

'Rational Creatures and Free Citizens': Republicanism, Feminism and the Writing of History

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Modern republicanism and modern feminism both trace their roots back to the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century had caught the imagination of intellectual Europe, marking a further stage in the move from reliance on received authority to reliance on the power of the human mind, allied to systematic observation, to discover truth about the material world and the universe. Enlightenment thinkers applied the admired scientific methods to human beings and the organisation of human societies. At the level of the individual, they emphasised the rational aspect of human nature, the ability to think and reason, to decide between good and evil, and to make responsible and moral decisions about individuals' own lives. Since reason was an attribute of every human being rather than a monopoly in the hands of the high-born, they queried the allocation of resources, power and privilege, on the basis of arbitrary differences like birth. Hereditary monarchy and all forms of hereditary access to privilege and power came under critical scrutiny. At the level of society, Enlightenment thinkers looked for universal laws controlling human behaviour, as Newton had looked for the laws governing the movement of the planets.

Republican thinking was stimulated by Enlightenment ideas, and by both the American revolution in the 1770s and the French revolution from 1789. These fed into the long tradition of European republican thought, based on the the classical education universally enjoyed by the better-off, with its knowledge of the political ideas of Greece and Rome. From this came the concept of the classical republic, the *res publica* or public thing, with the virtuous and active citizens at the centre of political life. However, this citizenship was confined to male heads of households, and excluded all dependents, including women and slaves. Enlightenment

values deepened the democratic values of republicanism, stressing that good government must be in the interests of all the people and must be one in which all the people had a say. Writers, like Thomas Paine, advocated putting the principles of freedom and equality into practice on the ground, through political action. The French revolution saw one of the major European states attempt to do just that. Republican writings were widely read in late eighteenth-century Ireland, especially Paine's latest work, *The Rights of Man* (1791-2), which defended the French revolution, and presented a detailed Enlightenment and republican critique of the structure of British government.

Both the Enlightenment and the French revolution created a space and a climate which encouraged the assertion of claims for women's equality with men. In eighteenth-century Europe, for the small number of women – and men – who voiced such ideas, equality meant equality in terms of moral and rational worth, freedom to fulfil individual potential, and recognition as full members of the human race, instead of the second class membership allocated to women. The emphasis was not on equal work, but on recognition of the value of different work and roles. In Enlightenment debate, the position of women in western Europe was analysed in new terms, not of what God had ordained, but of 'nature', what was 'natural' for their sex. Nevertheless, women's nature and role continued to be defined by most male thinkers, in the context of their view of the relationship between the sexes. That role was famously defined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762. The education of a woman, he wrote, must be planned in relation to man:

To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught when young.¹

The view accepted by most Enlightenment thinkers of women's nature, fitted this role. Women were essentially non-rational, guided by emotion and feelings rather than moral judgment, and needing the guidance and control of rational men to find the path to virtue.

The language of reason, and of revolution and citizenship, became familiar to all sections of society, and disadvantaged groups expressed old concerns in new political terms. In France, for some years after 1789 radical women, mostly middle-class, pressed for specific reforms, formed clubs, marshalled their arguments, and began to petition the National Assembly. Demands included marriage reform, divorce, better employment, education, political liberty, and a general equality of rights. One of the best known, Olympe de Gouges, in 1791 published *Les Droits de la Femme*, demanding complete equality in the public sphere. In 1793 the Club des citoyennes républicaines révolutionnaires was founded, but,

in October of that year, the revolutionary government outlawed all women's clubs, and told women their contribution to the republic lay strictly within the home, where they could rear good republican citizens. The Assembly did pass some reforms in the area of divorce and property rights, but not on education or the public role of women.

While Britain did not experience a revolution, the early years of the French revolution made radical political change seem a real possibility and in this heightened atmosphere Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792. A writer and intellectual, unequivocally committed to the values of the Enlightenment and republicanism, and who had already published a book on the rights of men in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, she now argued the case for women's equality in the terms of republican citizenship.

