

HANDOUT THREE:

Tension Within the Movement

Interview Archive Transcript, Lisa Tetrault

Fractures within social movements

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One of the ways in which social narratives or movement narratives operate within the movement also is to try to make them look more cohesive and more united than they often actually are. Because a cohesive, united movement makes a stronger argument for change and for demand than a fractured divisive in-fighting narrative. So social movements themselves end up creating narratives about themselves where they're united and unified, but in fact, usually almost always social movements are fractured and divided and argumentative and ugly at times. But that doesn't make a very strong case for their demands. So it works better, in many cases, to make social movements appear as if they're unified and coherent.

We often romanticize social movements as perfect in some ways, as idyllic, as utopian, [but] they are just as fractured because they're political movements, as all kinds of politics. There are messy struggles. They don't unfold neatly and they don't accomplish their goals neatly.

Yeah, the suffrage movement is such a complicated movement and I find it fascinating for just that reason, because it is revered by a large segment of the population and it is maligned by an equally large segment of the population. So how do we make sense of those dual approaches to this particular movement? And part of it is by paying attention to the complexity of movements that we often miss when we cover movements. And much in the same way that white men often told the history of a nation as a kind of story of triumphal progress that brought everybody along, and social activists would argue, no, we didn't get brought along in that social progress, you know, you've left us out. The same things happened within the women's suffrage movement. The white women narrate it as, this is a story of progress. We began our fight in 1848, we won our goal in 1920, and with that is a story of a kind of progress, both of white women and of American democracy as a whole. There are lots of other people who know that is not a story of progress. That is a story of us being left out. And much like white men who ruled this nation for a long time, a lot of white women in the movement leave out and forget and silence and ignore a lot of the other women who were left out of that narrative of progress.

And the racism within the movement, much like the racism within the United States, was endemic and was ubiquitous. It was everywhere within the movement. And so, people who got left out of that story and who got left out of that tide, millions and millions and millions of women, look back on that and the people with whom they're aligned, and other social movements look back on that suffrage movement and see a movement that was very narrowly focused on the rights of a few, and willing to play a politics of white supremacy and throw women of color under the bus and throw men of color under the bus. And so they malign the movement. So what we get is this, if we tell the story from white suffragists' points of view, it seems like a very triumphal happy narrative. If we tell it from the point of view of the people who got left out, it looks like a movement that was highly exclusionary and, in many cases, reinforcing a politics of white supremacy rather than challenging it.

Carrie Chapman Catt

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Carrie Chapman Catt represents this kind of older guard of a woman [who] came of age during the Victorian era rather than the 19-teens and the 1920s. Who's still heavily dressed in Victorian garb and who takes a more deferential approach to politics. And we're going to curry the favor and the likability of these politicians rather than coming up and throwing a sign up in their face yelling at them.

Winning suffrage at the state level

When Stanton and Anthony go off and break from the feminist abolitionists coalition, they start a very new demand: suffrage by federal amendment. And that is a brand new idea after the war because nobody thought the federal constitution could be used to enforce voting rights—that was a state prerogative. A bunch of suffragists argue that's unconstitutional, that still belongs to the states and Lucy Stone and a bunch of other people fight for voting [at the state level.] In other words, go state by state and get "male" taken out of the constitution. That is a dual strategy that moves forward all the way to the 20th century. Working at the state level and working at the federal level, you've got two branches of the movement. The state movement starts to win. A lot of victories. States out West and states in other places start enfranchising women and allowing them access to the ballot. But the federal amendment has been stalled and has failed repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly. So when

Carrie Chapman Catt gets appointed Anthony's successor in the movement, she realizes that a direct fight for the federal amendment is not winnable because it's just repeatedly lost. So what she decides, and she comes up with a plan that says, "Let's win suffrage in a couple of key states where women have huge voting power if they were enfranchised. And then we'll put pressure on the Democratic Party with female voters to pass a federal amendment."

So Carrie Chapman Catt is busy with the ground game and she's going to try to win over key states. New York, for example, gives women the right to vote in 1917, California, really powerful states. While Alice Paul says, "To heck with that ground game, I'm going to go straight to the president and I'm going to go straight to Congress." And she's busy doing that. And it's really the two strategies that come together. Had it not been for these other states falling and granting women's voting rights, I don't think Alice Paul would have had any success with the federal amendment. But it was never that Carrie Chapman Catt gave up on the federal amendment, she just didn't think going directly for it was doable.

They absolutely are studying history. They're studying other radical movements. They are veterans in political organizing. . . . They come of age in a movement that is fully formed and fully active. . . . They cut their teeth in movement struggles. They're trained by activists before them.

Generational tension in the suffrage movement

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Oh, so there's this all kinds of generational tension. Carrie Chapman Catt thinks Alice Paul is going to cost them the vote. She thinks that her direct militant strategy is going to alienate people so much that the vote is going to be lost. She doesn't like these new women. She also doesn't like her own leadership being challenged. Alice Paul challenges Carrie Chapman Catt, goes off and forms a new organization. Carrie Chapman Catt is quite convinced, in the kind of self-assured way that many of these suffrage leaders had, that she knows the right way and everyone should fall in line behind her. And if you don't, you are messing up the works. Whereas Alice Paul looks at Carrie Chapman Catt and just thinks "Y'all are a bunch of fuddy duddy old ladies." There's a lot of ageism in this, and you see this over and over again in women's movements. The younger generation thinking the older generation is nothing but a bunch of conservative drag. They're old biddies. They got nothing that we need. You know. We understand the way of the future. And it showcases, in many ways, youthful optimism. And that kind of youthful sense that I know the way to fix the world.

Women's suffrage in states

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So, when Wilson takes office in 1913, women are already voting in nine states. So, women's suffrage is not something new and untried. It's being practiced, and being experimented with, and being accepted in a whole wide range of places already. There are other states where women have partial suffrage rights. And partial suffrage rights was whereby you didn't get voting on equal terms with men, you got the right to vote only in certain types of elections. So like Illinois for example, gives women presidential suffrage, you can vote for president, but you can't vote for anything else. So by 1920, there are only eight states where women are not voting in some fashion and many where they're voting on the same terms as men. So tons of women are voting before 1920 and tons of women aren't voting after 1920.

Setting the stage for a federal women's suffrage amendment

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The fact that so many women are voting, that states pull the word "male" from their voting clauses before 1920, I think convinces Americans that civilization is not going to fall if women vote. And I think that sets the stage for making the federal amendment possible. The other thing that makes the federal amendment possible is World War I. Many, many social movements have very successfully leveraged America's claim to democracy abroad while denying it at home. And what Alice Paul does very, very effectively is say, "You're fighting this war, World War I, to make the world safe for democracy, but you're denying it at home." And that becomes a political embarrassment for the United States. And I think that makes the federal amendment possible as well.

Complexity of the struggle

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I think when we tie these things up in these nice linear narratives that end in happy ending points, we miss all of the complexity that it takes to try to fight for something. We miss all the complexity, all the myriad individual local battles that you have to fight to get someplace and the unbelievable amounts of strategizing it takes. The fact that you might be strategizing in the wrong direction. It's not always clear what the proper path forward is. And that itself can be a real limitation for social movements. What's the best way forward? It can be very hard to know. And of course in the suffrage movement, they had different ideas about what was the best move forward.