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Gender equality: Core principle of modern society?

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Abstract: Gender equality is sometimes claimed as a core principle of ‘modern’ society, in ways that encourage complacency about how far societies have progressed, but also feed into hierarchies of countries and cultures. From this perspective, the 1918 *Representation of the People Act*, which enfranchised women over the age of thirty, would appear as a key moment in the unfolding of the principle of women’s equality with men. But equal voting rights was not the major driving force in the legislation, and the story of the subsequent century has not been one of steady progress. Drawing on evidence from women’s political representation and material about the *increasing* gender differentiation that accompanied the so-called birth of modernity, this article argues against the attribution of a logic to modernity that will eventually deliver gender equality. It is through politics, not the unfolding of some core principle, that change occurs.

Keywords: gender equality, modernity, women’s enfranchisement, political representation.

In February 1918, the British Parliament passed the *Representation of the People Act*, giving the right to vote in parliamentary elections to women of thirty and over, who were householders, wives of householders, occupiers of property to the yearly value of at least £5, and/or university graduates. The same Act enfranchised all men over twenty one, subject only to a six-month residence qualification, and in an additional exceptional measure, enfranchised soldiers and sailors who had turned nineteen while serving in the war. Given the age and property restrictions, only about 40 per cent of adult women got the vote in 1918: even those over thirty, but living in boarding houses or at home with parents still did not qualify.¹ Equal voting rights for women and men

¹An estimated 22 per cent of women over thirty were still disenfranchised (Commons Library Briefing 2013: 39).

was by no means the driving force. The immediate impetus for the legislation was the fact that any election held under the increasingly out-of-date electoral register would have disenfranchised many of the soldiers and sailors on active service. MPs had already voted to extend the life of the Parliament, but at some point, either during the war or very soon after it, there would have to be a new election; indeed, given the fragility of the wartime coalition government, the need for this might arise very suddenly. In an exceptional initiative, Parliament set up an all-party Speakers' Conference to prepare proposals for reforms of the suffrage and electoral register. This addressed pretty much every contentious suffrage matter that had been debated and campaigned over in the preceding decades.

Women's suffrage was, of course, one of these. There had been petitions calling for women's suffrage since the 1830s, and regular parliamentary debates since 1867, when John Stuart Mill, in his brief period as an MP, proposed an amendment to the Second Reform Act that would have replaced the word 'man' with 'person'. Campaigning continued in the intervening decades, with almost annual attempts at women's suffrage legislation, and particularly effective mobilisation in the fifteen years immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War. The older and larger suffrage organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), under the presidency of Millicent Fawcett, had a network of around 500 branches across the country by the time of the war, and focused its activities on canvassing MPs, petitions to parliament, and, increasingly, mass demonstrations. They defined themselves as the non-militant, constitutional wing of suffrage activity, in distinction to the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)—though the distinction was often lost on opponents, who were as likely to heckle and attack marches by the non-militant 'suffragists' as by the self-consciously militant 'suffragettes'.² The latter was the dismissive term initially applied by a journalist to the activists of the WSPU, but quickly adopted by them as a badge of pride. The WSPU was formed in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, and came to adopt the more dramatic tactics of disrupting political meetings, smashing windows, arson attacks, and the (no doubt, extremely unpopular) post box campaign, where they destroyed letters by dropping acid or ink into pillar boxes. WSPU militants typically refused to pay fines when convicted of disruptive or criminal behaviour, and many then ended up in prison, and, eventually, on hunger strike. This was the context, first, for the brutalities of force-feeding; later, for the notorious *Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act* (1913), commonly known as the Cat and Mouse Act, under which activists weakened by hunger strikes were released, but reincarcerated to complete their sentence as soon as they had recovered their

²As in Jane Robinson's account (2018) of attacks on the NUWSS marchers who joined the suffrage 'pilgrimage' to London in 1913.

health.³ These were dramatic times, and Votes for Women had become one of the most contentious political issues in the period immediately preceding the war. No reform of the suffrage could plausibly occur without addressing the question.

