

Mother Jones and Suffrage

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My snippet is taken from the autobiography of Mother Jones. It concerns the problem of why Mother Jones did not support the suffrage movement and whether she was an ^{exception} exemption among women in this regard. To investigate this problem, I have employed various strategies and attempted to discover where people stood on the question of the enfranchisement of women and why they held such beliefs. I will present the diary of my research within the discussion of the problem, providing insights into the life and work of Mother Jones and her relationship to the suffrage movement. I will first provide a brief discussion of her life and follow this by relating the suffrage and anti-suffrage movement² as it deals with ~~to~~ her.

Her Autobiography seemed to be the most logical place to commence my research into the life of Mary Harris Jones. However, this source is problematic and sometimes provides an unreliable account of her life. For example, there is a conflict concerning her date of birth (one historian records it as 1948 while she claimed it to be 1930)¹ This one-sided view can also be extremely important as a way to gain some type of psychological insight into the author's beliefs and views of the world. For my purposes, I was interested in trying to discover what type of early life Jones experienced and whether it may have influenced her beliefs ^{about} towards suffrage. Although the autobiography begins with her marriage at the age of 31, I believe it gives us some extremely relevant information. In the first years of her marriage to an active union organizer, there was an outbreak of yellow fever. Although she was not ^{afflicted} inflicted with the disease, she lost her children and her husband to it. She describes how she tried to help the masses of poor and ^{dying} dying around her, while the rich fled to the countryside for refuge². I believe this gives two insights into how

¹Fred Thompson, "Introduction" in The Autobiography of Mother Jones, (Chicago 1972) p. iii.

²Mary Harris Jones, The Autobiography of Mother Jones, (Chicago, 1972) pp.12-13.

→ she would have
re-married

she chose to live her life and why she may have formed her opinions ^{of} towards suffrage. Firstly, she recognizes and comments on the class distinction^s and how the rich are too preoccupied to care for the poor (most of the suffrage movement was directed by upper class women). Secondly, without a family she needed to feel a sense of mothering and ^{this} realized in the importance and the women's place in the raising of children.] ^{meaning?}

The autobiography proceeds to recount her various successes and failures as she pursued her work in the trade unions. It is at this point that it is important for the historian to draw on a variety of view points in order to try and find out what kind of a person she was. From the style and tone of her book, it is possible to conclude that she is very confident and steadfast in her opinions about people and the world. But what did the world think of her? I began this search by viewing back issues of a current-day periodical entitled Mother Jones. Although this publication has few direct reference to its namesake, it does allow me to get a general idea of how this woman is viewed today. The thrust of the magazine deals with ~~an~~ attack^s on big business and the theme of David and Goliath (such as an attack on the tobacco industry). It is also a patriotically American, but not a feminist or female leaning publication³. These are all themes which Mother Jones believed in. This general and distant reflection was useful but I needed some primary source material. At first, I thought to search old editions of the New York Times published during the Colorado strike in which she was very prominent. However, this was not fruitful. I then found out the date of her death and looked at the following day's paper. Success! The obituary appeared in December 1, 1930. It gave a concise and eloquent report of her life (including the yellow fever affair) and gave me a tremendous amount of insight into this woman's life and what the

³Mother Jones (New York, 1995-1996)

newspaper viewed as the most important aspects of it. The paper described her as “a mother” to the miners and their families. It was also the first time that her beliefs of class conflict towards the upper classes and capitalism were revealed to me.⁴ From here, my logical step was to see what it was that she did for the miner’s and their families and how these people looked on Mother Jones. A search into coal in America produced an excellent book covering the history of the industry. The book, as ^{was} Mother Jones, is sympathetic to the working and living conditions of the miners. Published in the last ten years, it offers an in-depth account, and more primary source material concerning Mother Jones. A union organizer described his first impression of her. “She came into the mine one day and talked to us in our workplace in the vernacular of the mines. How she got in I don’t know; probably just walked in and defied anyone to stop her.”⁵ Her forceful attitude and ability to relate to the mining community are demonstrated here. Her special interest in this community was to help the wives and children to live in more comfort. This is a very important point for this paper because it shows her interest in the well-being and advancement of all people, especially women.

She often used women in the front lines of her marches and was instrumental in inspiring them to rise up for their cause.⁶ I would have liked to have done more research into the marches and methods of protest, as well as looking at what the main slogans and placards were which Mother Jones and her supporters carried. Such an investigation may have allowed me to grasp what Mother Jones viewed to be her main ideas and messages to the women and the American

⁴New York Times December 1, 1930. p. 21.

⁵John Brophy quoted by Priscila Long in Where the Sun never Shines, (New York, 1989) pp. 154.

⁶Long Where the Sun Never Shines, p. 284.