Her main target was the basic contradiction underlying Rousseau's views on the education of women already noted. Either women were rational human creatures who should be both educated and expected to act as such, or men should declare openly that they did not believe women were fully human. For Wollstonecraft, as for most Enlightenment thinkers, reason and virtue were closely linked. To be virtuous one had to be free to act as reason dictated. According to Rousseau, a woman 'will always be in subjection to a man, or men's judgment, and she will never be free to set her own opinion above his...'² Wollstonecraft responded: 'In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. That was Rousseau's opinion respecting men; I extend it to women...'³

While she argued that all knowledge and occupations should be open to both sexes, she saw women as being primarily occupied as wives and mothers. To be good as either, they must first be self-determining virtuous human beings. The political, social and economic structures of society forced women into dependence on men, and hence into subordination. This then made it an economic necessity for women to seek to attract a man who would support them. It was useless to expect virtue from women while they were so dependent on men. If women were recognised as free, independent citizens, they could then be expected, as other citizens were expected, to work, and to work to acceptable standards. Being wives and mothers would then be seen as real work by citizens, contributing to society, and a revolution in the quality of mothering would follow. 'Make women rational creatures and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers'.⁴

Some Enlightenment writers, female and male, supported improved education for women on the grounds of improved motherhood. Wollstonecraft was one of the few who justified the rights of women on

the same grounds as the rights of men, on shared human reason: 'Speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother'.⁵ She went further still in seeing motherhood in terms of citizenship, rejecting any absolute division between the private and public spheres.

Ireland did see a rebellion, but not one which, like the French revolution, led to a new constitution and a new state. The defeat of the United Irishmen in 1798 was followed by the passing of the Act of Union in 1800. We do not know what sort of state would have followed success. Nor do we, as of now, know how widespread demands for women's citizenship were among the women in the movement. However, we do know that some at least had developed opinions. Mary Ann McCracken (1770-1866), writing from Belfast to her brother and leading United Irishman, Henry Joy McCracken in Kilmainham Prison in Dublin on 16 March 1797, put the case in language and ideas reminiscent of Wollstonecraft (who was widely read in Ireland), and with the added edge of the French *citoyennes*. She wrote of the dignity of women's nature and their current situation, 'degraded by custom and education ...'; if woman was intended as man's companion, she 'must of course be his equal in understanding ...'; women must take responsibility for their own liberation: 'is it not almost time ... that the female part of creation as well as the male should throw off the fetters with which they have been so long mentally bound and ... rise to the situation for which they were designed ...'; they must believe that 'rational ideas of liberty and equality' applied to themselves as well as to men, and must cultivate a 'genuine love of Liberty and just sense of her value', if their support of liberty for others is to be of value. Like the women activists of the French revolution she urges that a new Irish constitution should include women as citizens, and hopes 'it is reserved for the Irish nation to strike out something new and to shew an example of candour generosity and justice superior to any that have gone before them ...'⁶ It was not to be. Sixteen months later almost to the day she walked with her brother, her arm through his, to his execution in Belfast. The rebellion had been crushed, and there was no new Ireland in the building.

A number of points arise relevant to our understanding of how history is written. Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Ann McCracken and the radical Frenchwomen were not outsiders pressing claims on movements of which they were not a part. They were all active participants who from within tried to broaden the intellectual base. Olympe de Gouges and the French women who urged women's rights to full citizenship on the revolutionary leadership, were active revolutionaries themselves. Wollstonecraft's writings, including the *Vindication*, are part of the body of Enlightenment

and republican thought. McCracken, while not a sworn member of the United Irishmen, was active in the broad movement. Nancy Curtin, one of the leading historians of the United Irishmen, describes her as taking 'the radicals' notion of the natural rights of man to self-government to its logical conclusion – the extension of these rights to women', and notes that she 'seems to have been far better read in the classic republican and radical texts than her brother'.⁷ These women took part in the mainstream development of republican thinking and practice, and, in addition, argued for a more inclusive concept of republican citizenship. By any criteria this would seem a significant contribution. Yet, few histories of the Enlightenment, the French revolution or the radical politics of 1790s Ireland see women as part of the action or see the feminist challenge as part of the political thinking of the period.

Most survey histories of societies have been written from a perspective that sees males as the active agents in human history, dominating the 'public' sphere of political, macro-economic, intellectual, and cultural affairs, and as the instigators of the patterns of change and continuity that historians study. Women are implicitly seen as passive spectators or followers in the public sphere and as in control in their special domain of the 'private' or domestic sphere. The two spheres are seen to operate separately and independently.

A major factor in this perspective is that few historians have seen the relationships between men and women as a part of history. Instead, relationships between the sexes appear to have been taken for granted, as 'natural', biologically based, essentially the same across societies and over time, unchanging and unchangeable, and so outside the remit of the historian.