But this was not the immediate impetus for the Act, and debates over the legislation addressed a range of additional concerns. Plural voting was one of these. Reformers had long campaigned against the anomaly of plural voting, which included a university franchise for graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. One person one vote, however, had to wait many more years; it was not until after the Second World War that plural voting was abolished. Indeed, the 1918 Act extended the university franchise to include other universities, and confirmed the right of those with a business in a separate constituency to vote in both places; the main reform to plural voting was simply that no one was now allowed more than two votes.⁴ Proportional representation was also one of the big issues. The enlarged electorate meant more MPs, especially for the cities, and the Speaker's Conference favoured a return to the multimember constituencies that had been more common before 1885. They proposed that in these multimember constituencies, which they envisaged covering the large metropolitan areas like London, each containing between three and five members, MPs should be elected by single transferable vote. This proposal did not get Government support and was repeatedly rejected by the Commons; interestingly it was the Lords who turned out to be the strongest supporters, presumably because, with the ascendancy of the Liberal Party since 1906, the imminent enfranchisement of all working men, and the anticipated increased support for the Labour Party, conservatives feared that their days were otherwise numbered. The Lords were eventually bought off by a clause proposing that commissioners be appointed to prepare a plan for the election of 100 members on the basis of PR, with both Houses of Parliament being required to approve the plan before implementation. Predictably, nothing came of this.⁵

It was proportional representation that came closest to scuppering the Bill; on women's suffrage, by contrast, there was now a majority (if not always a happy majority) in both Government and Parliament. As Ramsay MacDonald put it in one of his speeches:

³Sylvia Pankhurst's account (1931) of the suffragette movement contains extraordinary stories of being passed from one safe house to another in London's East End, in the attempt to delay her rearrest.

⁴The one plus about the university constituencies was that Eleanor Rathbone was elected in 1929 as an Independent member for the Combined English Universities, and continued to represent the universities until her death in 1946.

⁵For a full account of this moment when a form of proportional representation came close to being introduced (see Hart 1992). In one small experiment, the university constituencies that had more than one member (as did the Combined English Universities) used a system of single transferable vote until their abolition in 1948.

It is pretty evident from the course the Debate has taken that this matter has already been fought and won. Some hon. Members are prepared, like gallant gentlemen, to go down with flags flying; others, like more cautious businessmen, without changing their opinions, have declared that they have changed their side.⁶

The diehard anti-suffrage MPs (MacDonald's gallant gentlemen) carried on insisting that women did not have the necessary judgement for public affairs, that (all evidence to the contrary) they did not want the vote, that their interests were already perfectly well served by an all-male electorate, or that requiring women to vote would diminish their moral authority. They tried to get an amendment passed that would have committed the country to a referendum on women's suffrage. And in one classic political manoeuvre, opponents of women's suffrage supported an amendment that would have lowered the age qualification to twenty one, in the hope that this would undo the majority in favour of the Bill. The qualifying age had been a moveable figure from the start, with the Speaker's Conference proposing either thirty or thirty five, and the Government eventually recommending thirty. The legislation was very much a compromise, and accepted as such by the suffrage societies; it was framed to avoid what many MPs considered the unacceptable consequence of a majority female electorate, which, given both the greater longevity of women and the enormous loss of male life in the war, would have been the effect of enfranchising both sexes on the same basis.⁷ This produced the odd anguished speech from those long committed to equal voting rights who had nonetheless accepted the compromise as the first step forward, and then found themselves having to vote against an amendment that would reduce the age to twenty one. But as one then observed,

The hon. Gentleman ... made a speech just now in which he said that the Committee would very soon be confronted with the strange spectacle of a number of the supporters of women's suffrage going into the Lobby against this Amendment. But the hon. Member did not call attention to the much stranger spectacle of himself, and the right hon. Gentleman who has just spoken, and others, who have spoken against women's suffrage and who have done all they can to defeat it, going into the Lobby now enormously to increase its operation.⁸

The political manoeuvre failed; that particular amendment was defeated; and the complete Bill was eventually carried with 385 voting in favour and only 55 against.

⁶Ramsay MacDonald MP HC Deb 19 June 1917 vol 94: 1692.

⁷When women were finally given the vote on the same basis as men, the female electorate exceeded the male one by about two million. However, politicians were by this point reasonably reassured that women did not vote along significantly different lines from men, and found the disparity less threatening.

⁸Ronald McNeill MP HC Deb 20 June 1917 vol 94: 1853.

1918: A STEP ON THE WAY?

Looking back on this moment from one hundred years on, we tend to see the *Representation of the People Act* as primarily about women's suffrage; indeed, if you search the web for details of the legislation, you mostly get information about the one small clause that dealt with women's suffrage. But, except when those diehard anti-suffragists were out in force, votes for women figured mainly as an accompaniment to something prompted by other concerns. The legislation was not, on the whole, debated in a language of rights, and though some MPs referred in their speeches to countries around the world that had already enfranchised women, we do not, at this point, hear much about moves towards gender equality being the mark of a modern society.

