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Philosophy 304

20 October 2023

Word Count: 1134

The Wisconsin Idea and Women’s Rights

The Wisconsin Idea became a relevant aspect of Wisconsin history in the late 1800s as the Progressive Era had led to a broad realization of reforms in the University of Wisconsin’s goals as well as the University’s impacts on local, state, and national politics. Another historical movement gaining traction at the same time was the Women’s Suffrage and Higher Education movement. While this aspect of Wisconsin and American history was prevalent around the time the Wisconsin Idea was popularized, we have not yet encountered it in our Wisconsin Idea course and lectures. We have heard lots of discussion about various marginalized groups such as the Ho-Chunk tribe, the Hmong population, and even those with disabilities as was seen in our Eugenics discussion. However, the one group we have yet to cover and discuss is women and their struggles specifically in light of the initial popularization of the Wisconsin Idea. Therefore, this discussion focuses on how the Wisconsin Idea and its prominent historical figures influenced and supported women’s rights in the late 1800s. Specifically, John Bascom’s promotion of Women’s Suffrage and Women’s Higher Education and how that relates to the values of the Wisconsin Idea. The foundational source I used for this research was the chapter “Progressivism 2: Women” from the book *John Bascom and the Origins of the Wisconsin Idea* by J. David Hoeveler.

John Bascom, the president of the University of Wisconsin from 1874-1887, was an outspoken, progressive supporter of women’s right to vote and to a higher education due to one main underlying theory: evolution. Evolution, along with the Wisconsin Idea and Progressivism, had become increasingly prevalent in discussions regarding American society and how citizens should, or should not, participate within that society in the late 1800s. Therefore, unsurprisingly, Bascom had “appropriated evolution and the organic model as the basis of his views on social reform,” (Hoeveler, 144). Bascom believed evolution and the advancements of human society directly supported women’s suffrage and access to higher education as he argued that “the community should exercise its power on behalf of individuals, all individuals, the inclusive constituent makeup of the social whole,” In other words, as society evolves it needs to utilize its power for the benefit of all individuals to perpetuate those benefits. This belief directly coincides with one of the core values of the Wisconsin Idea that knowledge and education should extend outside of the classroom to enhance the lives of all the citizens of Wisconsin. Bascom’s ideological foundation in evolution also promoted his direct opposition to those against women’s right to vote and to higher education that relied on arguments involving poor biology and incorrect sexual disadvantages. For instance, one of the main arguments at the time against women’s involvement in higher education resulted from the belief that female students suffered ill health during their “monthly changes” and would need to undergo immense mental strain and exertion to “make up study time lost in the period cycle,” (Hoeveler, 137). In response to this poorly supported argument, Bascom conducted his own study during his presidency where he found the following:

Of student absences from class for reasons of sickness, he noted 357 on the part of the men and 18 on the part of the women. Were their absences in ratio to the number of males and females in the student body there would have been 155 days of absences on the part of the women.” (Hoeveler, 138)

Additionally, those against women’s ability to vote and to higher education argued that women were inherently disadvantaged intelligently. Again, in response, Bascom reported that “Although the women represent only one-fourth of the students at Madison, they win one-half of the academic honors,” (Hoeveler, 136). Overall, John Bascom was a prominent supporter of women’s right to vote and to higher education due to the fact that his ideologies were founded on the theory of evolution.

The Wisconsin Idea was widely promoted by John Bascom through his outspoken support for women’s suffrage and higher education. Two of the main goals of the Wisconsin Idea include the extension of benefits from the classroom outside the University to the people of the state as well as preparing citizens to be well-informed actors in state politics. Both of these goals can be seen in Bascom’s reasoning for why women’s suffrage and higher education should be supported. First, Bascom argued women should have the right to higher education, and specifically the same higher education curriculum as the male students, as he believed separating them would “set women in the direction of making them useful for social intercourse at the expense of intellectual strength,” (Hoeveler, 136). Additionally, he argued that “we must take the widest measure here… and see evolution as the expansion of reason, opening up the world to new possibilities and human progress,” (Hoeveler, 144). In other words, Bascom supported women’s right to higher education as it would not only allow for the proliferation of intellectual strength outside of the classroom and among Wisconsin citizens but would also allow for the expansion of human progress through evolution. Through Bascom’s support of higher education, he promoted the Wisconsin Idea’s goal of extending the University’s benefits far beyond the classroom. Second, Bascom supported women’s suffrage as he believed “little would change… if women did not have the right to vote, if they did not have the means to effect change in law, if they did not have a more powerful role to play in public life,” (Hoeveler, 138). Additionally, in an address at a meeting of the Wisconsin Advocates of the Movement, he called upon evolution again by saying that “the empowerment of individuals, the essential ingredients of the healthy, adapting social organism, always invokes the activities of the state,” (Hoeveler, 145). Bascom argued that in order for our society to progress further, we need to adapt our social organism and promote the education of politically informed citizens who can influence the activities of the state. Again, we see one of the main goals of the Wisconsin Idea being a prominent aspect of Bascom’s reasoning for promoting women’s right to vote.

To conclude, in the late 1800s, the Wisconsin Idea, along with the Progressive Era and Evolution, can be seen underlying the support of two other prominent issues of the time: women’s right to vote and to higher education. Specifically, we can learn how John Bascom’s foundational beliefs in evolution and progressivism promoted his support for women’s suffrage and higher education which ultimately led to the realization of two main goals of the Wisconsin Idea: the goal of extending benefits beyond the University’s classrooms to the people of the state and the goal of preparing citizens to become well-informed actors in state politics.

Bibliography

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