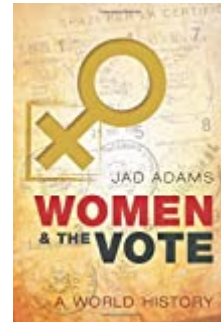




Jad Adams. *Women and the Vote: A World History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 528 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-870684-7.



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An Attempt at a Global History of Women's Suffrage

Comparative studies of the history of women's enfranchisement have raised interest among historians since the early days of women's history, but rarely have they attempted to cover a global perspective. Richard J. Evans, for example, a specialist of the German women's movement, published a study of feminist movements in Europe, North America, and Australia in 1977 in which he trailed a linear and progressive development from early thought on women's emancipation over moderate economic and educational reform to the radicalization of women's movements, first in the field of moral reform and then women's suffrage as a climax, which, in his view, eventually led to increasing conservatism and de-radicalization.[1] In 2003 sociologist John Markoff wrote a comparative article on margins and centers in the development of democratization for the journal *Signs*. [2] He drew attention to the fact that women's suffrage was first established in the periphery, notably on the Pitcairn Islands and in New Zealand. This focus on peripheries had the special merit that it sought to end the Anglo-American bias of several comparative studies, including

Evans's. However, drawbacks in both of these studies are that they largely relied on sources available in English (with a few German, French, and Spanish titles) and thus were only able to consider a fraction of the sources and literature available for the specific national histories of women's political rights. The outcome was, at times, false information and misunderstandings, particularly regarding the complicated history of women's suffrage in the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire.

Jad Adams, an independent historian and television producer specializing in biographies and currently Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies of the School of Advanced Study, University of London, has now presented an even more ambitious project of a comprehensive world history entitled *Women and the Vote*. Starting with the position of women in early democracies such as ancient Greece and Iceland, Adams covers women in the age of revolutions, radical thought and middle-class suffrage campaigns in Britain, the history of women's suffrage in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Scandinavia, militancy in Britain, women's

enfranchisement at the end of the First World War in the United States and Europe, women's political rights in European Catholic countries, Latin America, India, China, Indonesia, Japan, sub-Saharan Africa, and Muslim countries; and finally discusses both the problem of correct dates for the introduction of women's suffrage and the special case of Switzerland in appendices. HABSBURO's readers will mostly be interested in how Adams deals with the Habsburg lands, but first, a few general remarks on the book are in order.

Evans and Markoff are important references for Adams but he also follows them into some of their pitfalls. Again, the Anglo-American world dominates this history, taking up roughly half the book. Adams also mainly relies on sources published in English. His claim to look first at accounts of events written by the participants themselves (p. 4) is, consequently, inoperable for the non-Anglophone world. In addition, the bibliography is comparably slim. Conceding that a comprehensive list of sources on all national suffrage histories would have gone beyond the possibilities of an already lengthy book (it has over 500 pages), it is rather odd that the cited literature is dated in many cases, with important newer publications missing, as, for example, regarding property single women's right to vote in New Jersey from 1776 to 1807 or the issue of polygamy and women's suffrage in Utah. A further example: the sections on Belgium and Germany lack any reference to the many studies published by Belgian and German historians in the last decades on the topic. Without knowledge of the literature written in national languages, Adams necessarily misses new insights into the history of women's enfranchisement, and errors and inaccuracies are unavoidable. To mention only a few: It is difficult to argue that Sweden was the first country in Europe to give women the municipal vote [1862] and among the last to grant the parliamentary franchise [1921] (p. 187). Austria, for example, preceded Sweden with the local government vote, albeit to be exercised by proxy, in 1849 (reorganized in 1862), and women were enfranchised for the diets of the Austrian crown lands in 1861, now often with a personal vote. Regarding the parliamentary franchise many countries followed much later than Sweden—Spain, Turkey, France, Italy, and Switzerland among them. Furthermore, divorce and remarriage cannot by definition resemble acceptance of polygamy (p. 245). The leader of the German Social Democrats was August Bebel, not Auguste (p. 262). And in Switzerland manhood suffrage of 1848 was universal on the federal level, not limited (p. 434). However, the cantons nominally retained the right to ex-

clude certain social groups, for instance illiterate persons or servants, until 1874.