It is not my aim in this paper to add to the literature on why there was this shift of parliamentary opinion between 1913, the last time a women's suffrage Bill had been rejected, and 1918, when the Act was passed with an overwhelming majority,⁹ except to say that I am entirely unconvinced by those who try to diminish the significance of the pre-war mobilisations, and attribute the change in attitudes simply to men's appreciation of women's selfless contribution to the war effort. What I want to focus on is whether, even with hindsight, we should think of that moment one hundred years ago as a staging post in the progress towards a modernity defined by gender equality. This would be one way of looking at where we now are, and it is a sentiment that one finds reflected—though usually with some lament about the slow pace—in many of the commentaries in this centenary year. Within this framework, we would see ourselves as slowly, but inevitably, delivering on the promise implied in what we commonly think of as the modern conception of equality; that notion, increasingly widely articulated from the mid-18th century onwards, that all men are born equal.

This is the idea encapsulated in the *American Declaration of Independence*, 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

or the *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, 1789: 'men are born and remain free and equal in rights'. These declarations were self-evidently exclusionary: they said men and they meant men; in the American case, they meant free men, but not slaves; in the French case, they meant French men, but not the slaves or men of colour in the French colonies. Yet we could still plausibly think of these tentative formulations of equality and rights as setting in motion a process that would eventually

⁹Harold Smith (1998) makes the point that the numbers in favour of women's suffrage did not change dramatically during the war: that there was large support for women's suffrage before the war, and very considerable continuing Conservative opposition during and after it.

lead to the 1918 *Representation of the People Act*, the 1928 *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act* (the one that gave women the right to vote on the same basis as men), the 1948 *Representation of the People Act* (the one that got rid of plural voting), and so on. This would be a happy and optimistic reading of history, reminiscent of those now-derided Whig approaches that read events through the lens of progress, reading back into the twists and turns a steady movement toward constitutional government and liberal democracy. There is, I believe, a similar tendency at large as regards the relationship between modernity and gender equality: a tendency, that is, to assume that the trajectory is always in the forwards direction, to understate the inventiveness of new forms of inequality and subordination, and understate the extent to which battles have to be refought again and again. There is a confidence and perhaps a complacency in this conception of progress that I find problematic. There is also a troubling arrogance, for when gender equality is claimed as a defining principle of modern societies, it gets caught up in hierarchies of culture and country, and becomes a basis for claiming the moral superiority of the West.

As regards this second aspect, consider the way gender equality has become celebrated as a key ‘Western’ value, and the frequency with which it is then deployed, not so much to root out continuing evidence of gender inequality, but to disparage or exclude those associated with what are considered ‘backward’ cultures. European countries now routinely make access to citizenship depend on adherence to what are said to be ‘core’ values, and when they draw up their list of those values that must not be sacrificed to the requirements of cultural sensitivity, they refer, as one might expect, to such matters as democracy and toleration. They almost always now include the equality of the sexes in a prominent position. Migrants to Denmark have been asked to sign a contract stating that they accept the principle of gender equality, and recognise that female circumcision and forced marriage are illegal in Denmark. Migrants to the Netherlands have been shown a video that includes images of two men kissing, and asked whether they are willing to live in a democracy that values the right of gay people to free and open expression (Butler 2008, Phillips & Saharso 2008). In the current account of the values and principles of the UK, the fundamental principles of British life are said to be democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, and participation in community life; in the list used by Ofsted for the promotion of British values in schools, it is democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith. These lists do not explicitly cite gender equality, but in the citizenship test, you might well be asked, among other questions, whether you consider ‘the rule of men’ a key British value. Clearly, should you be asked this question, you are expected to recognise this as the wrong answer.¹⁰ In these

¹⁰Practice citizenship tests are available on <https://lifeintheuktestweb.co.uk/british-citizenship-test>

moments, gender equality and sexual freedom are being claimed both as defining characteristics of modernity in general, and defining characteristics of ‘modern’ Europe in particular.

