Sarah Gavron's *Suffragette*: What do Mrs. Pankhurst and an East End laundress have in common?

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Directed by Sarah Gavron; screenplay by Abi Morgan

British filmmaker Sarah Gavron's *Suffragette* is a fictionalized account of the women's voting rights movement in Britain in the pre-World War I period.

The so-called "suffragettes" were led by Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), who founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. The struggle at times became fierce, involving conflicts with police and minor acts of terrorism. The women were often jailed and tortured during their incarceration. The right to vote for women was eventually won in the UK in 1928.

Gavron's movie begins in 1912. Its protagonist, Maud Watts (Carey Mulligan), is a 24-year-old laundress, working and living in poverty-stricken and oppressed circumstances. Gavron uses the character to epitomize the growing social awareness of women and their involvement in the suffrage movement.

In *Suffragette*, Maud labors like a slave at work and goes home to minister to husband Sonny (Ben Whishaw), who also works at the industrial laundry, but for higher wages. She is a caring mother to her adored young son, Georgie. Marital relations are as good as can be expected for a couple living in abject poverty, even perhaps a little better, provided Maud does not deviate from what is expected of her.

At work, Maud is vigilant in regard to her employer, who, besides working people to their chemically scarred bones, sexually abuses young girls. Maud grew up in the laundry as the daughter of a laundress and sustained years of abuse herself.

An outspoken co-worker Violet (Anne-Marie Duff) makes an impression on Maud. The latter discovers that Violet is a member of the local underground suffragette chapter run by the militant Edith Ellyn (Helena Bonham Carter). Edith owns a pharmacy with her supportive husband—the only genuinely encouraging male in the movie—which is used as a front for the meetings of the group.

As Maud begins to express an interest in the fight, she almost immediately finds herself, unexpectedly (and somewhat implausibly), giving testimony at a hearing presided over by Chancellor of the Exchequer and future prime minister David Lloyd George (Adrian Schiller) on women's right to vote, an event that does not shift the government. As Maud's involvement with the suffragettes grows, so does her alienation from Sonny, who eventually locks her out of the house and, because he has exclusive parental rights over Georgie, bars her from their son—the most painful of all her sacrifices. Furthermore, she is hounded by the dogged Irish-born policeman Steed (Brendan Gleeson), who unsuccessfully tries to browbeat her into becoming an informer.

The women are inspired by and unswervingly loyal to their leader Emmeline Pankhurst (Meryl Streep in a cameo performance), who urges them to stand up to the determined efforts of the government to break their wills. The suffragettes are beaten and imprisoned. In jail, Maud and others go on hunger strike and are brutally force-fed. Even Steed is appalled by their "barbaric" treatment. The movie ends, essentially in mid-air, when one of the suffragettes, Emily Davison (Natalie Press), becomes a martyr for the cause in 1913.

Director Gavron has demonstrated a sensitivity and talent for filmmaking in her previous efforts, *This Little Life* (2003) about a child born prematurely, and *Brick Lane* (2007) concerning the Bangladeshi community in London. Unfortunately, the broader the panorama and scope of the subject matter, the weaker and more obviously limited in outlook and approach her work becomes.

Not helping matters, in her latest movie, she has teamed up with screenwriter Abi Morgan, responsible for the deplorable *The Iron Lady* (2011), a generally sympathetic portrait of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The chief difficulties with *Suffragette* arise from what is essentially an act of intellectual sleight of hand on the part of the filmmakers. In the end, the film plays fast and loose with history in the interests of pushing a contemporary political agenda.

Both the scenes of Maud toiling in the laundry and her struggling to make a decent life for her small family are moving. Mulligan, who has often seemed rather bland in the past, gives a restrained and convincing performance here as an oppressed woman whose passionate feelings and opinions only slowly rise to the surface.

However, to a considerable extent, Gavron's scenes of the abominable laundry and London's East End belong in a different film.

The WSPU, although it may have had support in certain areas from working class women, was a movement whose leadership and social outlook was overwhelmingly middle class. After all, 40 percent, the poorest layers, of the male population could not vote at the time (including Maud's husband) and the WSPU advocated women having the right to vote on the same terms as men, i.e., they accepted wealth and property limits on the women who would be able to vote. The Independent Labour Party, which advocated universal suffrage, attacked the WSPU on these grounds.

In all likelihood, a woman like Maud Watts would not have gravitated toward the feminist movement as her consciousness awakened, but toward the socialist movement. The pre-World War I period witnessed an immense growth in the socialist parties internationally and the number of female supporters in particular. The number of women in the Social Democratic Party in Germany, for example, jumped from about 4,000 in 1905 to over 141,000 by 1913. One of its most remarkable leaders, of course, was Rosa Luxemburg.

Maud's story, so to speak, belongs to a different social and intellectual trajectory than the one the filmmakers imagine for her. They clearly did

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not want to make a film about an aspiring parliamentarian, lawyer or pharmacist because it would not have had the same emotional or dramatic punch.

A more honest film would have shown women like Maud more attracted to the emerging social struggles of the working class as a whole (the British Labour Party, which also supported universal suffrage, was founded in 1906). A class divide separates the interests of Emmeline Pankhurst and those of Maud and Violet. As Pankhurst says in the movie: "We don't want to be law breakers, we want to be law makers." (The phrase actually comes from Anne Cobden Sanderson, another campaigner for votes for women.)

