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Infighting on the Path to Equality: Women's Suffrage and the Black Rights Movement

Writing Process

This historiography paper was written for ASI 120. I began preparing for this project by reading Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction*. While reading, I became interested in the relationship between the women's suffrage movement and the black rights movement during Reconstruction. As I researched the topic further, I found that historians' opinions of the relationship between the two movements, especially concerning how the movements diverged, have changed dramatically over time. The division between the black suffrage movement and the women's rights movements has a continuing influence on the relationship between the movements today, giving the topics' continued relevance. First, I found a number of different sources from different time periods to determine the patterns of how historians viewed the subject. Next, I wrote an annotated bibliography summarizing each source and dividing them into categories based on the interpretation used within each source. This annotated bibliography was then used as the basis for my historiography paper.

The first draft was reviewed by my professor, Dr. Susan Trollinger, as well as the Write Place Consultants and my fellow Core students. My historiography was then edited to reflect the comments received and submitted to my professor. My final draft discusses the evolving view of the relationship between the black rights movement and the women's suffrage movement, the connections between different interpretations, and an analysis of which interpretation I found most accurate.

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Infighting on the Path to Equality: Women's Suffrage and the Black Rights Movement

Jessica Jenick

The fight for suffrage in the United States was a long and intensive process that came to a head during Reconstruction. The women's suffrage movement and the black suffrage movement were especially active after the Civil War, working together to establish voting rights. However, as time passed, the black rights movement made progress while the women's suffrage movement remained stagnant. Soon, the relationship between the groups weakened, with each fighting only for their own causes. Through different periods of study, historians have disagreed over what the relationship was between the two throughout Reconstruction, especially concerning how the groups' paths diverged. The divisions between the groups have continued to this day, affecting the current relationship between the women's and the black right's movement. Exploration of different interpretations has helped to explain the history of these influential movements, as well as affecting their current actions.

Most sources tend to support one of three interpretations. The first group believes that the black suffrage movement and the women's suffrage movement were connected because the relationship was mutually beneficial, and although the bond remained positive, it naturally eroded as blacks gained more rights. These sources tend to see race as a small issue in the history of the women's suffrage movement. The second group appeared slightly later and believes that the black suffrage movement abandoned the women's suffrage movement, betraying them to advance African American goals despite women's attempts to help both movements work as a united front. The third, more modern interpretation revises earlier arguments, uncovering the racism inherent within the women's suffrage

movement and discussing how the racial bias obscured the participation of blacks within the fight for women's suffrage. The following sources demonstrate these interpretations and help support the view that historical interpretations of the relationship between the black rights movement and the women's suffrage movement during Reconstruction have changed over time. Historians tend to see the relationship between the women's suffrage movement and the black rights movement as mutually beneficial but parting due to a natural split caused by the differing goals of the movements, as bitterly divided due to a betrayal of the women's suffrage movement by the black rights movement, or as close but damaged due to the racism of the women's suffrage movement. The most accurate depiction of the relationship is shown by the more modern interpretation regarding the racism of the women's rights movement, as it gives a comprehensive interpretation of the subject.

A Relationship of Convenience

Early historical studies of the relationship between the suffragettes and black rights activists, like that of Kirk H. Porter in *A History of Suffrage in the United States*, describe the women's and the black suffrage movements as linked mostly due to the shared inferior status of those fighting for the vote. Both African Americans and women were hopeful about the benefits of the Fourteenth Amendment. However, it was declared in *Minor v. Happerset* that voting was not a right of citizenship; therefore, the Reconstruction Amendments did not grant suffrage to anyone and instead merely opposed racial discrimination at the polls, meaning it could not be used to support women's suffrage.¹ Many suffragettes reiterated suffrage arguments of past generations, echoing the protests used by the blacks during their fight for the vote. However, Porter sees the separation from the black rights movement as having little effect on the women's suffrage movement. Instead, the biggest opponents of women's suffrage were the chauvinistic beliefs of men and male sentimentality for the traditional sphere of women.² This source belongs in this category because it showcases the comfortable relationship between the women's suffrage movement and the black rights movement, focusing on the shared tactics used by the two movements. Porter puts little focus on the division between the women's suffrage movement

¹ 194. Kirk H. Porter, *A History of Suffrage in the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1918, 1969), 194.

² *Ibid.*, 242.

and the black rights movement, arguing that the relationship was relatively unimportant to the history of the movements. The author regards the movements' friendship as casual, only existing while the two groups shared a common cause.