In what follows, I do not attempt a precise definition of either ‘modernity’ or ‘the modern’, since it is part of my argument that the ways in which these terms are employed are always themselves political rather than simply definitional. But to clarify, I take the view that the intensification of market society, and the transition towards what can more properly be described as capitalism, did indeed provide the impetus for new articulations of equality, new ways of conceptualising the relationship between individual and community, and greater scepticism towards previously ‘natural’ sources of authority. Like many others, I roughly date this to the 18th century; and while I object to the way contrasts between traditional and modern become employed to establish hierarchies of country and culture, I have no special difficulty acknowledging the role of European philosophers in articulating some of these ideas. What I do have difficulty with is the idea that ‘the modern’ means gender equality.

THE ‘NOT YET’ OF MODERNITY

One problem with that claim is that it seems to overlook how very long it took for so-called modern societies to deliver on anything approximating gender equality. Consider the figures on women’s representation in the House of Commons (Table 1 and Figure 1). The *Representation of the People Act* did not yet allow women to stand for Parliament but, as many of its supporters anticipated, this further reform followed hard on its heels. By the end of 1918, in time for the next general election, Parliament had passed the *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act* giving women of twenty one the same right as men to be elected as MPs. (Interestingly, there was no sex discrimination here.) In the 1918 election, Constance Markievicz then became the first woman elected to the British Parliament, though as a Sinn Fein candidate, she refused to take her seat. She was also, at the time of the election, in prison for anti-conscription activities, having also previously been condemned to lifetime penal servitude for shooting at soldiers in the Easter Rising; she had been released after a year or so in deference to her status as a woman—and perhaps also her status as an aristocrat.¹¹ The second woman elected—and the first then to take her seat—was Nancy Astor, who was returned in a by-election in 1918.

¹¹ I somewhat lost my sympathy for Constance Markievicz after reading Sebastian Barry’s novel *A Long Long Way* (2005), which follows a young Irishman who signs up to fight with the Allied Forces in the First World War and whose unit was dragged into what to him was a completely mystifying engagement at the Dublin Post Office, where he had no idea who was shooting at whom.

The figures from then onwards are almost beyond belief: there is no way one could write the history of the next one hundred years as a slow but steady progress towards gender equality. For the first seventy of those years, the proportion of women elected to Westminster did not even hit the 5 per cent mark: 1987 was the first moment at which it climbed (marginally) to 6.3 per cent. There was, here, no ‘natural’ progression. Indeed it was not until the Labour Party introduced the first effective measure of affirmative action—all-women short lists for the selection of some of the Party’s parliamentary candidates—that the figure jumped (in 1997) to something even mildly respectable.¹²

Table 1: Women members elected at General Elections: 1918–2017. Source: From Richard Kelly *Women in the House of Commons*, Commons Library Briefing, SN06651, 16 June 2017.

Election	Number	Percentage of all MPs
1918	1	0.10
1922	2	0.30
1923	8	1.30
1924	4	0.70
1929	14	2.30
1931	15	2.40
1935	9	1.50
1945	24	3.80
1950	21	3.40
1951	17	2.70
1955	24	3.80
1959	25	4.00
1964	29	4.60
1966	26	4.10
1970	26	4.10
1974 (Feb)	23	3.60
1974 (Oct)	27	4.30
1979	19	3.00
1983	23	3.50
1987	41	6.30
1992	60	9.20
1997	120	18.20
2001	118	17.90
2005	128	19.80
2010	143	22.00
2015	191	29.38
2017	208	32.00

¹²The policy was contested by two aspiring male candidates at an industrial tribunal which ruled it discriminatory, but while the Party then suspended the policy, many candidates had already been chosen, hence it still had a significant effect in the 1997 election. Subsequently, legislation was introduced making it legal for political parties to employ affirmative action in this way, and the Labour Party reinstated the policy.

Or to put this in diagrammatic form:

