Suffragists and Consumerism: The Success of the New Woman in 1920s Europe
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The early twentieth century brought about an unprecedented shift in every aspect of European societies unlike anything previously experienced. The Second Industrial Revolution, having already ushered in big cities with booming economies, began to influence not only industry, but politics and cultural trends as well. The First World War shocked the globe and produced an extraordinary psychological effect on Europe particularly. Riding on the coattails of this revolutionary era came an increasingly large push for the change of women’s roles in society. Bolstered by increased responsibilities of wartime, suffragists pursued political acknowledgement with increased vigor, further driving a deep divide between pro and anti-suffragist groups, and found much of their political momentum spent after the armistice. However, another large trend of women’s emancipation grew out of the war and carried a radically different stigma. The New Woman that emerged in Europe following the First World War became not only a popular icon, but a catalyst of social change and a manipulator of consumerism whose popularity and influence the suffragists could not match.

The new ideas circulating about women did not appear as a spontaneous result of World War One; even before the Great War, ideas about women in Europe at the turn of the century were transforming. Before women took to the streets with pickets or shortened hemlines, they expressed themselves through the Victorian literature of the nineteenth century. Highly controversial at the time, women novelists like Kate Chopin, Charlotte Bronte, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman made literature “a mode of activism... that enabled them to proffer critique about marriage and society,” during a time in which women had few other venues to express
themselves. Stories about liberation, the constraint of marriage and the frustration women felt being trapped at home without their own place in society were read by women across the globe, and complemented the modern ideals and social changes that appeared at the turn of the century.

The early 1900s marked the dwindling popularity of the Victorian Era, a time period known for tight corsets, elaborate up-dos and a generation that expected quiet and subservient women. Contributing to the end of Victorian styles was the Second Industrial Revolution. Modern cities including London and Paris became the prized examples of a nation, both boasting booming industries and a wealthy middle class. An ever increasing number of women joined the workforce in search of fiscal independence and found their “proper” garments bulky and difficult to work in. New types of communication like the telegraph and telephone also provided women with thousands of new jobs in addition to the rising female population in clerical occupations. The invention of the bicycle also gave women the freedom of mobility and provided them with another reason to find a more practical style. The factories, however, did not supply women with their only escape from traditional occupations.

Many women benefitted from the increase in options available within higher education that appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century. College, once deemed as a useless pursuit, sometimes even harmful for women, gained increasingly popularity throughout Europe. The advent of sex-neutral primary and secondary schools also gave young girls an opportunity to forgo needle work and home economics and become exposed to what their male counterparts were learning. Girls’ ability to “profit from the instruction at least as much as boys” only helped

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1 Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, "A Little Afraid of the Women of Today": The Victorian New Woman and the Rhetoric of British Modernism, 229.

2 Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, "A Little Afraid of the Women of Today": The Victorian New Woman and the Rhetoric of British Modernism, 230.

debunk the oppressive myth of men and women’s intellectual inequality. Institutions were also created to give women an education beyond grade school, with the *Queen’s College* in Britain being founded in 1848, the first of its kind. Throughout the next half-century, many male colleges began admitting women, and although their female counterparts enjoyed far fewer academic privileges, acceptance of education showed society’s—and women’s especially—growing recognition of women as a legitimate political and intellectual force in Europe.\(^4\)

The turn of the century brought many suffrage movements in Europe to their climax. Across the continent, large scale demonstrations and protests cropped up as women of many nationalities fought for representation in their governments. This quest for universal suffrage, however, proved to be a polarizing cause within the suffragist body. A rigid separation in the group quickly appeared when justification for a women’s vote was purposed. All women called for equality, but many “did not mean ‘sameness’ but rather equal treatment of women’s difference” in the workforce and home.\(^6\) One group insisted on using any gained political power to enact bills and laws to improve their lives at home. Reform, child labor, and world peace dominated the platforms for women who claimed to have “women’s interests” in mind.

