



Civil society in Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)

Sylvana Tomaselli
St. John's College, Cambridge

If by 'civil society' one understands an association of people brought and held together by common values and actively participating in the pursuit of these values, at least to some degree, and thereby maintaining society, then Wollstonecraft thought the society she lived in was not a properly functioning civil society. She did think that society existed independently of government and governmental institutions, and was in many ways more concerned about society and its values than she was about forms of government and governmental activities, although she believed that they should redress injustice and, in particular, economic inequalities. The problem, as she saw it, was twofold. Firstly, contemporary European society expected its members to fulfill duties without providing them with the necessary means to do so. This was especially the case with women who were expected to be dutiful wives, mothers, and neighbours, but without the education to enable them to be such. In fact, they were raised to be coquettes and with false ideas of their lives to come. This points to Wollstonecraft's second contention, namely, that the values of modern commercial society were self-contradictory and ultimately self-destructive of its members individually and the community as a whole. It encouraged competition to the point that mothers vied with their daughters for admiration as all lived for the sake of appearances in what was a monumental hall of mirrors. Fueled by luxury consumption such a society rested on the intensification of the division of labour, social and economic inequality, and delusion, none of which the French Revolution would halt, if only because it was denying women their rights, and retaining Paris' power monopoly. Wollstonecraft, by contrast, wished for a society in which both men and women would be good parents and neighbours working together in more equal communities within a decentralized system of government.

Primary Sources:

Todd, Janet; Butler, Marilyn; Rees-Mogg, Emma (eds.) 1989. *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*. 7 Vols. London: William Pickering.

Wollstonecraft, Mary 1995 [1792]. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*. Tomaselli, Sylvania (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Secondary Sources:

Coffee, Alan 2016. Mary Wollstonecraft, Public Reason, and the Virtuous Republic, in Bergès, Sandrine & Coffee, Alan (eds.): *The Social and Political philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* Oxford: Oxford University press, 183-200.

Sapiro, Virginia 1992. *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tomaselli, Sylvania 2001. The Most Public Sphere of All: The Family, in Eger, Elizabeth; Grant, Charlotte; Gallchoir, Cliona O.; Warburton, Penny (eds.): *Women and the Public Sphere: Writing and Representation, 1700-1830*. Cambridge University Press, 239-256.

Keywords:

community, economic inequality, government, luxury, revolution, rights