To their discredit, Gavron and Morgan are relying on the generally low level of historical knowledge in removing the socialist movement from the historical equation. *Suffragette* 's circumscribed timeline is significant. Had it stretched out a few more years, the film's creators would have had to show the irreconcilable split that occurred within the Pankhurst family itself.

With the outbreak of World War I, Emmeline and one of her daughters, Christabel, threw their full support behind British imperialism in its conflict with the "German Peril." Within days of the declaration of war in August 1914, the British government agreed to release all WSPU prisoners and paid the organization £2,000 to organize a patriotic rally under the slogan "Men must fight and women must work." Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst campaigned tirelessly for millions of young men to be sent into the slaughterhouse of the war. Later, a fervent anti-communist, Emmeline Pankhurst joined the Conservative Party and was chosen as one of its parliamentary candidates.

The film makes much of the WSPU slogan, "Deeds, not words." There is nothing inherently radical or progressive about such a motto. The character of a movement is determined by its program and social orientation. Many ultra-right organizations would subscribe—and have subscribed—to "Deeds, not words." In fact, it is worth pointing to the political evolution of Norah Dacre Fox, a leading member, and from 1913 the general secretary, of the WSPU. Fox was one of the organizers of the 1914 pro-war rally and a ferocious anti-German chauvinist. According to *The Times* in 1918, Mrs. Dacre Fox supported making "a clean sweep of all persons of German blood, without distinction of sex, birthplace, or nationality. … Any person in this country, no matter who he was or what his position, who was suspected of protecting German influence, should be tried as a traitor, and, if necessary, shot. There must be no compromise and no discrimination." Norah Dacre Fox (later Norah Elam) went on to become a prominent figure in Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the 1930s.

For many of the upper-middle class women involved in the WSPU, as for many of their present-day counterparts, the "fight for women's rights" boiled down to a fight for a bigger share of the professional, political and income pie. There is inevitably a sinister and reactionary logic to any movement based on ethnicity or gender. Many contemporary feminists support the imperialist war drive against Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria today—and tomorrow, Russia—on the spurious grounds of "women's rights."

By contrast, Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960) led East End women in the direction of socialism. She broke from the WSPU in 1914, eventually launching the Workers' Socialist Federation. She founded the newspaper, the *Women's Dreadnought*, which later changed its name to the *Workers' Dreadnought*. From her own experiences with women like Maud Watts, Sylvia came to the conclusion that the problem was capitalism.

Sylvia Pankhurst supported the Russian Revolution of 1917 and went to the Soviet Union in 1920-21 where she met Lenin and heard Trotsky speak. (While in London, she received a letter from Lenin in August 1919, urging no delay in "the formation of a big workers' Communist Party in Britain."). Coming into conflict with her mother, she agreed with Marxists such as Rosa Luxemburg, who wrote in 1914: "Bourgeois women's rights activists want to acquire political rights, in order to participate in political life. The proletarian woman can only follow the path of workers' struggle, which in the opposite way achieves every inch of actual power, and only in this way acquires statutory rights."

No one on the official "left" today, utterly consumed by identity politics and issues of sex and gender, cares to remember the scorn that socialists like Luxemburg, Eleanor Marx, Luise Kautsky, Clara Zetkin and others heaped on the affluent "women rightsers" of their time.

In that period, it was elementary to view the issue in class not gender terms. Eleanor Marx, for example, wrote: "We are not women arrayed in struggle against men but workers who are in struggle against the exploiters." And: "The real women's party, the socialist party … has a basic understanding of the economic causes of the present adverse position of workingwomen and … calls on the workingwomen to wage a common fight hand-in-hand with the men of their class against the common enemy, *viz.* the men and women of the capitalist class."

And it was Eleanor Marx who noted that "We see no more in common between a Mrs. Fawcett [the leading light of the women's rights movement in the late 19th century] and a laundress than we see between [the banker] Rothschild and one of his employees. In short, for us there is only the working-class movement."

Or Clara Zetkin: "For the proletarian woman, it is capital's need for exploitation, its unceasing search for the cheapest labour power, that has created the women's question …

"Consequently, the liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be—as it is for the bourgeois woman—a struggle against the men of her own class … The end-goal of her struggle is not free competition with men but bringing about the political rule of the proletariat. Hand in hand with the men of her own class, the proletarian woman fights against capitalist society."

It should be added that even though *Suffragette* does have a working class woman as its heroine, it tends to demonstrate contempt for the working class as a whole. The innumerable close-ups of Mulligan's face speak to the deliberately narrow and confined focus. Virtually all the men in the film are monstrous. In addition, all of Maud's co-workers, with the exception of Violet, as well as her female neighbors shun and blackguard her for taking up a fight. So while Maud is one of the deserving poor, the rest are portrayed as hopelessly backward and beholden to King and Country.

And what of the fruits of feminism? A study by a UK think tank in 2013 concluded that "fifty years of feminism" has seen the gap between the wages of the average man and woman narrow, while the differences between working class and upper class women "remain far greater than the differences between men and women."

Morgan-Gavron's *Suffragette* attempts to avoid and misrepresent the fact that working class women were thrown into the vortex of political life as part of a class and it was the inescapable logic of the movement of the whole class that imbued them with their "class-conscious defiance." (Luxemburg)

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