusal to pay taxes and their protests over the erosion of civil rights.

By looking in some detail at the language and meaning of militancy and the various forms that it took, Laura Nym Mayhall draws out the subtle differences between organisations and individuals. She shows that these differences were not simply the result of personality clashes or party political perspectives, but were rooted in conceptions of active citizenship and the forms that resistance to the state should take. Thus, she argues that the WFL used the courtroom to expose women?s unequal status under the law, to challenge the legitimacy of legal decisions and to argue that women should not be subject to laws that were man-made. The WSPU disagreed with this approach. They insisted that all protests should be political and should aim only at opposing the government. When the leaders of the WSPU were tried at the Old Bailey in 1912 for conspiracy to incite violence, they used their trial as a platform to make a case for women?s right to citizenship and to criticise government hypocrisy for excluding them. They were able to present themselves to a wide public audience as rational political actors, and to deny that their actions were criminal in nature.

Other differences identified by Mayhall are perhaps less convincing. For example, she asserts that after 1911 some WSPU members wanted to make life difficult for the government and to remove obstacles to women gaining the vote, rather than trying to convince politicians that women should be enfranchised. The WFL on the other hand saw citizenship as women?s service to the nation, with freedom being the ability to act, and therefore they both demanded and performed citizenship at the same time. Yet this appears to slide over the very complex attitudes that suffrage campaigners held towards the meaning of women?s citizenship and service to the state. How, for example, did the constitutionalists of the NUWSS view women?s service, and was this different from that held by the militants? At some points there is a questioning of the demarcation often still drawn between constitutionalists and militants, but at others, Mayhall suggests that in organisational terms they saw themselves as distinct. It is also unclear as to whether, within the militant camp, the crucial differences were between organisations or between individuals. Given, for example, that only a minority of WSPU members engaged in arson, window smashing and slashing of paintings after 1911, what were the views of the rest, and why did they remain in the Union rather than joining one of the other militant groups?

The emphasis of the book on the rhetoric and arguments of the militant suffrage movement, and its links to more general political debates about citizenship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, does provide important new insights and different ways of looking at the meaning of militant theory and practice. On the other hand, there is a missing dimension here in terms of engagement with everyday political

practice. In chapter 2, for example, the focus is on the way in which the Boer War helped to redefine citizenship, but little is said about the impact of other political developments, such as the growing involvement of working-class women from Lancashire in the suffrage campaign. Moreover, the increasing separation of suffragettes from socialist politics is seen as a rhetorical one rather than as stemming from conflicts over specific issues and demands. A number of questions need to be asked: how did militants who were also involved in mixed-sex politics, in particular socialists and Labour Party activists, view women?s citizenship and the politics of resistance? To what extent did competing loyalties to gender, class and party cut across, or conflict with, attitudes towards militancy and organisational affiliations? How far did the proliferation of militant groups before the war stem from differences over violence or from broader disagreements about the nature of citizenship and democracy?

The range of questions being raised demonstrates that Mayhall?s approach to militancy is a stimulating one that challenges preconceived ideas and encourages the reader to engage in debate. This is particularly evident in the conclusion, ?Fetishizing militancy, 1918?1930?, which looks at the way in which the militant suffrage movement was viewed from the vantage point of the 1920s and 30s. Mayhall argues that emphasis was placed on service during the war as the main reason why women were enfranchised and the militant movement was viewed as ?irrational?. The militants? focus on ?citizenship as engagement with the state? was lost. This was crucial at a time when, in the 1920s, the importance of the vote itself was being questioned. There are some tantalising statements here about how citizenship might be configured in this new environment, which should provide themes for further research and discussion. Anyone embarking on such a task can use, as a starting point, the excellent references and bibliography provided in the book.

Notes

1. S. S. Holton, *Suffrage Days. Stories from the Women?s Suffrage Movement* (1996).Back to (1)
2. K. Cowman, ??The stone throwing has been forced upon us?: the function of militancy within the Liverpool WSPU, 1906?1914?, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 145 (1996), 171?92.Back to (2)
3. H. Kean, ??Searching for the past in present defeat?: the construction of historical and political identity in British feminism in the 1920s and 30s?, *Women?s History Review*, 3.1 (1994), 57-80.Back to (3)
4. S. Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850?1930* (Oxford, 1991); J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women?s Politics, 1800?1914* (Oxford, 1987).Back to (4)

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