A major supporter of the more conservative political trend was Ellen Key, a prominent Swedish feminist who in 1914 criticized the modern women’s belief “that every new effort to make woman’s motherliness a determining factor of her nature or her calling is a return to antiquated superstition”.\(^7\) She insisted a woman’s political quest should be used to increase her functionality and success as a mother, and not as an individual within society. The sanctity of Motherhood, not political and intellectual freedom, according to Key, was what women were put

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\(^4\) Lisa Dicaprio and Merry E. Wiesner, *Lives and Voices*, 386.


on Earth to uphold. The French Union for Women’s suffrage in 1913 published a set of arguments for women’s suffrage in which they decreed that all women wanted the abolition of alcohol, health and warfare laws, regulation of child labor, laws against prostitution and the prevention of wars. Some suffragist’s assumption of the “moral pillar” stereotype was widely criticized by women as a step backwards politically.

Serving as a polar opposite to Key’s vision of women’s suffrage was the assembly who insisted their political voice would be used to establish equality, on every level, between men and women. The task of determining what problems were really “women’s issues” split the suffragist movement in half as a result of “women politicians [who] displayed a mixed attitude towards women’s specific needs” which weakened it against stubborn and unmoving political systems. Women with a more liberal influence insisted “a regime that oppresses the women shows contempt for the people and at the same time who are responsible for the future” and demanded the right to vote as a validation in the public eye of women’s equality with men on every level. These women believed gaining suffrage was an obvious right to women simply for the fact they viewed women to be just as important, if not more, in society as their male counterparts. This divide within the suffragist cause led to disorganization for the whole party, and left many women frustrated with their cause.

The New Woman owes her origins to the First World War; this shocking event is often blamed as the catalyst for the modern fashion, haircuts, and gender roles that arose immediately after the Armistice. When men departed for the frontlines, they left behind hundreds of thousands of new jobs available for women. Instead of the typical domestic industries of thread

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8 Ibid, 81.
9 Helen Jones, Women in British Public Life, 7.
10 Eleanor S. Riemer and John C. Fout, European Women A Documentary History, 1789-1945, 113.
mills and textiles, women were able to work in “true” industrial factories, producing everything from bullets to tanks. In Britain, women made up over half the workforce by the end of the war.\footnote{11} These factory jobs allowed for even less oppressive clothing and women began to cut away yards of fabric in favor of a more simplistic style. The New Woman’s fashion not only shocked but enraged many conservative citizens and men who came back from the battle fields in the late nineteen-teens. This shift in fashion proved to be the physical representation of the social change that permeated European culture, a change that did not come easy to many, men and women alike.

An illustration from London’s Cassell’s Saturday Journal in 1918 satirizes the radical change WWI had on fashion and society’s view of women.  \url{http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com}

The war left Europe in a state of disillusionment; calling to question every accepted aspect of pre-war life, marking “the beginning of the end for the liberal values and the old hierarchies of nineteenth-century Europe” that still clung to antiquated systems and ideals.\footnote{12} The

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\textit{—From Cassell's Saturday Journal, London.}

\footnote{11} Deborah Thom, Women Workers; pg 34
\footnote{12} Jennifer Birkett and Elizabeth Harvey, Determined Women Studies, 69.
“age of revolution” did not extend only to political systems—it was a time of revolution for women, a time to remake themselves in rebuilding societies. This opportunity for women was not seen as a positive event, however, to many men trying to reacclimatize themselves to a radically different postwar Europe. Women, freed by the war, caused many men to feel emasculated and “[r]estoring relations between men and women, grappling with women’s new public visibility…were seen as fundamental to the restoration of order” in society.\(^{13}\) What the men who tried to reestablish the prewar standards of gender roles did not understand was women were not interested in restoring the perceived “order” of a patriarchal system.

The First World War also saw the conclusion of many suffragist battles, with over twenty Western and Eastern European countries granting the right to vote between 1914 and 1920. The Great War allowed a chance for women in Europe to prove how essential they were to their countries. Women showed the world they were much more than a moral pillar in society, on the contrary women proved to be better-equipped than men in handling the crisis of a world war. Taking over every aspect in society during the war time, women worked endless hours assembling war equipment, managing bills, teaching in schools; in fact most suffragists put down, or in some cases were forced to put down, their pickets and banners to take up the war effort so tirelessly that it seems one of the only reasons they gained suffrage was a product of the apparent debt war-torn countries felt towards the women who kept society afloat. However, suffrage did not necessarily entail full political rights and privileges, and not all women believed in universal suffrage. Throughout Europe, the political rights women gained as a product of the First World War slowly were phased out, and the organizations whose relations with state governments changed, but “because this change was war-related it did not survive the

\(^{13}\) Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur, *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, 48.
Armistice”. The privileges bestowed to women during and directly after the war were seen as temporary measures to many politicians. To many, the powers women assumed were a necessary, albeit short-term, response to the lack of men during the First World War. The success or failure of suffrage movements was greatly determined by the country in which they began.