Despite its jacket—the Venus feminist symbol overlapping some Italian voting documents—this is not a feminist book. Adams is intent on presenting the men's essential share in the struggle for and the achievement of women's suffrage, which is fair enough and an interesting perspective, especially when he presents couples working for women's enfranchisement (although he only succeeds in sustaining this consistently for British suffrage history). Jarring are efforts to make suffrage history more lively by relating juicy tidbits on the unconventional sex lives of suffragists—with American Victoria Woodhull as an especially colorful character. However, this is to the detriment of more dull, but politically very important characters such as Millicent Fawcett and, in consequence, downplays the key role of the British National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. All in all, Adams is especially averse to claims that suffrage organizations and movements won the vote and argues that vigorous feminist organizations deterred erstwhile supporters in some countries (p. 9). His focus is on the role of leading individuals.

Regarding the actual enfranchisement of women, Adams correctly states that several factors were significant for legislative change, among these, especially, local conditions. However, catastrophic or revolutionary national events, not movements played the most important role in his view (pp. 15). Nevertheless, Adams remains, at times, rather ambivalent about the relation these pivotal events, for instance World War I, actually had to women's enfranchisement. His conclusions are more general and hardly analytical—for example, "The War did not bring about women's suffrage in the US, but it created the right atmosphere" (p. 245). In his chapter "Who Won Votes from the War?" he rightly acknowledges that women's war work was hardly a factor in enfranchisement in most countries (p. 280). Nationalism was more important in his view—that is, the creation of new countries which wanted to show that they were fully equipped to deal with the modern world, who emphasized the new social order in contrast to earlier autocracy (p. 281). Adams unfortunately tarnishes this convincing argument by claiming that nations such as France and Belgium primarily wanted to return to the way things were *ante bellum* (p. 281) and ignoring the actual political fights, especially in Belgium, over women's suffrage in 1919, which he does refer to briefly later in the book when he explains the Belgian and French cases more closely.

Several of the Habsburg Empire's successor states introduced women's suffrage between 1918 and 1920: Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia. These states are mentioned briefly together with Hungary (which restricted women's political rights to a great extent again in 1921) in the chapter on World War I that includes Russia, Germany, the Netherlands—neutral during the war—and Canada. Austria, which introduced full suffrage for women on December 18, 1918, in a similar revolutionary context as in Germany is not dealt with in the war chapter at all, but the Habsburg Empire surfaces together with Belgium, France, Italy, and Spain in the following chapter titled "The Pope and the Vote—Catholic Europe."

Adams is obviously unaware of the complex structure of the empire and of forms of political representation on the local, provincial, and national levels. His account is to some extent based on an early article by the reviewer dealing with a slightly different issue, namely Austrian women's goals and visions in politics from 1890 to 1934,[3] but there is not much that Adams gets right in the roughly four pages (285-288) on the Habsburg Empire. Women's enfranchisement on the local and provincial levels are portrayed as if they referred to the Austrian central parliament. The fact that only noble women and women's convents owning certain landed property had the vote in the curia of great landowners for the central parliament until 1907 is omitted. Contrary to Adams's statements, noble women did not have precedence because of their nobility but because they owned and paid a certain amount of taxes for real estate listed in registers for noble or feudal property (*land- und lehenstÄpfliche GÄ½ter*). However, Adams is right when he maintains that democracy was attached to a masculine model of political organization from 1907 on, at least on the national level (p. 286). It is true that the Association Law of 1867 did not allow women to become members of political associations, but it did not forbid them to attend political meetings. Unfortunately, the myth that the Association Law was revised in 1913 (Adams calls it the Law of Assemblies) to allow women to join political associations is repeated here. The revision actually came through in the Lower House but was finally put into law only in 1918. So, there was no "unfettered national suffrage campaign" (p. 286) launched in 1913. Another error is the claim that Liberals supported women's suffrage ideologically (p. 287). Only Thomas Masaryk's Progressive Party founded in 1906 and individual members of the several more leftist, German-speaking Liberal Party organizations did so, such as Julius Ofner and the democratic Deutsche Freiheitspartei founded in 1913. Suffrag-