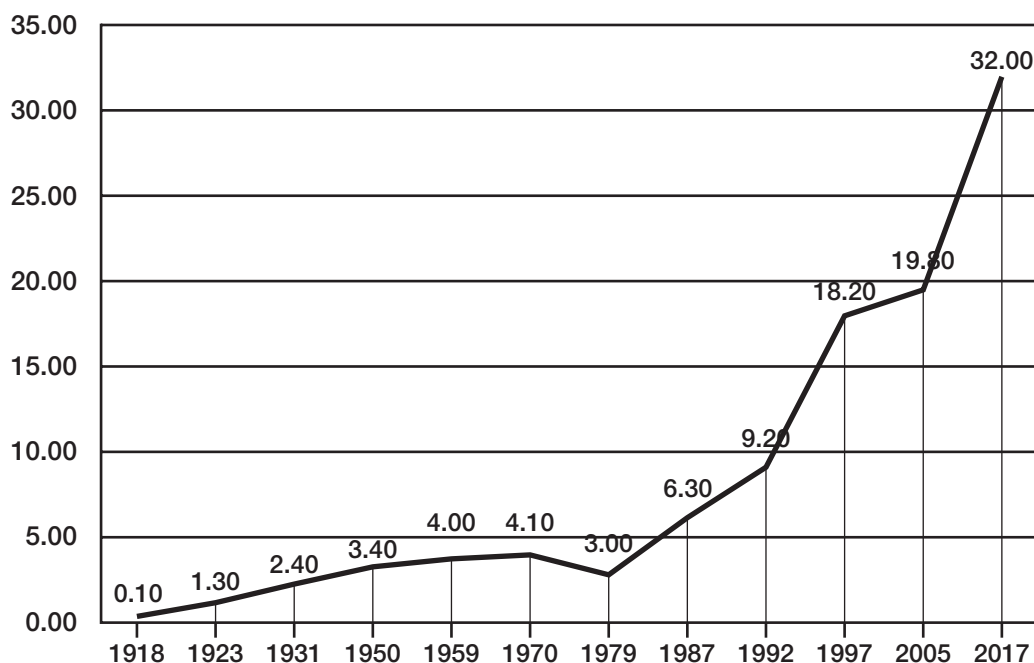


Figure 1: Percentage of female MPs at successive General Elections.

One hundred years on from the legislation that removed the sex disqualification, women make up 32 per cent of the House of Commons, fewer than one in three of MPs. The country appears at number 39 in the world's table for women's political representation, considerably behind Sweden, Norway, Spain, France, but also far behind many countries in Central and South America and Africa.¹³ I noted earlier that it would be considered a serious error for those taking the UK citizenship test to pick 'the rule of men' as a key British value. When you look, however, at some of these figures, you might be forgiven for arguing that this is precisely what characterises the society.

Consider also what many of us have thought of as the most 'modern' sector of the economy: the high-tech, innovative, fast-moving world of computing and artificial intelligence. In the USA, women held 57 per cent of all professional occupations in 2015, yet only 25 per cent of all computing occupations (Ashcraft *et al.* 2016). In 2017, they made up 23 per cent of Apple's tech employees, 19 per cent of Google's, 17 per cent of those at Facebook. Only one in six tech specialists in the UK is a

¹³ See the constantly updated data on Women in Parliaments produced by the Inter Parliamentary Union <http://www.ipu.org>

woman.¹⁴ And fitting well with my argument, this is not something to be interpreted simply as an overly slow process of change, for in the case of the computing industry, it is not a matter of delay in the forwards movement, but of significant backwards steps. In the 1940s and 1950s, women were very well represented in computer programming: indeed Janet Abbate opens her history of women's changing participation in the industry with a quote from a female programmer hired in 1953: 'It really amazed me that these *men* were programmers, because I thought it was women's work!' (Abbate 2012: 1). The number of women has since fallen markedly, and the maleness of the culture has increased, with several high-profile cases of sex discrimination in the tech world in recent years, as well as compelling reports on endemic sexism. In 2015, to give one example, a group of female tech investors and executives conducted a survey of two hundred senior-level women in Silicon Valley. Their results—published as 'The Elephant in the Valley'—reported 84 per cent of participants saying they had been told they were 'too aggressive' in the office, 66 per cent saying they had been excluded from important events because of their gender, and 60 per cent reporting unwanted sexual advances in the workplace, mostly from those above them in the career structure.¹⁵ The prevalence of sexism and sex discrimination in the Palo Altos of this world has to be a puzzle for those who see modernity as on the side of gender equality.

One way of accommodating this evidence is to see it as a reminder of how long it takes for modern societies to deliver on their promise, but *not* as something that seriously undermines the claim about modernity being characterised by equality of the sexes. People continue, that is, to believe in a logic to modernity that drives us, eventually, in the direction of gender equality, sexual freedom, and human rights. Discordant evidence—like that from the computing industry—is then set aside or explained away in an argument I term the 'not yet' of modernity. We find an early example of this in the writings of John Stuart Mill, who was exemplary in his support for women's suffrage (though not so good on plural voting, being a strong advocate of extra votes for skilled workers and university graduates). In *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, and much more widely read by feminists of the period than Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), he attacks, not just the political, legal, and economic inequalities between the sexes, but the 'subjection' (to use his term) and the violence that so often characterised relations between the sexes. In his *Autobiography*, he attributes many of the ideas in this work to Harriet Taylor,

¹⁴ Women in Tech <http://www.womenintech.co.uk/the-future-of-women-in-it>. This contrasts sharply with figures from Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand, where women commonly make up 50 per cent or more of computer science graduates.

