

Thomas Dorr on universal suffrage

1. Synthesis

Text divided into 2 parts

a) first one focuses on who should be given the right to vote according to Dorr – all adult (that is to say over 21 years of age) white male citizens (except criminals) because they make up the political nation. To him, they represent 25% of the whole population and their votes would equally fall on either political party (that is to say the Democratic party and the Whigs) so that in the end only one eighth would govern the nation. However he complains that, because of voting restrictions on white males, that minority in representation is even more important. He then moves on to compare the voting rights in both New Hampshire and Rhode Island where differences are quite marked : in New Hampshire 20% of white males can vote while in Rhode Island only 8 % do because of the property qualifications required- instead of 25 % if universal white male suffrage was implemented.

b) in the second paragraph, he moves on to widen his statement by saying that in many other states the issue of universal suffrage has led to changes so as to include the so far « unrepresented classes ». He mentions the example of New York where married women can own property in their own right - the property they inherited being regarded as their own and not their husbands'. The result is that these women can vote at elections of officers and directors in corporations they are stockholders of, yet if they own land they cannot vote for the mayor, which to him is not logical or right. He exposes the fact that it is property and not the mind/intelligence of the voter that comes first. He then quotes Benjamin Franklin who once made fun of this by stating that property can be owning a farm animal so that if the animal dies the voter loses his right to vote, who then according to him actually has this right ? The animal and not the man. Dorr stresses that women should be given the right to vote because of their moral influence on society and that a great deal of good would come out of it if they were given the right to vote, he believes women's perception of right and wrong is more acute than in men so that if they voted it would enhance American society 's morality.

2. Analysis

Dorr (1805-1854) was from Rhode Island and the son of a wealthy Providence merchant, and studied law at Harvard university. In 1840, he headed a movement in favor of universal suffrage in Rhode Island and wanted all white adult males and females, as the text shows, but also African-Americans to be given the right to vote. Rhode Island's voting rights were still based on the state's original charter granted by Charles II in 1663. It secured the vote for men who owned \$134 of land- that is to say men of aristocratic descent- which excluded half of the white males in the state. At the time, Rhode Island was one of the five states that still had very restrictive property requirements to vote and represented an exception hence the comparison with New Hampshire which had a more liberal position. Dorr's position was part and parcel of a wider movement in the United States under the presidency of Andrew Jackson who was regarded as close to the people since he was of modest origin. At the same time, extending the franchise was also a concern in Great Britain where the Chartist movement was gaining momentum and the first Reform Act of 1832 had enfranchised a great number of middle-class men.

As this extract is a speech, Dorr uses several rhetorical devices specific to this type of exercise which are based on Aristotle's "modes for persuasion". They are also known as rhetorical appeals or ethos, pathos, and logos. These rhetorical devices are aimed to sway (= influencer) and convince an audience that does not agree with you. To start with, he uses « logos », that is to say « logic » hence the use of words such as « thus », « hence », « while », « however », « If we compare » and « we observe », in the first paragraph. In the second paragraph, he mixes « logos » with « ethos » and « pathos ». « Ethos » is based on ethics and appeals to them. Indeed, Dorr introduces the idea that women should be given the right to vote owing to their high moral standard : « Her perception of right and wrong is more acute », while "her superior love of offspring" refers to "pathos" which appeals to emotion. He also mentions a sophism used by Benjamin Franklin to denounce the absurdity of the definition of property that extends to owning a farm animal to get the right to vote: "Suppose a man owns a jackass worth \$100, and that property confers upon him the right to vote: very well! he votes, but in the next year the death of the animal deprives the man of the vote: was it then the man or the jackass which voted?" In Dorr's days, voting was still a privilege in some states as Rhode Island but even when it was more widely spread, no one envisioned to give women the right to vote which they were eventually granted in 1920 only.

So, in this extract, Dorr takes on a very radical position for his time since he not only advocates to extend voting rights to more men but also to women who were making their voices heard in abolitionist circles (hence his allusion to their high moral standard) and were hoping to be granted the right to vote in the wake of getting such rights for African-Americans. Dorr offers common sense proposals and aims to empower both men and women because the Market Revolution and Andrew Jackson's presidency had widen American people's opportunities and horizons, and that politics needed to be reshuffled to adapt to this new situation. Indeed, the old system of property requirements no longer fitted the evolution of the United States where prosperity was rising especially in big cities thanks to people's intelligence not thanks to original property. What is striking in this extract is that Dorr bases his reasoning on very accurate information, figures and statistics. This makes his speech very convincing and efficacious but taking such a stance was also very bold since Dorr was far ahead of his time.

Because he was libertarian and a very radical one for his time, Dorr eventually had to flee Rhode Island and was considered as anathema by Conservatives in the North and the South, but he inspired a generation of activists, writers and thinkers. Although Dorr is barely remembered today, Dorrism affected politics at the local, state and national levels for several years.