Comment on David Patterson’s *The Search for a Negotiated Peace: Women’s Activism and Citizen Diplomacy in World War I*

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David Patterson has meticulously researched the peace movement emerging in the US and Europe during World War I. He argues that the modern peace movement congealed during the Great War; that what had been a set of concerns confined to a small contingent of men centered in places like the Carnegie Endowment for Peace expanded to become a transnational movement with women the most visible and vocal leadership at least in the US. Patterson goes on then to treat citizen diplomats—both male and female—as deadly serious. Using records not only from the peace organizations and organizers but also from departments of state and government, David tries to assess the actual impact of peace activism on policy in both belligerent and neutral countries. No one else has attempted that assessment.

For me, as an historian of twentieth-century women and progressive reform, it is especially this taking citizen diplomacy seriously that proved revelatory. The women most involved in the World War I peace movement were generally long-time activists in the women’s suffrage movement or other progressive reform movements. By the teens, women like Jane Addams and Emily Balch, Grace Abbott and Alice Hamilton had long track records as savvy public figures and as effective social policy advocates and progressive institution builders. I have written about their social policy activism before and after the war myself and have for them and their entire generation absolutely the greatest respect. In fact I attribute my own possibilities in life and those of my daughter in part to this generation of women. Even so, whenever I have sidled up to their wartime
peace efforts, I have generally cringed and hidden my eyes. I just can’t look. While having the deepest admiration for the hopes of peace activists in the 1910s—I mean, who doesn’t long for a world without war, a world in which states act earnestly to find just solutions to international problems—while having the deepest admiration for their hopes, I have found their behavior during the war hopelessly naïve, quixotic, even embarrassing. When women from the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary and many more places met at the Hague in 1915 they were, after all, a bunch of ordinary citizens not particularly experienced in foreign affairs gathering during an appalling world conflict to outline a process by which belligerents might lay down their arms and work toward a settlement of issues that the belligerents had not quite even articulated and, while they were at it, producing a set of goals for the postwar world that might diminish the possibilities of war from that time forward. Audacious. But that’s not all: that gathering of ordinary citizens sent representatives to meet with foreign ministers of countries at war to propose the *un*official group’s ideas.

David Patterson has forced me to stop cringing at this audacity and to keep my eyes open. He has helped me see first that this group of women was not the only international group of ordinary citizens trying to intervene in the official policy of countries that were at the time shooting at each other and that the ideas they were hawking were not peculiar to them at all but were in widespread circulation at least among liberal thinkers in the West. That context helps to make them seem less nutty, but more important, as I read Patterson’s account of this attempt by women (and later men) to intervene directly in the foreign policies of warring countries not their own, I stopped thinking about how naïve peace activists were and instead about what their intrepidity,
their nerve revealed about their understandings of citizenship, civil society, and the meaning of democratizing foreign policy. By acting together with citizens from a range of countries and totting around to the foreign ministers of multiple states, these citizen activists were trying to embody a citizenship rooted not in individual states but the world. They were experimenting to see what some version of world citizenship might look like. Moreover, Progressive era activists were imagining and trying to bring into being a powerful and effective international civil society that might influence national policymaking. Knowing just how eager those same women activists were in other contexts--that is in domestic policy--to increase state power, I was at first caught off guard by the confidence they showed, the power they wanted to demand for this international civil formation. But then, increasing state power never meant for this particular generation of activists a diminution of vitality within civil society. They imagined the scope and effectiveness of civil society expanding right along with that of the state. So, why not imagine expanding the scope and effectiveness of civil society in foreign affairs?

Here’s how I now see it: In domestic politics, progressive activists were eager to expand the state’s responsibility in the context of an already vital civil society; in foreign policy, where states had pretty well complete power, they are trying to create an effective civil society. They seem to have been aiming toward the same kind of balance between the state and civil society in each arena.