In Britain, the anti-suffragist movement held equally deep roots as the suffragist platform itself. Suffrage became considered a national movement by the mid 1870s with the founding of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage; anti-suffragists immediately counteracted, with men and women both supporting the 1889 Appeal Against Women’s Suffrage. The Mud March in 1907—a suffragist march through London—was widely publicized; the next year saw a large counter movement in 1908, when maternal reformists adopted a “forward policy”. These anti-suffragists believed in creating a society in which women could become equal citizens while still respecting the different gender spheres men and women occupied. With a decisive split within the country over the issue of women’s political rights, it is no surprise suffragists found their eventual success in the 1918 decision of partial suffrage bitter-sweet:

Only women over 30 could vote, and not all fulfilled the necessary qualifications, while some electoral registration officers obstructed even entitled women. The ‘flapper vote’ granting the franchise on the same terms of men was only finally achieved in 1928, following a decade of continued agitation. The opportunities opened up for women by the war were largely closed down...

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16 Ibid, 23.
media excoriated women both for holding onto jobs, and ‘idling on the dole’.  

The long fight between supporters and dissidents of the female vote left many British citizens wary of the suffragist cause, and resistant to radical political change. Because women themselves could not agree on women’s rights, the suffragist movement was greatly inhibited.

Britain was not the only country to draw out the issue of women’s rights; the constitution of Weimar Germany in 1919 added women as legitimate political partners and office holders, only for the same women to be fired from their jobs the moment Hitler seized power in 1933. The German suffragist movement, started in 1865 with the foundation of the German Women’s Association, saw many victories within the German education system, but faced difficulties getting middle class and working women to support the suffragist cause. The insurmountable reparations placed on Germany after WWI also undermined any items on the women’s rights agenda in the newly formed Weimar Republic. The article itself in the Weimar Constitution gave women only "as a matter of principle the equal rights and duties of citizenship"—a concession which became easily interpreted in the favor of anti-suffragist lawmakers. The strains on Germany’s economy blocked success for suffragists, whose issues garnered little sympathy as the country slipped deeper into debt.

Perhaps most surprising is the suffrage movement in France at the turn of the century. Home to Mary Wollstonecraft, writer of A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) and one of the first prominent feminist figures in the modern age, French women did not gain suffrage until the conclusion of WWII in October 1945. 1914 brought the most promising year of the French

17 Lesley A. Hall, Sex, Gender and Social change in Britain Since 1880, 100.
18 Eleanor S. Riemer and John C. Fout, European Women, A Documentary History 1789-1945, 112.
campaign, with major rallies and a country-wide ballot revealing 505,912 women supported the suffragist cause. However, the hopes of suffragists endured a significant setback when a war-torn France began experiencing serious internal turmoil. Although World War One brought many opportunities for suffragists, political instability undermined many movements across the continent. The feminist roots in the suffragist movement were, by 1925, reaching an “awkward age” in which many women felt daunted by the lack of progress politically. European countries became focused on rebuilding their cities and economies and many progressive issues reaching a peak before the outbreak of the war no longer enjoyed widespread support.

The femme moderne held an advantage in European society that suffragists did not—they were on billboards, movie screens and envied by most young girls and women. While negative press all but destroyed the suffragist’s image, the face of the New Woman was seen everywhere and most notably appeared in fashion ads and magazines. Young girls during this time grew up “in a new climate in which alternatives to conventional feminine patterns of behavior were opening up as real possibilities”, resulting in many bobbing their hair to imitate their favorite

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movie stars, enacting social change through their physical image.\textsuperscript{22} Coming out of the oppressive Victorian Era, many women chose to bob their long hair as rebellion against traditional gender ideals. Their rejection of corsets and dropped-waist dresses also contributed to a more masculine image, instead of the once curvy figure made popular by Charles Dana Gibson and his Gibson Girls. This rejection sent shock waves through Europe and was popularized by women for the same reason it was denounced by dissidents. The New Woman sought to win equality not by pickets and political decrees, but through fashion and consumerism.

