The history of modern feminist political theories is often framed in terms of the already existing theories of a number of radical nineteenth-century men philosophers such as James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Charles Fourier, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. My argument takes issue with this way of framing feminist political theory by demonstrating that it rests on a derivation that remains squarely within the logic of malestream political theory. Each of these philosophers made use of a particular discursive trope that linked the idea of women’s emancipation with the idea of social progress. I argue that this trope reproduced the masculinist signification and symbolism inherent in their particular political philosophies. I argue for a more positive, less masculinist, account of the history of feminist political thought.

With the resurgence of reinvigorated feminist ideas in the late 1960s, the history of Western political and philosophical thought came to be subjected to intense scrutiny. Of particular concern were issues such as masculinist biases (conceptual, factual, methodological, and so on), the search for and recuperation of the works of women writers and thinkers, and the view that feminist ideas provided a legitimate framework for understanding politics and power. Until feminists began reappraising the received wisdom of then-prevailing histories of philosophy in general and political theory in particular, it was almost universally assumed that if there had been writings of any significance by women philosophers (political or otherwise) they would have found a place within the existing canon. The benefit of forty years or more of feminist scholarship makes abundantly clear the considerable history of feminist ideas that belies such an assumption.<1>

This paper is primarily concerned with one particular dimension of how that history has been told: namely, the way in which the beginnings of modern feminist political theory have been framed in terms of already established political philosophies. Just as Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and knowledge, was supposed to have sprung full-grown from the head of Zeus, so too feminist political thought was represented as having its genesis in the minds of significant men thinkers. In the 1970s and 1980s, accounts of past feminist ideas, especially challenges to traditional views of women’s rights, came to be explained in terms of hyphenated feminisms such as liberal-feminism, socialist-feminism, Marxist-feminism, anarcho-feminism, and so on (for example, see Jaggar 1983; Barrett 1987; Coole 1988; Tong 1989; Bryson 1993; Duerst-Lahti 1999; and Whelehan 1995). The hyphenated approach was partly because of “a need to show allegiance to the basic propositions of the adjoining theory” and partly because “as feminists assessed political concerns theoretically and practically, inevitably they drew upon existing political ideologies” (Duerst-Lahti 1999, n.p.). In consequence, the hyphenated approach has led to a characterization of feminist political theory, like
feminist theory generally, as having nothing original to offer. For example, mainstream dictionaries and encyclopedias of social and political thought treat feminist theory as a derivative of already existing political theories and philosophies (Winter 2000, 107). Referring to a specific, but representative, view in The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology, (Abercrombie et al., 1994, 162–64), Winter observed that the radical upsurge of feminism in the 1960s was represented as having derived its revolutionary ideas from various radical political theories such as Marxism or anarchism; and “there is no suggestion that feminist theory might have added something original to this radical smorgasbord” (winter 2000, 107). However, it can be demonstrated that feminist political theory need not, indeed should not, be taken as a merely derivative phenomenon.

The tendency to locate the sources of feminist political theory within already existing theories stems from a number of radical nineteenth-century men philosophers with divergent philosophical assumptions who appear to have defended women’s political rights, or at least to have provided frames of analysis that entailed women’s political rights. Within English liberalism, this mantle fell variously to James Mill (see Ball 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1984), Jeremy Bentham (see Boralevi 1980, 1984, 1987; Williford 1975), and John Stuart Mill (Okin 1979; Rossi 1970). Elizabeth Altman (1976) and Leslie Goldstein (1982) noted feminist ideas present in the works of the so-called utopian socialists such as Claude Henri Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier, with Goldstein remarking on “their seminal role in the history of feminism” (1982, 107). In Moses’ view, by 1808, “Fourier had put the cornerstone of nineteenth century--and even twentieth-century--feminist thought in place” (1984, 92). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, if they did not directly posit specifically feminist ideas, are regarded by Juliet Mitchell (1971) and Sheila Rowbotham (1974) at least as having provided the theoretical framework for the realization of feminist goals. Of course, the feminist insights within these various political philosophies were often superficial and ambiguous, and the men themselves only tenuously committed to a distinctively feminist outlook, as numerous feminist scholars have noted.<2> Of those mentioned above, only John Stuart Mill (and perhaps Engels) could lay a strong claim to such a political commitment. Nonetheless, for many scholars, feminist and nonfeminist alike, the hyphenated approach seemed a logical way of framing feminist theory.