Mother Jones was a Wobbly, a member of the
IWW

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public. Were the messages an attack on the upper class, or a cry for help and compassion from the middle class? These are issues which might help to define her views on suffrage. Her protests fought against the suppression of the working class and, in the Colorado strike of 1913, specifically against the powerful ^{forces of} John Rockefeller jr. In her autobiography, she describes him as a nice man, but "...he could not possibly understand the aspirations of the working class."⁷ Did she view all of the upper class this way, or ^{in part} only the owners of big mining companies? Was this a sentiment which added fuel to her disbelief in the suffrage movement? In order to answer these questions an historian would need to locate numerous writings or speeches by her concerning this subject (an activity which I did not have time to do). However, I will provide an agreeably small number of sources which will attempt to prove this conflict with the upper classes. I will discuss this theme in more detail when discussing suffrage and anti-suffrage.

I was interested to try and find out how Rockefeller viewed her and what she represented to him. I endeavoured to do so, but did not find anything of use. I did, however, discover, through her obituary, that she and Rockefeller had enjoyed a friendship, which weakens any theory that she had an out right hatred towards the upper class.⁸ However, it is without a doubt that Mother Jones certainly respected and viewed the lower classes as her class. This is demonstrated by the way the strikers cheered for her when she was arrested. The response of the wives of the miners to this situation was to hold a protest march. I am confident that with more time and access to oral history reports of miners, and their wives, or diaries on this subject, more information regarding the support for Mother Jones would be more concrete. Jones herself is very specific on

⁷Jones, Autobiography p. 202.

⁸New York Times, Dec. 1, 1930. p. 21.

this subject when she states in her autobiography; "I am not an anti to anything which will bring freedom to my class"⁹ That is to say that if women gained the vote it would not necessarily help her class- the working class.

The life work of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones entailed a tireless and continuing pledge to serve the needs of the working class across the United States. She did not hide from any confrontation where she believed in her actions. She was arrested several times and always did so with dignity and without a call to violence. She was indeed a great figure (man or woman), and she was certainly a progressive thinker. With all this in mind, why was it that she did not support the suffragettes in their plight to bring America into the future? Why did she not combine her efforts to advance the situation of the women in the mining camps with those of the suffragettes? In order to give a clear response to these questions I first had to research the suffrage and anti-suffrage movements. [And then try and decide where Mother Jones may have placed her self in these two groups and where these groups placed her.] I set out to achieve this by searching for general writings on the subject. I will first discuss the suffrage movement followed by an investigation into the antis. I will then conclude with how Mother Jones relates to them and suggest why she held her beliefs. *fragment.*

The most interesting source on the history of Suffrage I found was written by Carrie Chapman Catt who led International Women Suffrage Alliance From 1904¹⁰. I discovered this source while looking at the massive History of Women Suffrage V. 6 1900-1920. Catt's book must be looked at and used carefully due to her personal attachment to the subject which she is

⁹Jones, Autobiography p. 203.

¹⁰Ida Harper, History of Woman Suffrage v.6 (New York 1969) from picture on unnumbered page inside front cover.

writing about. It is not a primary source but rather a researched and documented account of the history of the movement in the United States from its beginnings. For example, she states that the liquor companies and well-to-do women and men were the only groups opposed to suffrage (thus, excluding people like Mother Jones).¹¹ However, it provides us with a summary of the may ideas and motives behind the movement. Catt states that women possess a will to break away from the “control of freedom of thought, speech and action”¹² It was believed that with the vote this independence would be achieved. Access to suffrage banners and propaganda posters, which were produced in a great quantity would have been extremely useful to further this investigation of the main ideas.

Catt also describes the members of the movement as being from “organizations ...churches...educational institutions...”¹³ Another source, also written by a pro-suffragette, says that the supporters could use the vote in their daily lives in “...club life...religious, philanthropic, educational and civic work...”¹⁴ Both these sources show clearly that this movement was the domain of the wealthy and these authors did not hide this fact. These women wanted to exercise their independence and they believed that the vote would give them this much ability. However, the suffragettes faced opposition. Some organized and others not ^{did}.

A general source in the area of the ^{anti} movement is Women Against Women which in fact deals with men and women against suffrage. This source provides an outline of the five

¹¹Carrie Chapman Catt, Woman Suffrage and Politics, (Seattle 1969) p. 271.

¹²Ibid, p. 175.

¹³Ibid, p. 175.

¹⁴Harper, History of Suffrage, p. iv.

major themes of the Anti movement. Firstly, the antis believed that women had a special and designated role in the family which would be infringed upon by allowing them the vote¹⁵. Second, they believed that if given the vote, women would loose their special power to mold the citizens of the future and morally influence the political beliefs of men.¹⁶ Third, a medical arguments stated that women would not be able to “live as men do” because they could not deal with the stress of the environment¹⁷ (such as a ballot box, I suppose). Fourth, the “separate, not equal” argument propertied that enfranchising women would mean breaking the “line” of naturally designated tasks on the basis of sex.¹⁸ Lastly, the antis feared that suffrage would lead to an “imitation” of men.¹⁹

These five points provide a background of what the antis believed. I was desperate to find some literature of these women and compare it to what Mother Jones was saying. I was unsure of how to go about this until I was lucky enough to stumble upon two pieces in a New York Times edition (I found it by accident when I was looking at the papers during the Colorado strike. My eyes were drained from staring at the microfilm when I nearly shouted for joy at this small but valuable article-it was rather exciting). These were both reports about anti-suffrage women. The first one was an account of a speech ~~night~~ at which Miss Alice Chittenden (a president of a state