To see these relationships as solely 'natural' and outside history seems extraordinary once attention is drawn to them. In eighteenth-century Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe, access to resources and power was directed to males, rather than females, through a combination of laws, regulations, and customs. These involved inheritance laws, marriage laws including husbands' legal control of their wives' persons and property, and double sexual standards in law and daily life, as well as the exclusion of women from the universities, the professions, and political life. It is difficult to see how all these together could be explained as occurring 'naturally', without any purposeful human intervention. Yet, few historians have seen them as needing to be even adverted to or described, let alone analysed or explained as significant aspects of the history of a society.

If historians do not see relationships between the sexes as part of history, then feminist argument and campaigns have no reference point. If historians do not see the historical realities that provoked them, they appear to come from nowhere. This blindness of the historians appears to

be the main reason why survey histories, when they do mention women's rights campaigns, which is seldom, almost never consider their origins, their significance, their interaction with other movements, or the light they throw on other developments.

The 'discovery' of these relationships, as the proper subject for historical research and interpretation, came in response to a simple question: what did women do in history? This question came to be asked when the current growth in women's history developed under the impetus of the new wave of the women's movement in the 1960s. It arose because opponents argued that women had always lived happily in a purely domestic sphere. Attempts to answer it uncovered, among other things, both earlier assertions of women's right to autonomy and the structures of societies which gave rise to them. It became clear that male-female relationships in history could not be ascribed solely to a simple biological determinism. It was necessary to distinguish between, on the one hand, whatever biological differences exist between the sexes, and on the other, the roles societies prescribe and enforce for males and females. These roles involve the political, social, and economic consequences experienced by an individual in any particular society – at any particular time – depending on birth as a male or female. Feminist theorists took the word 'gender' and gave it a new meaning to denote this social construction of sex.

This highlights the significance of both the questions historians ask and the questions they do not ask. Women's emancipation campaigns, and the reasons for them were fully visible in the historical evidence. It was historians' perceptions of who and what was significant that made it irrelevant to ask: what did women do? This reminds us that we all bring our political and other beliefs to the writing and reading of history. While this is inevitable, it also indicates the importance of listening to new questions, and paying less attention to who is asking them, and more to how we try to answer them. New questions may be politically motivated in various ways, but that does not invalidate a question that opens up hitherto unexplored areas of human experience. We may also ponder what conscious or unconscious motivations contribute to the various blindspots of historians, as well as what questions remain as yet unasked.

Gender analysis is a powerful tool in historical research and interpretation, and it is ironic, to say the least, that before its value has been recognised and exploited on any broad scale, popular usage has translated it into a synonym for sex, and so drained it of its value. However, whatever name we use for it, it is important that the concept itself and the reality it names do not become invisible again. Once the relationships between women and men are brought under historical scrutiny, sex takes its place with other categories of analysis, such as class, colour, race, religion, nationality, wealth or access to resources. The interaction of all

these determines the location of individuals in time and place, and influences the opportunities and choices open to them. Seeing this interaction eliminates the danger of a reductionism that sees all women as always oppressed by all men. For example, the interaction of class and sex will find some women exercising power over men and other women. Women as well as men can be oppressors. The reality is that we have human beings, female and male, grappling with their situation, with varying degrees of altruism and self-interest, awareness and muddled thinking, within the constraints of sex, class, and the other categories.

Women's history in Ireland, while not as fully developed as elsewhere, is rooted and growing. Relevant to the discussion here, is its discovery of women's emancipation activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nineteenth-century campaigns, some of them conducted in close cooperation with British activists, and others separate Irish endeavours, achieved a number of substantial reforms: improved standards in the education of girls and women, including admission to universities and degrees; married women's control of their own property; wider employment opportunities; and the local government vote and eligibility for election to most local government bodies. The early twentieth-century campaign for parliamentary suffrage, as well as continued pressure on other fronts won full citizenship, including full political participation, for women in the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State. After 1922 activism continued, albeit with a lower public profile, as feminists tried, with varying degrees of success, to counter the general hostility of the conservative Free State governments of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s to women's participation in the public sphere.

