

**The city of almost perpendicular streets.
John Stuart Mill and the emancipation of women**

Abstract

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1. John Stuart Mill

The aim of the present paper is to analyse John Stuart Mill's work in favour of the emancipation of women in the context of the development of liberal theory. And it is as a liberal thinker that he was led to his militant feminism, while at the same time, it presented his theory with certain serious problems, problems that still remain for the feminist movement and contemporary political theory.

The feminist theory of John Stuart Mill, or of him and Harriet Taylor Mill has been studied in depth. There is an important question in that theory, however, that has not, in my opinion, received sufficient attention and which I propose to analyse here with you in this paper. It is to this question that I owe the title of my intervention; in effect, I refer in the title to "the emancipation of women", when the usual focus on tackling the feminist question is to refer to the equality, or rather, the inequality of women with respect to men.

2. J. S. Mill's intervention in the context of the emancipation of women

Mill's demand fell within the great emancipating process that took place during Modernity, and that really constituted it. From this point of view, Modernity is the emergence of an individualizing tendency, present probable from the dawn of Humanity but which had subsisted very precariously, crushed by the massive preponderance of the collectivist element.

This revolutionary emancipation had two groups of "forgotten people", who were not included in the processes of liberation: the slaves and women.

3. The content of Mill's intervention

There are many important intellectual influences to which John Stuart Mill was subject, from his first mentors, his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, to Auguste Comte, Thomas Carlyle or Alexis de Tocqueville. Of all these, one especially must be highlighted as the key to understanding the sense of his feminism, that of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Above all in his *The Sphere and Duties of Government* of 1791, Mill had found, concisely expressed, the idea of the individual human as a being full of possibilities and whose realization must consist of the fullest actualisation of that potentiality.

That sense of human life, then is the achievement of the fullness of the forces, of human energies, for which independence is required (authenticity, liberty) that enables human variety to flourish; and relationships for the recombination of that variety, a recombination that enables humans never to repeat ourselves

In his capacity to imagine a situation of liberty for women, we can outline:

First: A voluntary subjugation that has to be renewed at every instant by a free and spontaneous choice is not properly subjugation; it is quite the contrary, the freest association that can be.

Second: Liberty and equality. Liberty is independence, autonomy. Liberty, then, implies equality, although evidently they are not synonyms. Being unequal, as we humans are, (or, to put it another way, unequal in some matters and equal in others), that factual inequality cannot imply an inequality in law, in rights.

And, third, independence is, eminently, independence in the means necessary to subsist and realize our own objectives, that is, economic independence, so that what is especially important is access to an education that grants that independence. This is one of the main demands inherited from the Enlightenment.

4. Mill and romantic liberalism

Humboldt pointed out two conditions for the existential accomplishment of the human being: liberty and the variety of situations. Conversely, there are two huge/great enemies to defeat: slavery and uniformity.

Marriage should be understood in this way too, and should be based on “their personal independence with the intimacy of the common bond”.

Up to this point, the approach of romantic liberalism is irreproachable from the standpoint of its consistency in defence of human beings. Now we shall concern ourselves with a question that is still pending.

When we speak of the emancipation of women, we are not speaking of equality, but rather of liberty, since liberty is what autonomy means. It is clear that we are free to the extent that we are not subject to anybody, who in this way would be our superior. If there is anyone superior to us, he would not be our equal and we ourselves would no longer be equal to the rest.

Coherently with this basic approach, what John Stuart Mill denounced in the situation of woman is her subjection, her lack of liberty, mainly within marriage, and her inequality before the law, which prevented her from being able to contract, able to vote, able to act, from being able to be a person.

6. The city of almost perpendicular streets

In agreement with Isaiah Berlin, if there is a liberal, that person is Mill, when refusing to sacrifice the individual search for truth (or reason, or happiness, or any other thing that each human being can discover as the end for his own life) for presumed evidence, objectivity or illumination of any type; that is to say, to refuse to accept submission of all human minds to only one or to a group of them.

But there are other authors who have also taken liberal perspectives as their point of departure and have then lost their way and adopted authoritarian or openly totalitarian postures. The line of the main argument turns out to be the ancient identification between truth and virtue. Once the truth is discovered, which is accessible to human reason or thanks to the inspiration of some metaphysical or intra-physical entity, we must not permit people to live in their error-vice.

We can apply this same analysis of Berlin for the case of the betrayal of liberty to the process of the emancipation of women. Various socialist authors (among them, social-democrats) have argued that that liberty was only possible if a compensatory policy was carried out by the state that would permit the initial inequality of opportunities between men and women to be reversed, so that both had an equality of possibilities to realize their lives.

All this grandly reminds us of a legal institution that Adam Smith analysed in a fragment of his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*; he is talking of exclusive privileges or monopolies.

The reason for the institution of exclusive privileges is the twin of that for positive discrimination. As with privilege, we are facing a change to free competition (to get a place as a student in a university, a job in the public administrations, a tax rebate or an exemption from social security payments), from the exclusive and fair evaluation on merit and capacity, to introducing artificial discrimination, segregation, the work of the government. The aim of that government interference is praiseworthy; the danger here is that, once the aim is achieved, the privilege is perpetuated undesirably. The result is, furthermore, progressive social inefficiency and similar collective impoverishment, the increase of governmental despotism and the subjection of the citizens, which will lead to a situation of generalised and growing servility. Just what we are trying to avoid.