Betrayal by the Black Rights Movement

Other historians began to see that the division between the black rights movement and the women's suffrage movement was less peaceful than it originally appeared. These historians focused on the large role that the suffragettes played in the black suffrage movement. The sources in this category especially showcase the ways in which the black rights movement refused to support women's suffrage, as well as how this was detrimental to the women's cause. For instance, according to Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler in *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*, many suffragists claimed to support both women's and black suffrage but believed that the nation could only handle one reform at a time and that the African Americans were the priority. Many women's suffrage advocates agreed with this claim, so discussion of women's suffrage left the public sphere. The New York Constitutional Convention received many petitions for women's suffrage but only submitted a black suffrage amendment despite suffragettes arguing that although a majority of women may not want the vote, the proportion of women who wanted suffrage was higher than that of African Americans.³ In Kansas, the women had expected help from Republicans and abolitionists, but these groups refused to support women's rights and no amendment could be made. As the 15th amendment was being debated, a 16th amendment was proposed which would prevent discrimination based on gender at the polls, but this was largely ignored because black suffrage was the priority. Many women tried to claim that suffrage had been granted under the 14th and 15th amendment, but they were denied the right to vote. As the Republicans began to realize that Reconstruction had defied logic and accomplished little, they began to hate women's suffrage. This book discusses many instances of when the women's suffrage movement expected support from the black suffrage movement but were denied. Catt and Shuler also clearly show the detrimental effects of these refusals with the Republicans damaging the suffragettes' opportunities to gain recognition.

³ Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1926, 1969), 53

These sentiments are echoed by Ellen Carol DuBois in *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869*. The author explains that after slavery ended, abolitionists gained political power, which the women's suffrage movement assumed would help their cause. However, the abolitionists became more hesitant about supporting the women, as taking a stance might hurt the black rights movement. Although some women tried to make the women's and black suffrage movements equal, this drove abolitionists further from the women's rights movement, as they had expected the women to defer their demands until after the blacks had gained their rights for strategic reasons. The Radical Republicans suppressed petitions against the inclusion of "male" in the 14th amendment and antislavery leaders prevented the American Anti-Slavery Association from merging with the women's rights movement to fight for universal suffrage. This inspired the women to create the American Equal Rights Association, which originally promoted the image of the black woman, although after black men began to disagree with the suffragettes about the importance of women's suffrage, the image died out altogether. DuBois also explains that the Abolitionists saw that black men were being oppressed by society but blamed the women's lack of suffrage on female apathy. After the Kansas Campaign of 1867, the Republicans proved that they would not acknowledge feminists, so the women created an independent movement.⁴ The American Woman Suffrage Association had some support from the abolitionists and the Republicans, but this support accomplished very little, as the Republicans refused to openly support women's suffrage. This source clearly shows the abolitionists' refusal to acknowledge the women's suffrage movement as those fighting for black rights gained power, earning its place in this category. This is demonstrated throughout the numerous examples of instances when the women asked for Republican help but were refused. Like Catt and Schuler, DuBois puts a large emphasis on the political reasons for the lack of support. While the previous source looks at the issue from the perspective of the women involved with the suffrage movement, showing the women's attempts at gaining recognition, this text instead focused on the actions of the black rights activists.

Robert E. Riegel further demonstrates how the black suffrage abandoned the women and the consequences for the women's movement in "The Split of the

⁴ Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), 90.

Feminist Movement in 1869.” According to Riegel, it is difficult to know the true cause of the division of the women’s suffrage movement in 1869 because there are few statements from those involved; however, he argues that the main factor was the black rights movement. The suffragette leaders had formerly worked together well, especially as members of the abolition movement, and had wanted to connect their cause to that of the blacks, leading to the formation of the American Equal Rights Association. The male abolitionists, including prominent figures like Frederick Douglass, refused to support women’s suffrage, saying it was not the hour for women’s rights.⁵ After this, the American Equal Rights Association crumbled, and the women’s suffrage movement divided into the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). The NWSA suffered because it was willing to support extreme and tangential ideas instead of focusing merely on women’s suffrage. The two organizations were also divided on the 15th amendment, which the AWSA supported but the NWSA vehemently opposed. This article clearly states a belief that the male abolitionists refused to help the women’s suffrage movement and that the abandonment had drastic influences on the women’s suffrage movement. This article focuses less on the details of the relationship between abolitionists and suffragettes, as the previous articles did, and more on the effects of the relationship on the women’s suffrage movement. Riegel argues that the black activists’ refusal to support the suffragettes actively divided the women’s rights movement that, in turn, had lasting consequences for the movement.