This paper challenges this way of framing feminist political theory by demonstrating that it rests on a derivation or genealogy that remains squarely within the logic of malestream political theory. The argument proceeds by examining a particular discursive trope used by each of these particular philosophers, a trope that links the idea of women’s emancipation with the idea of social progress. James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Fourier, Marx, and Engels all expressed a variation on the view that the degree or extent of women’s emancipation should be taken as an indicator of social emancipation, a signifier of the level of general social and political progress. Though these philosophers differed in their views and definitions of social progress according to their philosophical perspectives, the fundamental linkage between women’s emancipation and social progress was held in common. For a number of influential feminist scholars (for example, see Ball 1980b, 1984; Mitchell 1971; Rowbotham 1974; Altman 1976; Goldstein 1982; and Moses 1984), this trope was decisive in assessing the genealogical significance of these particular men philosophers for the development of feminist political thought.
On the surface, this conclusion seems reasonable for feminist scholars to have drawn. These men theorists appeared to be clearing a space within which feminist political ideas could be developed. Moreover, their use of the trope of women’s emancipation and social progress seemed to be a direct challenge to the Protagorean<sup>3</sup> “man-measure” principle that has been woven into centuries of Western philosophical thought and political theory. Women, not men, were to be posited as the measure of humankind’s progress. In various accounts this has been taken to signify a shift of Western political thought in a supposedly more politically progressive direction. However, this paper argues that this trope was not progressive, either in itself or as a marker of a particular thinker’s feminist sensibilities. Its use by these political theorists did not necessarily mark out a space for the articulation of a distinctly feminist set of ideas. To the contrary, this trope reproduced the masculinist signification and symbolism that each of those theorists took for granted. This was because this trope was shaped, or at least informed, by the particular ontological commitments<sup>4</sup> that each of these political theories marked out as their own, commitments that remained distinctly masculinist. The ontological commitments of each of these radical political philosophies, the sorts of realities that each conceptualized, were not challenged or subverted by this trope. Rather than opening out a space in which feminist political theory could be seen as significant in its own right, this trope served to reinforce the patrilineal descent of feminist political theory. This is because masculinist bias is not restricted just to what counts as appropriate content within political theory and public discourse.

It is well accepted that politics is a domain that “has been more intensely, self-consciously masculine than most other social practices” (Brown 1988, 4). It is little different for the realm of political theory.<sup>5</sup> As Beverly Thiele has commented, the subject matter of political theory still largely “reflects male concerns, deals with male activity and male ambitions and is directed away from issues involving, or of concern to, women” (1986, 30). That is, political theory is ontologically committed to a reality in which “man” is the measure of all things. The men political theorists listed above all shared this Protagorean ontological commitment. Men theorists spoke to each other about, but rarely with, women theorists. But just as importantly, the manner in which political theory is pursued and understood is also part of the problem. That is, the manner of discourse within political theory has been structured, conceptually and methodologically, to favor or reflect men’s modes of intellectual practice. As far as women thinkers were concerned, the Protagorean ontological commitment meant that western political theory “inscribe[d] their absence as women and as speaking subjects” (Zerilli 1991, 270). Women remained the objects of men’s discourses, ciphers to be moved around within men’s discursive imaginations.

The point is not simply to rehearse from yet another perspective the feminist limitations of these particular political theorists, but rather to argue that their respective uses of the trope in question neither subvert nor negate the masculinist exclusion of women’s presence as speaking political subjects. Even within these supposedly radical discourses women remain positioned as discursive ciphers. Hence taking issue with this trope is more than just a matter of evaluating this or that political theorist’s particular feminist credentials. It also involves taking issue with the discursive deployment of this trope and demonstrating the way in which it remains inside of a masculinist ontology. That is, it is constitutive of a nonfeminist ontology. Nor is it being argued here that
distinctively feminist political theories arose *sui generis*, owing nothing to the historical and intellectual ferments of their times. Rather, the argument is with the idea that feminist political theory needs to be (or should be) accounted for in terms of the political philosophies of significant men thinkers. If accounts of the history of political theory are to do justice to the development of feminist political theory as a significant body of thought in its own right, then the genealogy of feminist thought can and should be sought within and between the discourses of the numerous thinkers, women and men alike. But to do that one must negate the idea that feminist political theory emerged just like Pallas Athena, the offspring of already existing malestream political theory. That is the aim of this paper.