The increased popularity of the modern woman’s fashion is typically attributed to a young French woman who had a flair for daring design—Coco Chanel. Her style of clothing not only represented her independence and competence as an intelligent and driven woman, but an entire generation’s yearning for something new. Chanel was “the first nationally and internationally known female couturier” and her clothing was imitated not only throughout Europe, but America and other countries around the world almost as soon as it hit the Paris runways in the mid nineteen twenties.\textsuperscript{23} Her fashions quickly became mass produced and allowed women from all walks of life, from the factories to the farm houses, to break free of outdated ideas about what women should wear. Consequently, fashion also became one of the most popular topics to criticize during the 1920s, but these critics did not seem to have any impact on the youth of the post war generation who was concerned with the latest trends and not political woes of an antiquated era.

Fashion’s impact was severe on gender roles in post World War One Europe. Women not only shed oppressive styles, but adopted the masculine fashion of pants. The shift in style

\textsuperscript{22} Jennifer Birkett and Elizabeth Harvey, \textit{Determined Women Studies}, 4.

\textsuperscript{23} Mary Louise Roberts, \textit{Civilization Without Sexes}, 67.
psychologically affected men and women in society, which made a pair of pants represent much more than a fashion trend. The fears of post-war Europe were personified by a generation of young women working and living in their popularized fashions—representing a shift in women’s ideals that frightened many. These new fashions were viewed “as a visual language of liberation” which quickly became associated with a highly political and cultural meaning. The surge of women coming into the workplace served as validation for the new and practical styles, but fashion allowed women who wanted to be “more self aware, creative perhaps, and wanted to construct themselves as autonomous agents” to do so through flamboyant prints, flashy jewelry and a carefully placed hat. For the first time, fashionable clothes were functional, inexpensive and easily used to express a woman’s personality. What the suffragists sought to gain through politics the New Woman managed to obtain with a dropped waist and scandalously short hem—society’s acceptance as an individual, as a force that could not be defeated by a political vote. However, clothing proved not to be the only venue in which women could shock the world.

A magazine ad from 1927 shows the latest styles of Peck and Peck, a prominent designer in New York. These fashions closely follow those popularized by Coco Chanel. http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/

24 Ibid, 66
25 Angela Kershaw and Angela Kimyongur, Women in Europe Between the Wars, 15.
An obsession that was widespread among both American and European women during this time period was the bobbing of their long Victorian-style locks and should be looked at closely. Oftentimes there was no greater sin to conservative families and societies than for a woman to cut her hair. In one severe case, a father actually swore to lock up his fourteen-year-old daughter for getting the popular hairstyle.\textsuperscript{26} In Germany, the boyish hair length was “the subject of such passionate arguments that it seemed as though the success or demise of [its] culture depended on hair length.”\textsuperscript{27} What caused such a negative response even when compared to reactions of women’s sexual impurity and scandalous drinking habits? The bobbed hair of the New Woman represented, to both herself and her critics, the death of every value society once held dear. While pants and dropped waists were also masculine, they were seemingly impermanent; clothes can easily be discarded. Hair, however, has been held sacred for hundreds of years, often representing women’s purity and most importantly—their femininity. The severing of long locks sent a message to society that women also cut ties with the chaste and moral image which suppressed them for centuries. The New Woman became such a strong figure in popular culture that her fashion was seen everywhere in post-war Europe and was popularized by the media especially.

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid, 63.
\textsuperscript{27}Irene Guenther, \textit{Nazi Chic?}, 71.
Both suffragists and the new woman received heavy criticism for their departure from traditional gender roles; suffragists in political activism, and new women in dress and attitude. Ignoring their intended radical actions, the war itself “reaffirmed cultural constructions of masculine warriors and feminine non-combatants, which polarized gender relations” making these women societal enemies without an effort.28 With the majority of the issues these women rebelled against arising long before America entered World War One in 1917, by continuing to pursue them after the Armistice they alienated the majority of the male public. Further threatening the male population were the new masculine styles that resulted, ironically, as the result of the war. Masculine clothing—overalls and pants especially—implied an attempted

equality with men and sexual promiscuity. Although both suffragists and flappers infuriated critics with their masculine garb, the latter personified society’s worst fear. The new woman rejected femininity while simultaneously embracing what they believed to be a woman’s right to experience sexual promiscuity. The two groups of women, although diverging greatly in political ideology, embraced their equality with men; the only difference was the venue they chose to express themselves in: for one it was politics, for the other it was the bedroom.

