

Eileen Hunt Botting
Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights
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Reviewed by Alexandre Lefebvre, 2018

Alexandre Lefebvre is an associate professor in the Department of Government and International Relations and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney. He is author of *Human Rights and the Care of the Self* (Duke, 2018), *Human Rights as a Way of Life: On Bergson's Philosophical Philosophy* (Stanford, 2013), and *The Image of Law: Deleuze, Bergson, Spinoza* (Stanford 2008).

Eileen Hunt Botting's beautifully conceived book provides a genealogy of women's human rights, which she defines as "the view that women are entitled to equal rights with men because of the sexes' shared status as human beings" (1). As the title indicates, her account centers on two thinkers she identifies as the primary architects of this view--Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)--and is both backward- and forward-looking. Botting looks backward for the philosophical antecedents of women's human rights, starting from the late medieval Catholic tradition, continuing with canonical early modern theorists of natural rights, and ending up with the dissenting theologians and utilitarian philosophers who influenced Wollstonecraft and Mill respectively. She also looks forward to readers, authors, and activists inspired by Wollstonecraft and Mill to further articulate, develop, and enshrine women's human rights.

As mentioned, Botting offers a genealogy of women's human rights. Although she doesn't say so, my sense is that there are two different kinds of genealogy at work in her book. The first consists of a history of the idea of women's human rights, and it furnishes the structure of the book: chapter 1 on the philosophical antecedents of women's human rights, chapters 2 and 3 on Wollstonecraft and Mill, and chapter 4 on Wollstonecraft and Mill's interlocutors (there is also a chapter 5, but I will come to that later). Botting's historical genealogy is rich and accomplished, and her two dedicated chapters on Wollstonecraft and Mill are exemplary. One reason has to do with style and composition: her writing is accessible and clear, and Botting puts Wollstonecraft and Mill into continual dialogue such that the reader never gets the feeling that the book is veering off into specialist terrain. But the main reason that Botting's commentary on Wollstonecraft and Mill is compelling has to do with how she uses the concept of women's human rights to illuminate the more general concept of human rights. A central claim in *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights* is that her titular authors are worth studying not only because they address the issue of human rights for women, but because in so doing they go to the heart of what is really at stake in--and for many, what is really threatening about--the idea of human rights itself: universality. As Botting puts it, "In order to argue for the human rights of women, Wollstonecraft, Mill, and their international interlocutors were forced to reconceive the notion of human rights itself. They realized that the idea of human rights could not be universal--that is, apply equally to each and every human being--without the explicit inclusion of women" (1). In other words, Botting demonstrates how innovative and radical Wollstonecraft and Mill were on the topic of human rights precisely because they cut into it through a focus on women's human rights.

Botting claims Friedrich Nietzsche as the inspiration behind her genealogy (7-8). Unlike his, however, the aim of her genealogy is not subversive. Her goal is to fill out and, shall we say, vindicate the idea of women's human rights. By that, I do not mean to suggest that Botting is uncritical of how this idea was developed by Wollstonecraft, Mill, or several of their interlocutors and successors. Much of her book--in particular, chapter 4, "The Problem of Cultural Bias: Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Western Narratives of Women's Progress"--holds Wollstonecraft and Mill accountable for their orientalist assumptions and rhetoric, together with various kinds of feminist imperialism they inspired in such later readers as Abigail Adams, Hannah Crocker, and Sarah Grimké. Moreover, in a fascinating section Botting presents lesser-known readers of Wollstonecraft and Mill from around the world--such as Maria Tsebrikova of Russia, Martina Barros Borgoño of Chile, and Elvira López of Argentina--who resisted Western European cultural bias and created genuinely inclusive and universal conceptions of women's human rights (188-203).

That, in a nutshell, is Botting's historical genealogy in *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights*: an examination of the prehistory of women's human rights, an extended commentary on that idea in Wollstonecraft and Mill, and an analysis of its extension and permutation in later readers and interpreters. This brings me to the second kind of genealogy to be found in this book, one that, as I will explain, is less about tracking the history of a particular idea than problematizing and opening up possibilities within contemporary human rights discourse and activism.