¹⁵ <https://www.elephantinthevalley.com/>

later Harriet Taylor Mill, though not, he says, the basic conviction that all legal, political, social, and domestic relations between the sexes should be ones of complete equality, which predated his first meeting with her. Indeed, he rather sweetly says that the strength of his conviction on this issue was ‘more than anything else, the originating cause of the interest she felt in me’ (Mill 1873/1964: 175).

Mill was, then, profoundly aware of the inequalities and subordination, but he represented these primarily as a hangover from earlier times, at odds with what he took to be the principle of modern society, which was that people’s position and prospects should be determined by competition, not birth. If that principle is true, he argued, ‘we ought to act as if we believed it, and not to ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy, any more than to be born black instead of white, or a commoner instead of a nobleman, shall decide a person’s position through all life—shall interdict people from all the more elevated social positions, and from all, except a few, respectable occupations’ (Mill 1869/1975: 448). In his reading, the continuing subordination of women stood out ‘as an isolated fact in modern social institutions; a solitary breach of what has become their fundamental law; a single relic of an old world of thought and practice exploded in everything else’ (449); and he attributed the failure to recognise the implications of the new principle to the operations of male self-interest. (He regarded this as a rare case of cross-class unity among men: whatever their status in the social world, all men could share an interest in keeping women subordinate.) In this account, Mill ascribes to modernity a principle—the principle of ‘competition not birth’—that should in all consistency render distinctions of sex and race irrelevant. That it had not yet done so is a reflection of the power of the past and the concerted efforts of men to hold on to that power.

Mill frames this as the underlying *principle* of modern society: the meaning or the essence of the modern. For others, it is more a matter of ideas, and the ways in which ‘modern’ articulations of equality inspired wider and wider applications. If we take the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, for example, we can see what seems an astonishingly rapid process of elaboration and extension. Already in late 1798, the deputies of the National Assembly start grappling with what equal rights means as regards religious minorities: should Protestants, then, have the same voting rights as Catholics? (agreed in 1789); and if Protestants, what about Jews? (agreed in 1791).¹⁶ What, moreover, of previous property qualifications? (swept away in 1792, though still leaving servants and the unemployed without a vote). What of freed black men in the colonies? (awarded voting rights in 1792). And how could the notion of all men being born equal be viewed as compatible with the existence of slavery in these

¹⁶Hunt (2007) documents the rapid extensions in chapter 4 of *Inventing Human Rights*. I draw on her account in the following paragraph.

colonies? (the abolition of slavery in 1794). What, some intrepid characters also asked, of the women? Olympe de Gouges published in 1791 a *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, but ended up on the guillotine for her pains; Nicolas de Caritat, the Marquis de Condorcet, and one of the revolutionaries, published a pamphlet *On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship* in 1790, but he too became a casualty of the revolution, dying in 1794 in prison. The question was raised, the extension was proposed, but women remained too far outside the sphere of conceivability even in these moments of revolutionary fervour.

In *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt does not minimise the initial exclusions, the resistance to thinking of women as among those ‘born equal’, and the subsequent reversals of many of the revolutionary acts, as when slavery was re-established by Napoleon in 1802. But she joins with Mill in offering an account of the inner logic—she writes at one point of the ‘the bulldozer force of the revolutionary logic of rights’ (Hunt 2007: 160)—that drives us forward towards the completion of modern ideals. ‘The notion of the “rights of man”, like revolution itself, opened up an unpredictable space for discussion, conflict and change. The promise of those rights can be denied, suppressed, or just remain unfulfilled, but it does not die’ (175). Once the natural equality of ‘all men being born equal’ was on the table, it was sure to be picked up and claimed as a rallying cry by many excluded and marginalised groups.