The role they seemed to claim for civil society in this regard created then whole new dimensions in my understanding of progressive activists’ insistence that they wanted to democratize foreign policy. I had previously thought that by that phrase they meant
they wanted an end to those secret deals concocted by the highest level officials with no input from the citizens of their own states. But now I see that in the much more expansive vision of Patterson’s peace activists democratization of foreign policy suggested not just finding ways that ordinary citizens might discuss foreign policy issues within their own countries and maybe register the majority opinion with their government officials but also finding ways that those ordinary citizens might directly intervene in any country at all not through their governments but quite directly themselves. When women from the Hague conference traveled all over Europe and then the United States offering ideas to foreign ministers for mediation, for instance, they were trying to find ways that every day citizens could break into a state-centered system of international relations. Patterson’s activists were trying to crack open that state-controlled system to open pathways for world citizens to affect international affairs. They were committed to a kind of democratic practice that pretty well takes your breath away.

Patterson has thus stretched my understanding of the progressive democratic project and revealed to me in the process the degree to which even an era as close to our own as the Progressive era is itself a foreign country.

I do, of course, have questions. As I mentioned earlier, David Patterson argues that after the war started, women emerged as front and center leaders of the peace movement, and their concern was not only to urge neutral nations to work for a negotiated end to the conflict but to create institutions that would diminish the threat of war in the postwar world. Patterson does a good job of explaining the motives of peacenik women. But his emphasis on women’s motives does not explain why men did not match them in numbers, voice and visibility in the movement. While we do see why
so many U.S. women got involved, we’re not clear on why fewer men did. I would love to hear David think that through. To understand the lopsidedness of this leadership or visibility, we probably need to understand the gender division of labor in progressivism more broadly. I wonder if Patterson would like to probe that division a bit. Related to that, we might ask whether by making maternalist arguments for women’s leadership on issues of war and peace,—that is, by claiming that women were more peaceful, cooperative, nurturing than men and so naturally took leadership in a peace movement—did female activists actually discourage men’s participation or perhaps obscure their participation? And, why did women come to dominate the peace movement in the United States but not in Britain? It seems pretty clear from Patterson’s evidence that the most significant peace group in Britain was the male Union of Democratic Control. Why the gender difference in the two countries? This same difference showed up in the social settlement movement as well: In Britain, the movement was male-dominated while in the United States women were far and away the most numerous, visible and effective participants in the movement. In fact, it seems to me that so many of the women involved in the peace movement in the United States were themselves settlement workers that the connection between the two might explain the greater representation of women in the U.S. peace movement.

But, even though women were the more visible and numerous peace activists in the United States, it seems from the evidence presented here that the men were more effective in affecting policy—or at least in moving Woodrow Wilson. Although Wilson seems to have been eager to court female peace activists because of their influence in domestic politics, he does not seem to have been moved by their arguments for a
conference of neutral nations to offer continuous mediation during the war nor in
particular by their arguments for new diplomacy in the postwar world. The latter seem to
have been widespread among progressives internationally by 1915 and so didn’t need to
come specifically from female activists in direct consultation with Wilson. The president
did seem to have been moved by some of the male activists—especially Louis Lochner
and the British men in the Union of Democratic Control. Moreover, Wilson explicitly
credited the guys at the New Republic, Walter Lippmann and especially Herbert Croly,
with helping him to sort his thoughts on preparedness and peace. He does not seem ever
to have credited the women with whom he repeatedly met with changing his mind or
giving him genuinely helpful information or advice. Maybe this is because the women
were meeting with Wilson earlier in the war when he was certain that the belligerents
were just not open to mediation and the men were meeting with him when the war
stalemated and mediation seemed a genuine possibility. Or, maybe Wilson could not
take women seriously in foreign policy. I’d love to know what you think on this, David.

Whatever the reason here, we are reminded by the case that visibility and voice do
not necessarily convey power. While men activists may have had less visibility and
lower voices, they exercised more power. And, this is surely in keeping with the longer
history of women’s authority in foreign policy. Women have had a notoriously difficult
time establishing authority in the field. We see it even yet in, for instance, the particular
ways that Madeleine Albright and Condeleeza Rice have been construed as in “over their
heads” when Secretary of State and in the perceived necessity of Hillary Clinton to vote
for war if she wanted to prepare to run for the presidency. A woman’s vote against
authorizing a president to go to war still means something different from what it means for a man.

In conclusion, even though the Progressive era was long enough ago to represent a foreign country, it is recent enough to illuminate aspects of our current gender system and the ways it limits the authority of women in our public life. David Patterson’s book amply demonstrates both the big shifts in our way of thinking about democracy and foreign policy and the recalcitrance of our way of gendering authority.