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Mill, Marx, and Women's Liberation

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Mill, Marx, and Women's Liberation
LESLIE GOLDSTEIN
A RECENT SCHOLARLY COMMENT ON John Stuart Mill claims that his book *The Subjection of Women* "is unquestionably the most ambitious plea... in the English language for the perfect equality of the sexes." "Even those who would quarrel with this superlative assessment of the book would nonetheless have to grant that Mill deserves his reputation as a sincerely committed feminist. There are allusions to women's equality in all of his practical works.² He was the first major philosopher to write a book-length treatise³ defending what he called the "principle of perfect equality" between the sexes? His political career--beginning with his arrest at the age of seventeen for the distribution of birth control pamphlets to working class women⁵ and extending through his advocacy, during his tenure as Member of Parliament, of the Married Women's Property Act, women's suffrage, and an end to various legal disabilities afflicting women⁶--demonstrated a consistent and firm commitment to the cause. Indeed, one generally highly sympathetic biographer characterized his devotion to women's equality as "fanatical,"⁷ while another referred to Mill's "extreme feminism" as a "disconcerting" and

"eccentric limitation" in Mill's philosophy. Mill himself made statements about the significance of the woman question which sound extreme even by today's standard of inflated rhetoric. For example, in 1850, at a time when the issue of chattel slavery was agitating the American scene, when serfdom still prevailed throughout Russia, and while Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and even Charles Dickens were detailing the miseries of the urban poor in England, John Stuart Mill describes the subject of women's equality as "that of all practical subjects the most important." 9 i Wendell Robert Can', editor's introduction, *The Subjection of Women* (Boston: M.I.T. Press, 1970), p. v. Cart is not alone in viewing Mill as a consummate women's liberationist. See e.g., William T. Blackstone, "Freedom and Women," *Ethics* 85, no. 3 (April, 1975):244-2 These include *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, *Principles of Political Economy*, *Representative Government*, and Mill's *Autobiography*. 3 Mill's *The Subjection of Women* was, of course, preceded by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1796), but Wollstonecraft's work says almost nothing of legal and political equality; her concern is almost exclusively women's education And she is not generally considered one of the world's major philosophers. 4 Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer. 1869; reprinted, New York: Source Book Press, 1970), p. 1; hereafter cited as *Subjection*, 5 Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 57-59. 6 See Packe for a full account. 7 Packe, p. 80. 8 Karl Britton, *John Stuart Mill* (1953, reprinted. New York. Dover Publications, 1969), pp. 37-38 9 Mill to Harriet Taylor, late October, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M Robson (Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 1963-79), vol. 14, *Later Letters. 1849-1873*. p. 49. In *The Principles of Political-* [319] 320 HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY Nevertheless, while Mill's reputation as a dedicated feminist is certainly deserved, the ambitiousness of his plea for women's equality has been substantially overrated. The standard version, justifiably misled by much of the tone of Mill's argument, portrays Mill as advocating complete equality of opportunity for women, ~an equality which, Mill clearly understood, would necessitate liberating women from the stereotyped sex roles toward which societal conditioning was then channeling them. Had Mill pursued the logic of many of his own arguments, he would have ended up as an advocate of women's liberation--that is, of women's liberation from their traditional sex-roles within the family, which liberation is the central aim of the late twentieth-century feminist movement. Mill, however, did not pursue the thrust of his own arguments; he stopped dead short at the brink of radical alteration of the traditional marriage institution. t~ For this reason, Mill ended up not as an advocate of full equality of opportunity for women, but only as an advocate of equality of legal rights for women.~2 In limiting himself to...

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A RECENT SCHOLARLY COMMENT ON John Stuart Mill claims that his book *The Subjection of Women* "is unquestionably the most ambitious plea . . . in the English language for the perfect equality of the sexes."¹ Even those who would quarrel with this superlative assessment of the book would nonetheless have to grant that Mill deserves his reputation as a sincerely committed feminist.

There are allusions to women's equality in all of his practical works.² He was the first major philosopher to write a book-length treatise³ defending what he called the "principle of perfect equality" between the sexes.⁴ His political career—beginning with his arrest at the age of seventeen for the distribution of birth control pamphlets to working class women⁵ and extending through his advocacy, during his tenure as Member of Parliament, of the Married Women's Property Act, women's suffrage, and an end to various legal disabilities afflicting women⁶—demonstrated a consistent and firm commitment to the cause. Indeed, one generally highly sympathetic biographer characterized his devotion to women's equality as "farouical,"⁷ while another referred to Mill's "extreme feminism" as a "disconcerting" and "eccentric limitation" in Mill's philosophy.⁸ Mill himself made statements about the significance of the woman question which sound extreme even by today's standard of inflated rhetoric. For example, in 1850, at a time when the issue of chattel slavery was agitating the American scene, when serfdom still prevailed throughout Russia, and while Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and even Charles Dickens were detailing the miseries of the urban poor in England, John Stuart Mill describes the subject of women's equality as "that of all practical subjects the most important."⁹

¹ Wendt, Robert Carr, editor's introduction, *The Subjection of Women* (Boston: MIT Press, 1970), p. v. Carr is not alone in viewing Mill as a crucial female women's liberationist. See e.g., William J. Block and "Feminists and Women," *Esquire* 85, no. 1 (April, 1975): 244.

² These include *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, *Principles of Political Economy*, *Representative Government*, and *Mill's Autobiography*.

³ Mill's *The Subjection of Women* was, of course, preceded by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Introduction of the Rights of Woman* (1796), but Wollstonecraft's work says almost nothing of legal and political equality, her concern is almost exclusively women's education. And *it* is not generally considered one of the world's major philosophies.

⁴ Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Rodda, and Dyer, 1869, reprinted, New York: Schoen Book Press, 1970), p. 1; hereinafter cited as *Subjection*.

⁵ Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 51–52.

⁶ See Packe for a full account.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸ Karl Ericson, *John Stuart Mill* (1955, repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1969), pp. 37–38.

⁹ Mill to Harriet Taylor, late October, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–79), vol. 14, *Later Letters, 1849–1871*, p. 49. In *The Principles of Political*





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