The popular media in Europe is a large factor in the divergence of suffragists and new women and their lasting impact on society. While suffragists were oftentimes mocked in cartoons and journals, the "femme moderne" became revered by many postwar writers as “central to the cultural mythology of the era, instilling at once envy, admiration, frustration, and horror” because not only did they symbolize the modern representation of a shift in gender roles, but “a visual language for upheaval and change” in all European countries. Although there was a backlash against the modern woman, especially her style, criticism did not stop the mass marketing of her image, as opposed to the suffragists whose political advancement hinged on the ideas and opinions of others. The suffragist’s goals and situation, although highly respectable, simply carried a negative stigma of the time, limiting those women’s effectiveness and social influence. The media precipitated cynical views of suffragists and the lack of support for women’s politics while at the same time creating an environment in which the New Woman flourished. Newspapers, film and popular radio shows relied on the "femme moderne" to draw in interest; consequentially the symbol of the New Woman became entangled with the media, guaranteeing her image to permeate not only the stores but the homes of the European people.

29 Ibid, 7.
30 Mary Louise Roberts, Civilization Without Sexes, 87.
America’s influence was indisputable on post-war Europe in many ways; fashion, society, politics and popular media all drew heavily from the only Ally to survive the war almost unscathed. Young women who admired the United States, which “represented modernism in its most heightened form” with its dance clubs, booming industries and mass marketed fashions looked to the prosperous country for all types of inspiration. The country not only inspired European suffragists who had not yet achieved the same success as the 19th amendment, but also the fashion designers and playwrights. America’s booming film industry provided a large export of American fashions and media, which was quickly absorbed in the rebuilding countries of Europe. The image of the New Woman especially was admired throughout the world on the silver screen, made popular by many famous actresses of the time. America was the most popular symbol of Western ideals, whose “gender patterns (including the implications of women’s consumerism) were seen as liberating” to all women around the world who sought the political freedom which seemed widely available in the United States. European women latched onto their western counterparts as an effort to ignore the fragmented economies and societies of their home countries.

The lasting impact of the New Woman can be seen long after the masculine fashion of dropped waists and bobbed hair went out of style in the late nineteen twenties. The popularization of pants during the era never dissipated, and neither did the trends of wearing makeup, driving cars or working and schooling alongside men. While many things the femme moderne added to society have been criticized as only furthering women’s oppression by new standards of beauty, these women pushed gender boundaries so far it was impossible for even the most conservative period in post WWII Europe to contract back to pre WWI ideals. These

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31 Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?*, 70.
32 Peter N. Stearns, *Gender in World History*, 110.
modernized women did something the suffragists could not do—they pervaded popular culture. Their influential fashion fundamentally changed the way people thought about women, an act no amount of picketing was able to equal. Their close ties with the booming consumer market only increased their affect on society and popularity within the media of the day. Bobbed hair and the traditionally-male style of pants gave women the physical representation of equality, something that could not be revoked by flighty conservative governments. The New Woman became the post war period’s human emblem, a physical embodiment of the dissatisfaction with the antiquated status quo.33 In France, the most war torn country in Europe, the femme moderne became a “privileged symbol of change”; she represented the loss of everything familiar and the dawn of a new age.34

Suffragists are synonymous with the World War One time period, and although many European countries passed women’s suffrage laws before 1930, their success is a source of debate. Because many achievements these women made were easily reversed when a more conservative government came into power, it remains to be seen if the movement deserves the credit it gets for liberating women from a male-dominated world. The modern woman, however, that emerged out of the tattered society of World War One made a deep impact on people’s views of gender. With her bobbed hair and scandalous fashion, the femme moderne in one fail swoop expressed the disillusionment of a generation and centuries worth of feminine oppression, making a lasting impression not only on fashion, sexuality, and self-expression, but how society viewed a modern woman.

33 Irene Guenther, Nazi Chic?, 67.
34 Mary Louise Roberts, Civilization Without Sexes, 41.
Bibliography


