

WGS.110J/21H.108J

Reading Guide for Week 5

The Birth of Feminism, Women's Suffrage, and the Politics of Reproduction

In our last class meeting we examined working-class sexuality in rapidly expanding, urban centers. We also discussed progressive reform and attempts by middle-class Americans to contain sexuality and gender expression through the control “vice,” broadly defined. This week we continue our focus on early twentieth-century contestations over sexual order by looking closely at the emergence of feminism as a radical social movement, the political campaign for women's suffrage, and connected debates over the politics of reproduction.

Required Texts

- Nancy Cott, “The Birth of Feminism,” from *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (1987) 12-50.
- Linda Gordon, “Birth Control and Social Revolution,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 320-327.
- Molly Ladd Taylor, “Eugenics, Sterilization, and Social Welfare,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 327-336.
- PERUSE: Thomas Dublin, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, and Rebecca Jo Plant, “[Women's Voting and U.S. Empire](#),” Module 2 from *The Empire Suffrage Syllabus*, 2024. Focus specifically on Weeks 5 and 6: “Civilizing Missions and Voting Rights,” and “The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in U.S. Colonies”
- PBS Digital Short, “[The Ongoing Fight](#)” (2020) ~10min.
- Mary Church Terrell, “The Progress of Colored Women,” Address delivered before the National American Women's Suffrage Association (1898) 1-8.
- Caves [1896], Sanger [1917], SCOTUS [1927], Letters to Sanger, [1924-1936], in “The Politics of Reproduction” Document Collection, in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 310-318.
- OPTIONAL: *Iron-Jawed Angels* (2004) 120 min.
- OPTIONAL: “Frances Willard Equates Learning to Ride a Bicycle with Opening New Frontiers for Women,” in *Modern American Women*, Ware, ed. (1989) 15-19.

Questions to Consider:

Historian Nancy Cott is a familiar figure from week one. This week we read her account of the emergence of feminism in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century. What historical contexts helped shape the early development of feminism in the US? What kinds of women and men embraced feminism? Which movements/philosophies/figures influenced and inspired early American feminists? As you read, think back to previous weeks. How do familiar themes (essentialized conceptions of gender, racial and class differences, notions of publicity and privacy, and so on) play out in Cott's chapter? What do you think accounts for these changes or continuities?

Linda Gordon and Molly Ladd-Taylor are both leading historians of American social policy. Gordon's essay examines the radical roots of the early twentieth-century birth control movement, and the links early activists like Margaret Sanger made between birth control and social, political, and economic revolution. Ladd-Taylor explores the darker side of birth control activism during a slightly later period. As you read, consider the ways that race, class, and gender shaped arguments about who should be able

to control fertility, and how. What roles do science and medicine play in both accounts? Read “The Politics of Reproduction” primary source collection (Caves, Sanger, SCOTUS, and letters to Sanger) alongside Gordon and Ladd-Taylor.

The Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed in 1870. It granted all men the right to vote (including formerly enslaved Black Americans), but failed to include women in the electorate. Disappointed by this failure, many white woman's rights activists (including many former abolitionists) made a strategic choice to push for suffrage for *white* women specifically. As the movement to achieve suffrage commenced during the final decades of the nineteenth-century, race became a central and divisive issue. Some white antisuffragists argued that opening the vote to *all* women would increase the Black voting population. Some white suffragists, for their part, argued that white women voters would help to uphold white racial supremacy. Mary Church Terrell, a daughter of former slaves, was one of the first African American women in the United States to earn a college degree, and later helped to found the National Association of Colored Women. As the organization's first president, she became nationally known for her support of women's suffrage, and her opposition to racial prejudice. In her 1898 speech to the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Terrell outlines the achievements of African American women. What motivations might have led her to do so for this audience? What rhetorical moves does she make in her speech? In what ways do her concerns and her language fit into the larger themes and social contexts we've been exploring over the past two weeks? Read Terrell's speech alongside the PBS digital short documentary and the Women's Voting and US Empire website.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

WGS.110J / 21H.108J Sexual and Gender Identities in the Modern United States
Spring 2024

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.