

# *In Conversation with* **Sylvana Tomaselli**

**Maria Stella Sendas Mendes**

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**CJLPA: Please could you start by outlining the main premise of your recent book *Wollstonecraft: Philosophy, Passion and Politics* (2020) and the context in which you started writing it? What key factors were involved in inspiring its argument?**

**Sylvana Tomaselli:** I have been teaching and writing on Wollstonecraft for many years, and one concern I have had is the extent to which she is measured against conceptions of feminism—various feminisms—depending on what predominant feminism at any one time is. I've never felt happy about this because she wrote about other topics, and it is conceivable that she might not have been as intensely concerned with the condition of women, or at least not in a way that would be subsequently understood as the focus on her thought.

One of the things that I objected to was that everything she said was seen through the prism of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' obscuring 'A Vindication of the Rights of Men', as well as her other writings. What was most important to me was ensuring some of her works didn't obscure others. Then the question that I asked myself, given that I didn't want to apply any labels—I find them unhelpful, at best—was how she would describe herself. Bless her, she does describe herself at least once as a philosopher and a moralist. This seemed to me an accurate representation of the way she thinks and the way she writes.

Having already written a great deal about her, with an emphasis on all the things she criticised—she criticised almost everything—I was rather bored with past ways of approaching her. I started asking myself, 'What did she approve of?', and when I realised I did not know this as clearly as I ought to have, I decided to explore what she liked in life. I started with the positives, not the negatives as we often do, and followed the format of her first publication 'On the Education of Daughters'—a set of short essays on various subjects—to look at the things she appreciated. The book then followed this format, more or less.

**CJLPA: The book is highly engaged in emphasising the connection between Wollstonecraft's own biography and her philosophical interests and writings. What would you consider to be some of the most formative aspects of her political philosophy, and what themes were particularly recurring?**

**ST:** I think I'm trying to find terms that are not overly identified with other thinkers, but she's very much preoccupied by the fact that human beings, male and female, young and old, are not educated in a way which allows them to be what they ought to be. The question is: what did she think human beings ought to be? Well, she thought that they ought to be in a position to develop their bodies and their minds to the maximum. There's a strong emphasis on the idea of potential. She thinks within a creationist perspective and, while it's difficult to know the extent to which she adhered to any aspect of Christianity, it's roughly a religious vision.

For Wollstonecraft, we are creatures with various potentials: physical, mental, as well as emotional. We must be encouraged to allow these potentials to flourish, to be realised. This might be referred to somewhat as an Aristotelian conception—that life is a project and one must have the requisite tools to deal with its opportunities. Still, she likely wouldn't have thought it directly in these terms, and her focus was primarily directed at the challenges presented to life, as well as the impact of resilience in overcoming this. Wollstonecraft affirms that we have to be strong. We have to be strong of body and mind because in her world—but one might say in the world of most people today—life is very hard.

In relation to that, she argued that some people, particularly women, were not educated to be strong of body and mind. In fact, they were educated to be weak of body and mind—not at all resilient. She regarded this as a contradiction, given society's expectation of women as mothers and wives. This combination of thoughts, that is, the gap between social expectations and social provisions, provides the foundations to her philosophy.

**CJLPA: You highlight the impact of Burke, Rousseau, and Smith in shaping Wollstonecraft's philosophy. In what ways was she influenced by them, and perhaps more significantly, in what ways did she diverge from their ideas?**

**ST:** Well, she was perhaps most influenced by Burke. By influence, I do not mean that she adopted his views. She was deeply disappointed by his reflection on the revolution in France, which indeed caused

her and many others who thought Burke a friend of liberty to shift their positions. Equally, because of his criticism of Richard Price, the Dissenting Minister, whom she knew and was close to, she engaged in a very extensive critique of Burke's work. That shaped her thinking, not because she adopted his views but because she was so determined to undermine him and everything he believed in. So it would be difficult to list all their divergences. That would simply be a reiteration of the whole 'Vindication of the Rights of Men' and indeed, 'of Woman'. Of these, one could say that she disagreed with what he said on the sublime and the origins of ideas of the beautiful, in which she saw it said that we identify beauty with smallness and weakness, and that women therefore mimic the weak. She also disagreed with his views about the relationship between church and state. Initially, she disagreed with the praise he lavished on the English constitution, though she later modified her views on that. So, one might say that Burke's thematic shaping of her work was commensurate to her disagreement with him. Interestingly, though, she did use Burke's language of beauty and the beautiful in her letters from Scandinavia, so one might say she was in conversation with his semantic choices.

With regard to Rousseau, she disagreed with his view of the history of civilisation. She did not think that all had been well, and that the history of mankind was simply one of decline. She certainly didn't think that the world was perfect at present, but she did think it could be made better. She did disagree very, very strongly with the account of education of Sophie—the protagonist's female counterpart—in 'Emile'. The education given to Sophie, for Wollstonecraft, is unsatisfactory in its own terms, but she similarly views it as a contradiction of Rousseau's own premise.

In contrast to Rousseau and Burke, I actually think she agreed with Smith. What she took from him was that the intensification of the division of labour had a very baneful effect on the human mind and needed countering. Smith thought it should be countered by providing a modicum of education to those who would be taking part in menial repetitive work. I don't think Wollstonecraft would have agreed with this. And this is not a disagreement with Smith as such, but its opposite. Rather than thinking that the intensification of the division of labour was an inevitable feature of the future of mankind, she thought that we should stop this process and ensure that no one is part of an economy such that they are engaged in tedious, repetitive work.

