

LSU PHIL 2035

John Protevi

<http://www.protevi.com/john/HMP>

Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Chapter 1)

In Ch 1, Wollstonecraft juxtaposes a hopeful narrative to Rousseau's decline narrative. She is equally horrified by current society, but holds hope for the future. "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally; a crowd of authors that all *is* now right; and I, that all will *be* right" (14).

In W's reading, R mistakes the cause of present-day evils. They are due to bad (hierarchical) social institutions ("vestiges of barbarism" [16]), not to civilization *tout court* coming to replace a state of nature of virtuous solitary individuals. If we could reform current institutions, W holds, we could improve humanity's lot. So the problem is that we haven't made enough progress in civilization, not that civilization represents a decline from the state of nature.

W attacks, in turn, monarchy, standing armies, and the Church. She then proposes a counter-narrative to Rousseau about the development of social structures.

W starts at the top: *monarchy*, by its concentration of power, calls forth vile intrigues to gain the top spot. Next, *standing armies* are bad because they are hierarchical, that is, they work by "despotism" or command rather than by reasoned discussion. It's not that you can have an army that doesn't work by command; the problem is *standing* armies that stifle reason, and that produce "a set of idle superficial young men, whose only occupation is gallantry, and whose polished manners render vice more dangerous, by concealing its deformity under gay ornamental drapery" (16). The *clergy* are stifled, albeit to a lesser degree, by the need to show dogmatic conformity to their patrons.

The conclusion is very important: "the character of every man is, in some degree, formed by his profession..." (17). This is an important "materialist" principle; humans are plastic so that "character" is "to some degree" a matter of habit formed by institutions. So enlightenment of society concentrates on reform of institutions, not on moralistic hectoring or encouragement of individual virtue.

Now on to W's counter-narrative of social stages. Chiefs and priests have power at the exit from "barbarism" (i.e., hunter-gatherer or early, non-state, mixed economies). Then aristocracy, then monarchy coming out of aristocratic power struggles. So we then have monarchical and priestly power early on. Then the people get some power, so rulers must "gloss over their oppression with a shew of right" (17). (Note that this is Rousseau's story in the *Essay on the Origin of Inequality* of the *factual* "social contract," which just cements in place inequality.) Thus it is monarchy, rather than "civilization" *tout court*, which is the source of current corruption; Rousseau thus misses the chance to see the possibility of the "perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization" (18).