¹⁵Jane Jerome Camhi, Woman Against Woman, (Brooklyn 1994) p. 6.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 28.

anti-suffrage group) spoke about getting women out of the industries and into the home.²⁰ There was also an account about a woman who had been left money in a will with the order to “Defend the historic position of her sex in our scheme of government”²¹. Both these sources help to summarize the predominate themes of the antis. They concentrate on the idea that the women is a mother figure and nurturer and not meant to become involved in the governmental system of the country. It would have been useful to take time to research a larger number of newspaper reports about suffrage and the antis and compare how each faction was depicted in the media and what the major arguments were. With this information I would be more able to present concrete data on the momentum of each movement and their respective support.

Catt also provides a complete but subjective report of the anti movement. The most useful document she cites is an advertisement sponsored by the liquor companies. This clearly shows what the antis wanted the general public to believe [Such as a wish for women to be free from political concerns]²² The second important point which can be taken from this book (and especially concerning Mother Jones) is that Catt describes the anti movement by saying, “Its members were mainly well-to-do and carefully protected”.²³ She makes no mention of Mother Jones or her movement with working class women.

I have outlined the basic principles of the two opposing views of suffrage. I will now discuss where Mother Jones may have placed her self amongst them and why. In order to achieve

²⁰New York Times, September 26, 1913. p. 4.

²¹Ibid., p. 10.

²² “An Appeal To Men” from Catt Suffrage and Politics, p. 275

²³Catt Suffrage and Politics, p. 271.

this a I will use previously discussed sources with an emphasis on the writings or ideas of Jones herself.

Was she an anti or not? To answer this, I will return to the idea of Jones as someone with a psychological motivation to emphasize the importance of the woman's role in the family. This concept is the basis for her motivation in opposing suffrage and may have been caused by the loss of her family to the yellow fever. In this way she is very similar to the organized suffrage movement. She once stated that "their [suffragettes or politically active women] sad neglect of motherhood...[led to]...juvenile delinquency".²⁴ However, the similarities with the antis ended here. Mother Jones was not wealthy (as the anti-suffrages tended to be), nor was she in favour of protecting women from the realm of social and industrial change. As she clearly states in her autobiography when addressing the suffragettes, "no matter what your fight...don't be ladylike".²⁵ She would not have wanted to be associated with this group of upper class antis, due to her expressed interest in obtaining human rights and advancing the conditions of working class women. She states that women should be "Organized...along industrial lines. Politics is only the servant of industry"²⁶. By this, she demonstrates her belief in the importance of women and the working class. In short, she believed that as in all capitalist systems, the government is at the mercy of industry and it is, therefore, more important to advance the conditions of the working class before that of the women who wanted the vote. Thus, she was not an Anti in this regard, but did not support the suffragettes either.

²⁴New York Times. December 1, 1930. p. 21.

²⁵Jones Autobiography, p. 204.

²⁶Ibid., p. 204.

I think that Mother Jones viewed the movement for ~~the~~ enfranchisement with some contempt because she saw the plight of the working class as having a far greater importance. She used the example of Colorado where, she argued, the women had the vote but that it had failed to elevate the situation of the miners.²⁷ She placed class rivalry above that of gender. In response to her arrest in January 1914, the Equal Suffrage Association became divided, with some members calling her a violent agitator while other supporting her efforts.²⁸ From this reaction it could be concluded that there was indeed a class conflict between Jones and this group. More information written by suffragettes about Mother Jones would be necessary to make a concrete statement in this regard. As the suffragettes were mostly composed of middle and upper class women this problem was intensified. Many of the suffragettes did not understand the problems of the miners and their wives and therefore dismissed Jones' arguments against the importance of suffrage.

Mother Jones seemed to have formed her opinions about suffrage because she thought that it would fail to aid her interests as a fighter for working class rights. She based her beliefs on the importance of a mother in the family as well as seeing suffrage as an upper class struggle. Whether these were valid opinions is not for me to judge. She was an exception because, it seems strange that such an empowered women could not see what might be gained from suffrage. I would, therefore, be very interested to see what her response to the final victory for suffrage was. She wrote very little about suffrage and her views on it made it difficult to grasp a true idea of why she felt this way.

When I first came across this topic I was confused as to why a women of Mother Jones'

²⁷Ibid., p. 203-204.

²⁸Long, The Sun Never Shines. P. 283

stature and motives would be apposed to a movement which was created to help improve the position of her sex in society. Was she just “old Fashioned” or close minded? I hope I have provided an answered to this confusing problem and communicated that Mother Jones was an exception in the way that she viewed the importance of women in the labour movement but not in the realm of politics. There were many other avenues which I would have liked to explore. For example, how did suffragettes view the role of women in the family? I would have liked to look at personal letters or diaries of women who held strong views on this issue (as the leaders of both movements were upper class, there should be a wealth of information in this regard). I searched in vain for the views of people who study women’s history (such as the Australian Jill Ker Conway) on this topic. Mother Jones is an important figure in labour and women’s history and deserves considerable attention.

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