There is undoubted power to this argument, and I do not in any way deny that ideas inspire, nor that they often inspire people to assert and claim far more than was originally intended. But I part company with such arguments when they make claims about a defining principle of modern society or a logic of modernity; and particularly when they encourage us to attribute discordant evidence either to hangovers from a previous epoch (Mill’s explanation for the continuing subjection of women), or to the delaying power of counter-movements slowing down an otherwise unstoppable progress. This latter was Hunt’s explanation: she argues that new ideas about human rights called forth what she describes as their ‘evil twins’ (Hunt 2007: 212), virulent forms of sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism that challenged ‘modern’ ideas about natural equality by insisting on biological difference. The problem with either of these approaches is that they retain at their centre an undiminished, unblemished, notion of what modernity, in its essence, offers in the way of gender equality. The problem, as they represent it, is never with modernity, but always with the things that are delaying its progress. The unfolding of the logic may and does get blocked; the principles of modern society may be distorted for centuries by remnants of the pre-modern that hold grimly on to previous ways of life. But on this view, any failings in gender equality—like the exceedingly long passage between the articulation, in 18th-century Europe and America, of the rights of man, and the much later delivery of equal rights for women—are not to be regarded as failings in modernity per se. All they show us is

that modernity is not yet fully instantiated, has not yet fully arrived. Note that this makes the superiority of the modern a matter of definitional truth. The modern is given an essential meaning, captured in some defining principle or principles; discordant evidence is explained away as reflecting the drag of past tradition or the power of counter-movements; and modernity becomes insulated from critique.

GENDER TRANSFORMATIONS

There is a kind of special pleading here that we should resist. The truth is that in the period we conventionally associate with the rise of modern society—roughly mid-18th century onwards—new patterns of gender relation were coming into shape that intensified rather than disrupted gender difference. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall showed in their path-breaking *Family Fortunes* (1987), the reconfiguration of the family in the 18th and 19th centuries involved a much sharper demarcation between home and work, and in the process, between women and men. Wives who once participated in the family business now withdrew to domestic seclusion; daughters who once helped in the home now devoted themselves to their feminine accomplishments; and middle-class women, in particular, developed what feminists from Wollstonecraft onwards derided as a parasite role. It became part of the ideals of the new way of life—of ‘modern life’—that women need not bother their heads with business, but could decline gracefully into their decorative role. Elizabeth Gaskell marks some of this process in the contrast she draws in *North and South* between Mrs Thornton, who had shared the hardships of her son’s early life before he became a successful mill-owner, and her daughter Fanny, who is taken up with fashions and fripperies, and lacks the strength to endure difficulties with patience. So far as gender relations are concerned, it is often easier to read the changes associated with the so-called birth of modernity as retreat than progression.

Indeed, through this period, legislation in a range of countries was closing off avenues for women’s political involvement. It was not so much that modern life did not *yet* open the doors to women, or resisted their entry for longer than we might have hoped; it actively shut them. In 1778, for example, the House of Commons introduced a prohibition on women attending or listening to parliamentary debates; in 1832, it expressly closed off future paths to women’s suffrage by inserting ‘male person’—no longer just ‘person’—into suffrage legislation. In France in 1793—just in the period when the deputies were deciding to extend the ‘rights of man’ to include so many more categories of men—political organisations for women were dissolved. In 1848, decrees were passed preventing women creating or belonging to political clubs or associations (Towns 2013: 78). It was, in other words, in the so-called age

of modernity that female engagement in politics came to be seen as at odds with advanced ideals.

I do not see how we can regard this trajectory as part of the ‘not yet’ of modernity, or attribute these shifts simply to hangovers from a pre-modern past. Indeed if one takes it, as both Adam Smith and Karl Marx in their different ways did, that it was the generalisation of market society, and detachment of measurements of value from pre-existing social status, that enabled these novel ideas of equality, then they were associated from the start with the commodification of people as well as goods, with the spread of colonial despotisms, and the naturalisation of both gender and racial difference. Elizabeth Anderson (2004: 352) argues that ‘capitalism, by enabling ordinary people to make a living without depending on noblesse oblige, thereby transformed the moral economy of social standing to a more egalitarian and potentially universalizable footing.’ But if it is capitalism we have to thank for the possibility of thinking of ‘all men as born equal’, we should be more willing to recognise that the new ideas pointed as much towards enhanced *inequality* as towards their more attractive opposite. Trying to explain away shortcomings by reference to the pre-modern ignores the complex ways in which gender divisions (but also class and racial divisions) have been reshaped, and in some areas deepened, as capitalist modernity has gone on its way. There is much in what we call modern society that reproduces and reaffirms gender inequality, and even manages to invent new forms. The 18th and 19th centuries were partly marked by an infantilisation of ‘Woman’, as she was put on her pedestal but then told not to do anything useful; while the 20th and 21st centuries have been marked by an increasing sexualisation of girls and women, as we are subjected to ever-tightening beauty norms¹⁷ and to sustained, even intensified, sexual harassment.