The analysis examines the use of the trope linking women’s emancipation and social progress in the writings of a number of influential political theorists in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Thus Sections I to IV examine its use in the writings of James Mill (1817), Charles Fourier (1996), Karl Marx (1975), Friedrich Engels (1975), Marx and Engels (1975), and John Stuart Mill (1983), respectively. In each case, I argue that the trope remains informed by the dominant masculinist ontology.<6> Section V concludes the paper by giving some brief consideration to the anomaly of these men political theorists articulating a position that appears to champion women’s political rights while at the same time their various theories ignore the writings of contemporaneous women thinkers. While this might be consistent with the masculinist norms of the discourses of political theory, the more substantial point to be made is that these norms remain unchallenged by accounts that take as given the derivation of feminist political theory from this “radical smorgasbord.”

I

In his three-volume *History of British India* James Mill declares that:

> the condition of women is one of the most remarkable circumstances in the manners of nations, and one of the most decisive criterions of the stage of society at which they have arrived. Among rude people the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted. . . . The history of uncultivated nations uniformly represents the women as in a state of abject slavery, from which they slowly emerge, as civilization advances. (1817, 293)

Here it is clear that Mill used the perceived treatment of women as a measure to ascertain whether a society should be recognized as civilized. But just as important is the causal link made by Mill—that as a society progressed toward what he took to be a civilized status its women received better treatment, somewhere along the continuum of “degraded” to “exalted.” The improvement to women’s lot was caused by whatever social and political dynamics were at play at the time. In Mill’s view, women’s improved social position was not the cause but the result, and hence a measure, of that progress.

Of some relevance here is the fact that the trope of linking women’s emancipation with social progress generally was commonplace within eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century thought, more often than not used to justify the development of English society. It was a means of demarcating degrees of civilization, between less and more civilized peoples. Its deployment can be found in a range of works such as William Robertson’s *History of America* (1788) and John Millar’s *Observations Concerning the
Robertson suggests “that one of the most general characteristics of the savage is to despise and degrade the female sex” (cited in Malthus 1958, 28), and by extension civilized societies were therefore to be distinguished by their better treatment of their women. Similarly, Mill argued that as society progressed in terms of its arts and manufactured goods, “a tendency [emerged] to remove those circumstances which prevented the free intercourse of the sexes,” such that “the fair sex . . . are more universally respected on account of their useful or agreeable talents which they are capable of acquiring” (1771, 63–64, 74).

In articulating his trope on women’s “progress,” James Mill approvingly cited Millar’s view of the relationship between women’s “progress” and social progress. However, neither Millar nor his contemporaries were alluding to social progress as such, but to that which was associated with the emerging commercial society of late-eighteenth-century England. It was this specific form of society that Millar and contemporaries like Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), Adam Smith (1723–1790) and David Hume (1711–1776), and successors like James Mill (1773–1836) and Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), meant by the term “civilization.” In Millar’s view, commercial society made it possible for men to improve themselves in terms of their manners and customs. Only then would men “be led” to promote a similar refinement in their women. That is, civilized society would result in men’s having “a suitable regard to those female accomplishments and virtues which have so much influence upon every species of improvement, and which contribute in so many different ways to multiply the comforts of life” (Millar 1771, 65). Even so, this “suitable regard” had to be treated with caution lest such improvements resulted in “licentious and dissolute manners, inconsistent with good order, and with the more important interests of society” (Millar 1771, 77). And presumably these “more important interests of society” would be those of men. Nonetheless, women were to be afforded a greater social space, but not to the extent or level enjoyed by men. The ideal relations between women and men, and especially wife and husband, would recognize the wife as “friend and companion,” as the one “who soothes and alleviates his misfortunes, who doubles all his joys, and who is capable of taking part in the care and labour to which he is subjected” (Millar 1771, 65). Thus women would be “exalted” as managers of the households, as nurturers of children and husband, as upholders of “modesty and diffidence” (Millar 1771, 65–67). Such a society would then be one worthy of the name “civilization.”

These were the values informing Millar’s understanding of the relationship between women’s and society’s “improvement” or “social progress.” By being helpmates to men women would gain a degree of social recognition and freedom similar to that which accrued to men. But this was not the same as advocating the unqualified political emancipation of women from all sorts of domination, nor was it asserting anything like the dismantling of patriarchal social relations. In this respect, Mill’s use in his *History of British India* (1817) of the trope in question was not an indicator of his feminist sensibilities as has been argued by Ball (1980b, 1984). Nor was that Mill’s intention. Rather than signifying a space within which feminist sensibilities could be articulated, Mill’s use of this trope aimed to signify the lack inherent in Indian society, a lack that justified, even necessitated, the extension and consolidation of British rule and its concomitant social values (Jose 2000). In Mill’s hands the trope was never in danger of losing its masculinist underpinnings. It positioned women as signifiers, silent ciphers,
within a self-satisfied liberalism, whereby men’s sense of progress was to be defined by
women’s elevation and social improvement.