Instead of looking at the consequences of the divide, *One Half the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage*, written by Anne Firor Scott and Andrew Mackay Scott, discusses the difficulty in getting people involved with the women’s suffrage movement and the fear of many politicians that the women’s suffrage movement was too radical to support. Many women joined the political sphere through the abolition movement. After the passing of the 13th amendment, which made slavery illegal, some abolitionists thought the fight for black rights was over, but others believed the movement would not be successful until freedmen could vote, a position supported by many women who saw it as a way to align the causes of black and women’s suffrage. The antislavery leadership refused to risk

⁵ Robert E. Riegel, “The Split of the Feminist Movement in 1869.” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49, no. 3 (1962): 485-496. *JSTOR*, 487.

black suffrage by supporting the unpopular fight for women's suffrage. The 14th and 15th amendments focus on male suffrage as few Republicans supported women's suffrage and those who did were worried about its effect on the cause of black suffrage.⁶ For a while, some women argued that they had already been enfranchised by the Reconstruction Amendments, but after the courts declared women citizens but not enfranchised, the movement began to focus on other avenues to equality which were ridiculed by many politicians for decades. This source describes the difficulty the women's suffrage movement faced trying to get support from the abolition movement and puts a large emphasis on the role of the Reconstruction amendments in the fight for women's suffrage, a claim supported by many sources in this category. However, unlike Riegel, this source claims the division of the women's suffrage movement was rooted in a disagreement over whether rights should be fought for on a national level or a state-by-state basis. Like other sources, the authors also argue that women's suffrage was seen as too radical for many politicians and that the Republicans believed that supporting the suffragettes would hurt the cause of African Americans.

Dissolution Due to Racial Bias

Many earlier historians saw the division between the black rights movement and advocates for women's suffrage as mainly due to the lack of support for the women from the black suffrage advocates. More recent historians have begun to discover the part played by the women's suffrage movement in the split between the two. These historians focus upon the ways in which the women's movement buried black support of their cause, as well as the racist actions of the women's suffrage movement that damaged relations with the black rights movement.

For instance, Valetia Watkins's article, "Votes for Women: Race, Gender, and W. E. B. DuBois's Advocacy of Woman Suffrage," focuses upon the place of African-Americans in the women's suffrage movement. For a number of years, some feminists and women's rights supporters claimed black men were opposed to female suffrage. However, since the 1990s, there has been an influx of uncovered evidence showing the power of black suffragists within the movement. Watkins explains that after the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment, a large part

⁶ Anne Firor Scott and Andrew Mackay Scott, *One Half the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1975, 1982), 16.

of the women's suffrage movement, including the NWSA, sought to separate the issues of female and black suffrage, a position opposed by many African-Americans, especially black women.⁷ This division was partly due to racism within the female suffrage movement, as many supporters were themselves racist, and for many years a dominant viewpoint was that black men hated the idea of women's suffrage. However, this discounts the fact that the majority of black men supported votes for women as well as universal suffrage. Despite this, many black men did fear white suffragists supporting racist policies through the suffrage movement, leading to women's suffrage becoming white women's suffrage. This source belongs in this category because it explains how racism has clouded historical interpretation of the relationship between the women's suffrage movement and the black rights movement and how that has changed over time. Watkins argues that the women's suffrage movement purposefully hid evidence of black participation in the movement to further their own agenda, damaging the perceived relationship between the black rights movement and the suffragettes.

Other historians have focused upon the direct attacks the women's suffrage movement made against the black rights movement as Faye E. Dudden does in *Fighting Chance: The Struggle Over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America*. Dudden explains that immediately after the war, the women's rights movement cooperated with the black rights movement because although discussions of suffrage rarely mentioned women, the women believed it was the hour of black suffrage. In her writings at the time, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was somewhat racially charged, and the women's movement considered supporting educated suffrage, which would limit both men and women, before deciding to fight for universal suffrage. The women's suffrage movement had black supporters, including Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, but the majority of these African Americans had higher priorities. Meanwhile, Wendell Phillips was insistent that women should not fight for suffrage until black men were guaranteed the vote. After the 15th amendment was focused solely on male rights, Stanton began to focus her arguments on degrading black men, even reinterpreting a failed attempt to combine black and female suffrage in Kansas as a victory of women over black men. Stanton also portrayed black men as sex offenders and stated that a government where black men could vote was worse