Let me put it this way. Today, human rights scholarship is booming with debates in the fields of political theory, philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, history, and literary studies. An especially lively conversation revolves around a set of three questions. First, when did human rights catch on? Second, why did they catch on? And third, how can we make them catch on more? In other words, given that we live at a time when the language of human rights is seemingly coextensive with that of global social justice, scholars have been asking and debating when it all started, why it started, and, assuming they are broadly supportive of the idea of human rights, how it can be further supported. Over the past ten years competing answers have been offered, and if I can bracket the first historical question (the "when" issue), a variety of reasons for the appeal of human rights have been advanced. Some claim that human rights are attractive because they protect normative agency (for example, James Griffin and Michael Ignatieff). Alternatively, the pursuit of eudemonism and human flourishing has been proposed as the inspiration behind human rights (for example, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen). Others state that human rights gain their power by striking an emotional chord of care and concern for others (for example, Lynn Hunt, Sharon Sliwinski, and Richard Rorty). Still others detect a spiritual impulse akin to religion underlying human rights (for example, Samuel Moyn, Hans Joas, Liisa Malkki, and myself).

Now, if it were possible to travel back in time to ask Wollstonecraft and Mill which is the "real" source for the appeal of human rights, and more specifically, to present them with our current menu of options and ask whether it is the protection of normative agency, *or* the pursuit of eudemonism, *or* the pull of a sentimental connection, *or* spiritual fulfillment, my sense is that their reply would be "yes!" What I mean to say--and in the spirit of the old joke, "Would you prefer chicken or fish? Yes, please!"--is that Botting's book gets us to see that Wollstonecraft's and Mill's works on (women's) human rights are rich tapestries that layer overlapping justifications and inspirations for human rights.

This feature of Botting's text is implicit compared to her historical genealogy of women's human rights. In fact, it only became apparent to me in the final chapter of her book, chapter 5: "Human Stories: Wollstonecraft, Mill, and the Literature of Human Rights." This was my favorite chapter not because it was the "best" in a comparative sense, but because (in my own reading experience, at least) it revealed a whole new dimension of what is going on in the book as a whole and in each of its preceding chapters. For what Botting does in chapter 5 is demonstrate how Wollstonecraft and Mill opened up new genres for human rights argumentation and advocacy. In particular, she shows how they both persuasively wrote their own lives into a defense of women's human rights: Wollstonecraft through her semi-autobiographical novellas and the widely popular *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, and Mill through his love and admiration for Harriet Taylor as written into his *Autobiography* and the dedication to *On Liberty*. As Botting puts it, "The stories of Wollstonecraft and Mill had the narrative sophistication and motivational power to become universal human stories, capable of moving people to care about the neglected cause of women's human rights" (206).

And here is my point: when we cast a look back to the earlier chapters of *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights*, it becomes apparent that each chapter highlights a different yet complementary source of appeal to anchor and advance women's human rights. With respect to Wollstonecraft, Botting lays down a perfectionist and theological defense of women's human rights in chapter 2, a eudemonism argument in chapter 3, and an appeal to sentiment and emotional connection in chapter 5. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for Mill: a perfectionist and modified utilitarianism in chapter 2, eudemonism in chapter 3, and an appeal to sentiment and emotional connection in chapter 5. It would be too complicated within the space of a review to show how these different strands of justification for women's human rights are interconnected, but suffice it to say that Botting aptly explains, first, how these strands cohere and yet remain distinctive, and second, how they can be drawn upon to advance (or to "allege," as Botting would put it) women's human rights today.

Why call this a genealogy? Here I am thinking of Foucault's use of the term, which for him is less tied to historical research than to a problematization of the present. "As soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought," he says, "transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible" (Foucault, 457). That is exactly how Botting depicts Wollstonecraft and Mill at their time of writing. Each lived in a patriarchal world, felt the indispensability yet inadequacy of their contemporary human rights discourse to change it, and set about to advance a conception of women's human rights through every basis of appeal they could muster. The terms *genealogy* and *hero* don't often sit well together, but in this case they do: Botting portrays Wollstonecraft and Mill as heroes of women's human rights--not, of course, in any hagiographical sense, but as exemplary figures who used all the resources of their minds, hearts and lives to invent, and then to advance, the cause. It is a book that deserves to be read widely by historians of political thought and human rights scholars alike.

Reference

Foucault, Michel. 2000. "So is it important to think?" Interview with Didier Eribon. In *Essential works*, volume 3: *Power*, ed. James Faubion and Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press.