5.5: First Wave Feminism

Even as socialist parties were growing in size and strength, another political and cultural conflict raged: the emergence of feminism. In the context of the Victorian era, most Europeans believed in the doctrine of gender relations known as “separate spheres.” In separate spheres, it was argued that men and women each had useful and necessary roles to play in society, but those roles were distinct from one another. The classic model of this concept was that the man's job was to represent the family unit in public and make decisions that affected the family, while the woman's job was to maintain order in the home and raise the children, albeit under the “veto” power of her husband. The Code Napoleon, in Article 231, proclaimed that the husband owed his wife protection, and the wife owed her husband obedience. Until the late nineteenth century, most legal systems officially classified women with children and the criminally insane in having no legal identity.

As of 1850, women across Europe could not vote, could not initiate divorce (in those countries in which divorce was even possible), could not control custody of children in the case of divorce, could not pursue higher education, could not open bank accounts in their own name, could not maintain ownership of inherited property after marriage, could not initiate lawsuits or serve as legal witnesses, and could not maintain control of their own wages if working and married. Everywhere, domestic violence against women (and children) was ubiquitous - it was taken for granted the the “man of the house” had the right to enforce his will with violence if he found it necessary, and the very concept of marital rape was nonexistent as well. In sum, despite the claim by male socialists that the working class were the “wretched of the earth,” there is no question that male workers enjoyed vastly more legal rights than did women of any social class at the time.

What had changed since the dawn of the nineteenth century, however, was the growth of liberalism. It was a short, logical step from making the claim that “all men are equal” to “all people are equal,” and indeed some women had very vocally emphasized just that point in the early liberal movement leading up to the French Revolution. By the late nineteenth century, liberal legal codes were present in some form in most of Europe, and after World War I all men won
the vote in Britain, France, and Germany (along with most of the smaller countries in central and western Europe). Thus, early feminists argued that their enfranchisement was simply the obvious, logical conclusion of the political evolution of their century.

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century feminism is referred to by historians as “first-wave” feminism (there have been three “waves” so far). Its defining characteristic was the battle against legally-mandated discrimination against women in terms of property laws, control over children within the family, and the right to vote. Of all of the culture struggles and legal battles of the period, however, first-wave feminism faced the greatest opposition from those in power: men. Biologists routinely claimed that women were simply physiologically less intelligent than men. Women who, against the odds, had risen to positions of note were constantly attacked and belittled; one example is the inaugural address of a new female scientist at the University of Athens in the early 1900s, whose speech was interrupted by male students shouting “back to the kitchen!” Queen Victoria herself once said that the demand for equal rights for women was “a mad, wicked folly…forgetting every sense of womanly feelings and propriety.”

In response, first-wave feminists argued that women were only “inferior” because of their inferior education. If they were educated at the same level and to the same standards as men, they would be able to exercise their reason at the same level as well, and would hence deserve to be treated as full equals by the law. As early as the French Revolution, some women had demanded equal rights for women as a logical outgrowth of the new, more just society under construction in the Revolution. The most famous revolutionary feminist of French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges, was executed for daring to argue that things like “equality” and “liberty” obviously implied that men and women should be equals. A century later, her vision remained unfulfilled.

First-wave feminism’s defining concern was suffrage - the right to vote, which served as the central demand of most first-wave feminist movements and parties. In 1867 in Britain the National Society for Women’s Suffrage was founded. Comparable movements spread across the continent over the next three decades. The word “feminist” itself came about in 1890, after a French Suffrage activist, Hubertine Auclert, described herself as such (Auclert made a name for herself in part because she refused to pay taxes, arguing that since she was not represented politically, she had no obligation to contribute to the state). Only in Finland and Norway, however, did women gain the vote before World War I. In some cases, it took shockingly long for women to get the vote: France only granted it in 1944 as a concession to the allies who liberated the country from the Nazis, and it took Switzerland until 1971(!)