⁷ Valethia Watkins, "Votes for Women: Race, Gender, and W. E. B. DuBois's Advocacy of Woman Suffrage" *Phylon* 53, no. 2 (2016): 3-19. *JSTOR*, 7.

than a white man's government, while Susan B. Anthony once again supported educational qualifications for suffrage.⁸ According to Dudden, Stanton and Anthony should have realized that they could not win and should have instead supported black male suffrage, but they were bitter and continued opposing the 15th amendment and using racial slurs. Although black attitudes towards women's suffrage were complex, Stanton and Anthony focused on their opponents instead of their supporters, decreeing that the majority of black men were against women voting while the ideas of black women went mostly unrecorded. This source demonstrates the racist ideas used by the women's suffrage movement to further their own agenda, proving it belongs in this category. Dudden, like Watkins, mentions that the suffragettes overlooked the support they received from prominent African Americans. However, Dudden puts a larger emphasis on the direct attacks launched by the women at the black rights movement, especially the incredibly racist comments made by leaders of the suffragettes. These attacks may have gained prominence after the black rights movement refused to support the suffragettes, but they were not caused by the betrayal.

Other historians, like Catherine A. Jones, focus on how a white supremacist attitude was used by the women's suffrage movement to gain support for their policies and that this attitude was not merely an act to appeal to those in power. Jones explains throughout "Women, Gender, and the Boundaries of Reconstruction" that Reconstruction and the abolition of slavery led to an increase in women's power in America. The women's rights movement during Reconstruction focused on many different issues and did make some advancements, but narratives tend to focus on the struggle for women's suffrage. Some historians see the women's suffrage movement's appeals to white supremacy as partially caused by the Republicans abandoning the movement. Other historians believe that the movement was racially charged from the beginning, as can be seen by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's belief in educated suffrage.⁹ Appeals to white supremacy were not merely the means to an end. In fact, they became increasingly important to the movement as time passed. As time passes, more studies have shown that white women's racist

⁸ Faye E. Dudden, *Fighting Chance: The Struggle Over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 169.

⁹ Catherine A. Jones, "Women, Gender, and the Boundaries of Reconstruction" *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 1 (2018): 111-131. *OhioLINK EJC*, 119.

activism was an important part of the women's suffrage movement's connection to American politics. This source demonstrates the racial bias found within the women's suffrage movement and how this racism was an integral part of it. The author argues that white supremacism was an integral part of the fight for women's rights. Like Dudden, Jones refers to the loss of support from the black rights movement as a catalyst for widespread white supremacist appeals for women's suffrage, as well as focusing on the racist tendencies of the suffragette leaders. However, unlike other historians in this group, Jones does not mention the part played by African Americans in the women's suffrage movement. The author instead focuses upon the philosophy of the suffragettes themselves.

Conclusion

The most accurate interpretation was determined to be that which showed the most well-informed, comprehensive viewpoint. The interpretation which best represents a comprehensive view of the relationship between the women's suffrage movement and the black rights movement is that of the third group that was discussed. The first interpretation did not give an in-depth view of the relationship between the movements. All other sources acknowledge that there was at least some tension between the women's suffrage movement and the black rights movement, and that this friction had a lasting impact. Therefore, dismissing the relationship as mutually beneficial without having a large effect does not tell the full story. The second interpretation is very biased in favor of the women's suffrage movement. The historians in this category tend to place the blame for the division between the movements solely on the side of the black rights advocates. It portrays the women's movement as victims, without demonstrating how the women's movement played a part in the dissolution of the relationship. This disregard of the actions of the women's suffrage movement shows an incomplete view of the relationship between the black rights advocates and the suffragettes. The final interpretation tells a more complete story of the relationship between the suffragettes and the black rights movement. The faults of both sides are shown, and the blame is shared between them. The sources in this category are well-informed on both sides of the issue. The black rights movement may have abandoned the women's suffrage movement, but the women also covered up the support they did receive from African Americans and made use of racist ideas to further their agenda. This comprehensive view is the most accurate interpretation and helps to explain the tensions still present between the women's rights

movement and the black rights movement, who are still fighting for equality today. Advocates for equality still disagree about whether women's rights and black right's groups are fighting for different goals, and there are many people who are of the opinion that the movement that they support is more important than other groups fighting for equality. The divides between those fighting for equality can clearly be traced back to the broken relationship between the movements that occurred during Reconstruction.

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