**CJLPA: You highlight the importance of artistic performance to Wollstonecraft's work, notably the impact of creation and the sense that the arts need some kind of 'training or conditioning' in order to be fully appreciated. How was this same strand of thought integrated into her political philosophy? Would it be appropriate to characterise it as an 'Enlightened' political philosophy, or would you say it is something else entirely?**

ST: I wouldn't call it 'Enlightened'. Again, it's a label. There are so many people who are called Enlightenment figures, but they're very different and it doesn't really tell us anything. I wouldn't resort to that. Wollstonecraft did think about art a great deal, and this is because she was worried about imitative behaviour, but on the other hand she understood that education involves a degree of imitation. This was particularly true in relation to nature. Should one imitate nature? Is this possible? What is the relationship between art and representation, and how is the viewer positioned in all of this?

Her position on this was that art should not just be slavishly imitative. It mustn't be affected or artificial, if you will. Her view

of sculpture illustrates this well. She didn't think that a sculpture of the human figure should be essentially a 'photocopy' of the body, and drew instead from her vision of how Greek sculptures were constructed: with a variety of angles and shapes taken from different sides. Equally, there was a sense that sculptures should be larger than life in quite a literal sense. The point of that is that art should effectively convey something. Now, what it should convey will obviously differ depending on the artist.

Wollstonecraft's conversation on art is not by any means prescriptive. She's very critical and concerned with its relationship to education. When it came to poetry, she sketched out the difficulties faced by imposing and teaching some of its stricter forms, proposing instead a more open-ended model of the arts in relation to individual growth.

**CJLPA: Let's turn to 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman', arguably Wollstonecraft's magnum opus. How did this text reconcile concerns with the legal status of women with a broader vision of humanity and its passion? What roles did imagination play in construing Wollstonecraft's visions of politics and law?**

ST: The 'Vindication of the Rights of Woman' is notable in part because it says relatively little about rights. At the beginning of the text Wollstonecraft says that she will write a second volume which will consider the rights of women. The hints we have towards this volume contain even fewer, if any, references to law and to the rights of women as legal persons. The notes are mostly about aesthetics and moral philosophy. This is because this is simply what she liked to think about. She liked to think about morality, moral philosophy, and the origins of our ideas—more generally, epistemological concerns. It's not really a book that aims to reconcile concerns about the legal status, because those concerns are not truly its focus. What it essentially is, is a critique of a number of educational proposals for women and, indeed, for men. It proposes some forms of education and goes into some details about who should be taught when and what, and proposes that schools should be mixed.

The way in which she tries to convince what might be a recalcitrant readership is by showing the contradictions within society's beliefs about women and its constitution more generally. So as I said earlier, there were strong expectations that women should fulfil their duties as wives, mothers, and neighbours, and she points to the way in which culture does everything it can to undermine women actually fulfilling these duties, and fails to prepare them for what these duties might actually be. Much of the text, then, is essentially holding a mirror to society and saying, 'Look at women', 'Look at men', and the way in which they negotiate so many aspects of social life. Look at the way people think about marriage, poverty, motherhood, etc, the way they conceptualise these things versus what they want effectively.

In turn, Wollstonecraft argues that if you really want women to be all of this and fulfil their roles and duties, you've got to give them their rights and the means to exercise them, and the means to this, broadly speaking, was education. The implication is that, in order for women to be as society expects them to be, men would have to be different. In order for men—and women—to be different, we would have to have a different culture and different conceptions of beauty and the sublime, and virtually a different conception of life on Earth.

So how does that fit in with visions of humanity and passion? Wollstonecraft argued that the current passion was to appear, to shine, to outshine, as evidenced in young women competing for

the best match on the marriage market. Her question was then whether that should be the predominant passion when, even if one were a winner in that kind of game, it could ultimately lead to shallow unhappiness. Looks could fade, marriages would fail, feelings change. Wollstonecraft saw women who were now deeply unhappy and had no inner resources to contend with the vicissitudes of life—death, illness, loneliness. So there's a sense in her work that the passions of her time needed to be changed. Wollstonecraft's aspirations for men and women could not be remotely fulfilled if passions remained the same. In her view, men and women should not be driven by the desires to be admired or to project a certain appearance, of money or status. There was a need for something more substantial to guide people, both men and women.

**CJLPA: Should we view 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' as the starting point for feminist philosophy, or should it be viewed as a continuation of all the ideas and themes that came before it? In what ways can it serve as a point of departure, and how did it perhaps lend itself to a multitude of feminisms? Does it, in some ways, set the tone for certain parts of Western feminism, and how has our present context transformed the way in which it might be read?**

ST: Different periods have emphasised different parts of Wollstonecraft's work, and academic and cultural concerns have shaped which parts are highlighted or actively rejected. I think she will always be an important thinker, but it will depend on what the issues of the moment are. For example, it's much easier to teach Wollstonecraft now than it was in the eighties. We're much happier to talk about women's bodies, the need to be physically strong, issues, looks, and so forth, than we were in parts of the twentieth century. We do not at present denigrate motherhood the way that it was denigrated at earlier stages of the feminist movement. Equally, there was some concern over her views of sexuality. It seemed to some that she was for repressed sexuality. Many scholars looked down on Wollstonecraft's discussion of marriage and motherhood because this did not fit with the main themes being explored at that time. She is much more of the moment.

She's also much more of the moment because of her emphasis on resilience. COVID-19 has recentred the word 'resilience', whereas just even a few years ago, discussions of it were taken as old-fashioned. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on that, along with education, are really crucial and contemporary. Her visions are also quite compatible with modern realistic utopian visions of a more decentralised, less consumer-driven world. Her critique of the slave trade and slavery is now very much integrated into debates on the relationship between feminism and anti-slavery, and has been particularly reinvigorated by our current context.

It's very important to consider too what she reacted to herself. She lived in a politically interesting time and was deeply responsive to what she was seeing. It's an interesting process: she responded to the world she saw and we, in turn, respond to her based on what is happening in our world. Nothing is independent.

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