The struggle for the vote was closely aligned to other feminist campaigns. In fact, it would be misleading to claim that first-wave feminism was solely focused on suffrage, since suffrage itself was seen by feminists as only one component of what was needed to realize women’s equality. An iconic example is the attitude of early feminists to marriage: for middle class women, marriage was a necessity, not a choice. Working class women worked in terrible conditions just to survive, while the truly desperate were often driven to prostitution not because of a lack of morality on their part but because of brutal economic and legal conditions for unmarried poor women. In turn, middle class women suffered the consequences when their husbands, succumbing to the temptation of prostitution, brought sexually transmitted diseases into the middle class home. Women, feminists argued, needed economic independence, the ability to support themselves before marriage without loss of status or respectability, and the right to retain the property and earnings they brought to and accumulated during marriage. Voting rights and the right to initiate divorce were thus “weapons of self defense” according to first wave feminists.

After decades of campaigns by feminists, divorce became a possibility in countries like Britain and France in the late
nineteenth century, but it remained difficult and expensive to secure. For a woman to initiate divorce, she had to somehow have the means to hire a lawyer and navigate labyrinthine divorce laws; as a result, only the well-off could do so. In other countries, like Russia, divorce remained illegal. Much more common than legal separation was the practice of men simply abandoning their wives and families when they tired of them; this made the institutions of middle-class family life open to mockery by socialists, who, as did Marx and Engels, pointed out that marriage was nothing but a property contract that men could choose to abandon at will (the socialist attitude toward feminism, incidentally, was that gender divisions were byproducts of capitalism: once capitalism was eliminated, gender inequality would supposedly vanish as well).

Even as the feminist movement in Britain became focused on voting rights, feminists waged other battles as well. In the 1880s, British feminists attacked the Contagious Diseases Acts, which subjected prostitutes to mandatory gynecological inspections (but did not require the male clients of prostitutes to be examined), and drew the radical conclusion that prostitution was simply the most obvious example of a condition that applied to practically all women. In marriage, after all, women exchanged sexual access to their bodies in return for their material existence. In other words, feminists of the 1880s and the 1890 challenged the Victorian image of marriage as a haven in a heartless world, a separate sphere of domestic bliss sheltered from the competitive world of business and capitalism.

In Britain, the best known and most important first-wave feminists were the Pankhursts: the mother Emmeline (1858 – 1928) and daughters Christabel and Sylvia, who formed a radical group known as the Suffragettes in 1903. Much of the original membership came from the ranks of Lancashire textile workers before the group moved its headquarters to London in 1906. The Pankhursts soon severed their links with the Labour Party and working class activists and began a campaign of direct action under the motto "deeds, not words". By 1908 they had moved from heckling to stone-throwing and other forms of protest, including destroying paintings in museums and, on one occasion, attacking male politicians with horsewhips on a golf course.

Activists who staged public demonstrations were on several occasions treated brutally by police, and those who were arrested were subjected to coercive feeding when they went on hunger strikes. That brutality led to more widespread public support for the Suffragettes, but there were still no legal changes forthcoming; even the British Liberal Party that had, on various occasions, claimed to support women’s suffrage always ended up putting it on the back-burner in parliament. In the most spectacular and tragic act of protest, a Suffragette named Emily Davison threw herself under the Kings horse during the Derby of 1913 and was killed - in the aftermath it was discovered that she had stuffed her dress with pamphlets demanding the vote for women.
Somewhat ironically, given the importance of the suffrage movement, feminists secured other legal rights before they did the right to vote in the period before World War I. By and large, women secured the right to enter universities by the early twentieth century and the first female academics secured teaching positions soon after - the first woman to hold a university post in France was the famous Marie Curie, whose work was instrumental in understanding radiation. Women secured the right to initiate divorce in some countries even earlier, along with the right to control their own wages and property and to fight for the custody of children. In short, thanks to feminist agitation, women had secured a legal identity and meaningful legal rights in at least some of the countries of Europe, and the United States, by the onset of World War I in 1914, but as mentioned above, only in two Scandinavian countries could they yet vote.