These findings have yet to infiltrate the 'mainstream' survey histories of Ireland. To be fair, there is not, as yet, a sustained and comprehensive overview of the history of the Irish women's movement. There are a few good monographs on the suffrage movement and quite a wide range of collections and scattered articles on various aspects. It may be that an inclusive overview or overviews are needed before the breakthrough will come. Be that as it may, for a group, society, or nation, history plays the role that personal memory does for the individual. What is not recorded by the historian has not existed for the reader. So effective can the memory loss be, that when the new wave of the women's movement, Women's Liberation, burst very publicly onto the scene in 1970, few of the participants were aware that Irish activism went back at least to the 1860s. Even today, knowledge of the history of Irish feminist organisation is confined to a small group of the interested, and has made little inroad into the awareness of the public at large or popular political debate. This is only too evident in the very limited perception of feminism generally portrayed in the media, where it is seen as a 'women's issue' and essentially a matter

of women trying to compete on equal terms with men within the existing structures of society.

So, the cycle of reinventing the wheel continues. Time and energy, which could be spent in critical self-analysis and reflection on what could be learned from the earlier experience, are instead used in rediscovering information and insights. Equally, of course, successive generations of men have lost the memory that male-dominated societies imposed such restrictions on the areas of human activity it allowed women to enter, and have not had to ponder the implications. How many other distortions of our shared past have yet to be recognised?

However, once we see the relationships between the sexes as part of history, this brings feminist thinking unequivocally into the arena of political thought where it makes its own contribution to debate. In practice, of course feminism has always engaged in political debate and argument with other analyses. Again, because the political, social, and economic relationships between the sexes have been overlooked, so too the contribution of feminism to debate has – until very recently – been largely ignored in discussion of political thought. At the international level, a large body of critical feminist theory has developed over the past 20 years or so, and is beginning to find its way into some histories of political thought.⁸ In Ireland, so far there has been only a limited amount of publication on political thought, and feminism is not included.

Feminism does not produce a blueprint for the ideal society. Its contribution to political thought is to insist that the political, social, and economic relationships between the sexes be scrutinised. It argues that sex-roles which limit women's control over their own lives, and which subordinate women to men, and women's needs to men's needs, are oppressive to women, dehumanising to both sexes, and damaging to society as a whole. In interaction with other analyses of the dynamics and structures of societies, various feminist political theories have developed, and so far none has become recognised as the definitive orthodoxy.

Nineteenth-century liberalism, itself a product of the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, sees human beings as autonomous, rational individuals, competing for success, wealth and status. The state's role is to create a level playing field by removing obstacles based on factors such as birth, religion, or ethnicity. Other than this, it should interfere as little as possible. However, in a liberal democracy, like Ireland today, feminists, whether or not they agree with the liberal world-view, find they have to call for continuing state intervention to remove obstacles based on sex. The social construction of sex, including the unequal division of domestic labour, the smaller earning power of women, and the distribution of power within families which determines whose interests get priority, inhibits equal competition between the sexes within the worlds of paid work and

politics. Feminists argue that a liberal democracy, which aims to treat all citizens equally, will have to exercise active discrimination. To achieve equal treatment, account must be taken of the differences in the life situation of different groups, and the balance of advantage and disadvantage has to be redressed. This may be done in various ways, for instance by providing child-care services to free women to compete on equal terms, by insisting on a quota of women on boards, or by anti-discrimination legislation.

These arguments are valid and important, but have limitations if the aim is to radically change society. In the first place, measures that aim to adjust the balance *between* the sexes often overlook the differences *within* each sex. Freeing women from various domestic responsibilities may allow more affluent women to compete with more affluent men, but may make little difference to poorer women and poorer men whose participation may be inhibited by other factors, such as lower educational achievement, lack of a car, etc. Secondly, it can easily slide into an assumption that the objective of feminism is solely equal rights and equal opportunities between the sexes. Equal participation of women with men in political, social, and economic life will only create a more inclusive and equitable society across the board if women *per se* are more committed to such values and to devising policies to promote them. Neither the historical record nor today's world show women consistently supporting different political policies to men. Like men, women involved in politics are, and have been, members of parties and movements whose policies differ fundamentally. In any case, there is a contradiction at the core of a view that sees women's rights as solely concerned with women attaining the position and privileges men enjoy. If we reject sex-role models which see women as subordinate to men, and which limit women's autonomy and control over their own lives, the corollary must be rejection of a male model of dominance and authority. The logic of the feminist starting point is the need to develop new and more fully human models for both sexes.