ists did not cease activities fully during the war. Austria did not introduce a "new constitution" (p. 287) in December 1918 but a law on the election of the constitutive national assembly. One wonders if readers will understand that this Austria after November 1918 now only related to the German-speaking parts of the former empire. At the end of the chapter Adams does briefly refer to the ethnic conflicts in the empire that also had their effects on the suffragists.

In addition to these specific errors concerning the general history of the Habsburg Empire, Adams presents the contentious idea that the "rhetoric of women's suffrage was in keeping with a conservative, Catholic country" (p. 286). The goal of bringing "womanly and motherly" moral qualities into politics was not specific for Austria, as the reviewer also argued in her essay (used by Adams), pointing out US-American examples. That he is undecided over the supra-regional, transnational significance of arguments based on gender difference is also clear when he maintains that women generally "promoted the positive, home-making and nurturing aspects of women's roles" in Latin America and "the East" (p. 12), but then also mentions this for the United States (p. 171). In his conclusion he suddenly claims that the arguments emphasizing "the supposedly ameliorative qualities of women on the body politic" were used "after the first major enfranchisements, with the obvious failure of society to be 'transformed'" (p. 429). This is entirely incorrect. We can find such arguments already in the 1860s and they were widely used by the early 1890s. It is clear that Adams lacks any knowledge of scholarship in women's and gender history on this issue.[4]

All in all, the claim at the end of the chapter that "it was the conservatism of Catholic societies" that delayed women's enfranchisement in Catholic countries (p. 308) seems rather arbitrary. The case of Austria is nonchalantly separated from the rest of the Catholic countries with the remark that it was "closely associated with Germany" (p. 308). And Adams's correct statement that the Catholic Party favored women's suffrage in Belgium in 1919 as opposed to the Liberals does not receive any further comment.

Just as the earlier surveys, this book raises questions about the usefulness of global overviews by lone authors trying to cover exhaustive accounts of the history of women's suffrage. At the present level of research this approach only seems to work for regional studies, such as Karen Offen's *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (2000) and Gisela Bock's study *Women in*

European History (2002)—an important book that Adams does not mention at all. As the collected volume on women's suffrage and citizenship in the countries belonging to the European Union, *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe: Voting to Become Citizens*, edited by Blanca Rodríguez-Ruiz and Ruth Rubio-Marín (2012), shows, a world history of women's suffrage needs a team of historians who agree on the questions they wish to answer. They should also be able to place the history of women's enfranchisement in the context of the history of suffrage and democratization in general. As we know, these contexts differ even today when we think about the immense variations in perceptions of democracy and individual political rights worldwide. Above all, this team needs a command of the relevant languages of the national histories it studies to be able to consider all relevant sources and to produce a truly useful and scholarly compendium on women's political rights and democratization.

Notes

- [1]. Richard J. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia 1840-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).
- [2]. John Markoff, "Margins, Centers, and Democracy: The Paradigmatic History of Women's Suffrage," *Signs* 29 (2003): 85-116.
- [3]. Birgitta Bader-Zaar, "Women in Austrian Politics, 1890-1934: Goals and Visions," in *Austrian Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. David Good, Margarete Grandner and Mary Jo Maynes (New York: Berghahn Books, 1996), 59-90.
- [4]. See, e.g., Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14 (1988): 119-157; and Carol Lee Bacchi, *Same Difference: Feminism and Sexual Difference* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

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