In a recent lecture at the British Academy, Nicola Lacey (2018) traced some of the shifts within the criminal justice system as regards gender, and drew attention to a puzzling anomaly. Over a century in which there have been numerous advances in the status of women—including the *Representation of the People Act*, but also multiple legal reforms to eliminate discrimination at work and in the professions, and major increases in women’s participation in higher education and employment—over this century, women prisoners as a proportion of the total prison population falls. There are a couple of spikes in the figures (round about the time of the suffrage militancy and the First World War, and then again, in the Second World War), but basically the trend is significantly downwards, towards around 5 per cent. We do not normally measure progress by how badly women are behaving, but clearly, this *is* a puzzle. If gender differences are narrowing, as seems to be the case over so many aspects of our political, social, and economic life, and if women are asserting their agency in

¹⁷See Heather Widdows (2018) for a powerful account of this.

increasingly visible ways, why is there still such extraordinary gender differentiation as regards criminal activities? (I admit that I am setting aside as one possible explanation that men are just naturally bad and women naturally good.) One of the points that struck me especially forcefully from the analysis is that, while there are plenty of literary depictions in the 20th and 21st centuries of women behaving badly, deviant behaviour by women is now most typically represented as linked to passionate relationships or passionate relationships gone sour: to the woman scorned, to acts of revenge, to acts of high passion. The storyline attached to women is, in other words, still deeply gendered, and in some ways more deeply so than in the 17th or 18th centuries.¹⁸ Informal gender-based controls remain intense, and in some ways intensified, even through this period of structural and legal change. Modern life may appear to have opened many doors, but it does so in a highly constrained manner.

Scepticism about modernity goes back a long way. It includes, of course, those nostalgic for an older order in which everyone supposedly knew their place, but it also includes many of the leading theorists of the 20th century. Max Weber saw modernity as a process of disenchantment, bringing in its train a bureaucratisation and instrumentalisation of knowledge that he considered positive in comparison to ‘irrational’ or romantic beliefs, but also potentially confining us to an ‘iron cage’ within which we lose the capacity for heroism or civic action. The theorists of the Frankfurt School saw modernity as the triumph of commodification, and feared a world in which people became the consumers and producers of their own alienation, losing the capacity to engage critically with the structures in which they lived. More recently, post-colonial scholars have taken issue with the way notions of modernity tend to model themselves on the parochial experience of one small part of the world, projecting what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 7) has termed a ‘first in Europe, then elsewhere’ imaginary that takes Europe and America as the repositories of all that is progressive and advanced. This last is a crucial part of my own concern: the way that easy assumptions about gender equality being a core feature of our own modern society encourage both a complacency about how far we have progressed towards equality (not so far, in my view, as many seem to think); and an exaggerated confidence about our superiority to other cultures and countries. Claims about gender equality as a core principle of modern society feed into discourses about ‘our Western values’ that we have good reason to distrust.

Let me end by stressing that my argument is not that nothing ever changes, nor that one country is as bad as any other when it comes to equality between the sexes.

¹⁸In an earlier work, Lacey (2008) traces shifts in perceptions of female criminality from the 18th to the 19th centuries, starting with Moll Flanders as a thoroughly autonomous woman, and ending with Tess of the d’Urbervilles, destroyed by a crime of passion..

In rejecting the notion of an inner logic to modernity that drives us on to ever-greater equality, I am endorsing, instead, the importance of political struggle, like those political struggles that won the first phase of women's enfranchisement one hundred years ago. Modernity did not do this for us; nor the gratitude of the politicians for women's selfless contributions to the war effort; it was many decades of courageous political struggle that achieved it. Politics matters, but then precisely because of this, we should not fall into the opposite error of suggesting that nothing ever changes, that each period is as bad as what went before when it comes to gender equality, or that one country is as patriarchal as any other. Merging everything into more of the same hardly does justice to specificity. In implying that nothing we do makes any difference, it also seems to dash hopes of achieving change. My point is not that we cannot make progress on the matter of gender equality. My more modest point is that we should not assume too readily that modernity is on our side, or that if we just wait long enough, things will sort themselves out. The suffrage campaigners knew that there was no inevitability to the achievement of women's suffrage, and we would do well to emulate them in our own campaigns.

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