Marxist analysis also drew on the Enlightenment, in its case on the search for the laws governing human behaviour and societies. It believes that capitalism, based on private ownership and competition for profits, produces an unjust society with high levels of deprivation and unhappiness. Marxism and socialism argue that society as a whole should control the entire economic and political systems, which should be developed in a non-competitive way in the interests of the welfare of all. Feminisms which accept Marxist and socialist views criticise liberal feminism as bourgeois and interested only in middle-class women. In Marxist and socialist analysis, *all* women will only be fully liberated when the class issue is resolved and capitalism replaced by socialism. In turn, feminists challenge Marxism and socialism that gender analysis must be

incorporated with their class analysis if women are to benefit from a class revolution.

Radical feminism emerged in the 1960s, and took yet another approach. It saw both biological sex *and* socially constructed sex-roles as crucial issues. Sexuality and sexual activity, as well as childbearing and rearing, were areas for political scrutiny and analysis. It rejected any aim of making women 'equal' to men and celebrated women's difference.

There are many feminisms, many feminist theories with many variations and interactions. Few people's thinking fits neatly into any one theory and most combine elements from a number.

All this points to the potential of dialogue between republicanism and feminism to contribute to radical change in society. Feminist awareness of the need to recognise social difference when trying to create conditions of equality and freedom, can engage with republicanism's insistence that good government must be concerned with the welfare of all citizens and must facilitate the participation of all citizens. Feminism also brings its insight that current models of masculinity and femininity may be obstacles to creating the republic; in particular the macho model with its reluctance to admit error and its obsession with saving face. If socialist principles are included in the dialogue, a critical approach to the existing organisation of the world, socially, economically and politically could follow. The present organisation and structures subordinate people to profits. This may favour male participation over female, but it does not aim to facilitate the human development, welfare and happiness of either sex. Instead of trying to fit women into this model we could ask what forms of economic organisation would best suit the real needs of women, men, and children. The same question could be addressed to political participation. The dialogue could also seek ways to counter the inhuman aspects of the current global, free-market economy where many of the issues that concern feminism and republicanism arise in new forms. Critics of globalisation stress the need to counter the belief that a competitive and unregulated free market, divorced from social responsibility, will best serve the interests of people everywhere because it is the most effective way of increasing wealth. It may increase wealth, but that wealth will benefit the few and not the many, unless some form of global regulation is devised to protect individuals from bearing the costs of unchecked competition, through job insecurity, the breakdown of communities, increasing wealth for some accompanied by the increasing alienation of others, or destruction of the environment.⁹

Feminism, republicanism, and democracy are concerned with combining individual freedom and social responsibility. Feminism is not a 'women's issue.' It is a human issue with implications for society as a whole, and it addresses fundamental questions concerning the definition of a human being and a citizen. Perhaps because the logic of its analysis

leads to critical scrutiny of masculinity as well as femininity, male thinkers have been slow to accept this. The emphasis of the women's rights argument in the 1790s was on a number of concerns: inclusiveness; the need to recognise and respect diversity among individuals and roles; the responsibilities as well as the rights of citizenship; and the need for education for good citizenship. All these have an applicability that is not confined to women and can engage constructively with the republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity/sorority. The writing of history, just as it played a role in losing the memory of feminist challenges to patriarchal societies, can now play a role in helping to retrieve some of that lost memory. If we can start by recovering the interaction of republicanism and women's emancipation in the 1790s and incorporating it into the written histories of the period, we can prepare the ground for ongoing engagement in the present day. If history is what the evidence forces us to believe, the first task must be to make that evidence so visible that it cannot be ignored. This is part of the project of writing a more inclusive human history. The challenge here is to historians, and perhaps particularly to historians of women.

Notes

¹ J.J. Rousseau, *Émile* (London: Dent 1974), p. 321

² *Ibid.*, p. 333

³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Dent 1982), p. 25

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159

⁶ Mary McNeill, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken 1770-1866* (Belfast: Blackstaff 1988), pp 126-8

⁷ Nancy Curtin, 'Women and Eighteenth-Century Irish Republicanism', in Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd (eds), *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound 1991), pp 138-40

⁸ See, for example, John Morrow, *History of Political Thought: A Thematic Introduction* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan 1998)

⁹ See, for example, John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta Books 1999)

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