II
Writing a decade before Mill, Charles Fourier also regarded the extent of women’s
emancipation as a measure of social progress (Fourier 1996, 130). However, as distinct
from Mill, he reversed the causal direction of the trope.

Social progress and changes of historical period are brought about
as a result of the progress of women towards liberty; and the decline
of social orders is brought about as a result of the discrimination of
the liberty of women. . . . To sum up, the extension of the privileges
of women is the basic cause of all social progress (Fourier 1996,
132).

It is clear that Fourier was not talking about “exalting” women. Nor was he equating
“social progress” and the idea of “civilization.” For Fourier, as for Jean-Jacques Rousseau
(1712–1778) before him, civilization was the problem.<7> In Fourier’s view, the
civilization of his own time was merely a stage in human development, an evil in itself
that was best left behind as quickly as possible. Instead of “civilization,” Fourier
envisioned a new social order, New Harmony, organized around what he called “the
progressive Series” (Fourier 1996, 12–13, 289–304), which in turn embodied in practice
his theory of passionate attraction (Fourier 1996, 15). Like many political thinkers he took
as a given that a necessary correspondence should exist between a natural or cosmic order
(as given by a deity of some sort) and the social order in which humans organized their
lives. However, in his own day, civilization “was organised around some reversal of the
natural order, that it operated perhaps in a way that was contrary to God’s designs, and
that the persistence of many scourges could be attributed to the absence of some form of
organisation intended by God but unknown to our scholars” (Fourier 1996, 7). Civilization
was beset by the problem of “industrial incoherence which is the antithesis of
God’s design” (Fourier 1996, 20; emphasis added).

The problem, as Fourier saw it, was that societies built themselves around
organizational structures and social relations that repressed or stifled human passions.
The Progressive Series would provide the means to enable all passions to be satisfied in
such a way as to ensure a harmonious social order, both within itself and with Nature. But
it also needs to be stressed that Fourier was not advocating an egalitarian social order. As
he put it, “philosophical chimera of that sort . . . are incompatible with the progressive
Series, which demand the opposite, a scale of inequalities” (Fourier 1996, 59). What he
envisioned required the existence and multiplication of differences and inequalities
between people. New Harmony was to be a unity through diversity, a harmonizing of
differences something like a vocal ensemble or orchestra.

The relations between the sexes were central to his social vision of New Harmony.
Fourier believed civilization had perverted these through its attempts to deny the passions
in love and sex, especially for women. The sexual double standard and the patriarchal
social relations that enshrined it (as assumed in the works of Millar and Mill) were a key
target for Fourier’s critical analysis. In his view, civilized society denied women the
liberty to acknowledge and exercise their passions. Women could only realize these
legitimately, if at all, through marriage--an institution that Fourier argued reduced women
to the status of chattel to be bought, sold, or traded. A flavor of his critique can be seen from the following:

Is a young woman not a piece of merchandise offered for sale to whoever wants to negotiate her acquisition and exclusive ownership? Is not the consent she gives to the marriage bond derisory and enforced upon her by the tyranny of all the prejudices which have beset her since childhood? . . . We see young women languishing, falling ill and dying for want of a union which nature imperiously commands and which prejudice forbids, on pain of being branded immoral, before they have been legally sold. However uncommon such events may be, they happen frequently enough to attest to the enslavement of the weaker sex, a contempt for nature’s wishes and the absence of all justice where women are concerned. (Fourier 1996, 129–31)

By any standards this was a critical position on patriarchal relations.

In such a context Fourier articulated the trope linking women’s liberty and social progress. It is largely on the basis of this trope, coupled with his scathing critiques of patriarchal practices governing love and sex, that his feminism has been adduced, and for which his “sempirical role in the history of feminism” is asserted as deserving of acknowledgment (Goldstein 1982, 108) for putting in place the “cornerstone of nineteenth-century--and even twentieth century--feminism” (Moses 1984, 92). However, lurking within Fourier’s solutions to the above problems is the familiar masculinist ontology. Fourier suggests that women should be granted “an age of amorous majority” at eighteen so that they would be free “from the humiliation of being offered for sale, and of being obliged to deprive themselves of men’s company until some unknown man haggles over them and marries them” (Fourier 1996, 132). He argued that if women were truly free to choose their sexual or marital partners then the vices of adultery, cuckoldry, and prostitution would wither away. In other works Fourier went into great detail about the sexual freedom that would emerge in New Harmony (Beecher 1985).

Whether Fourier’s solutions would have produced the outcome that he envisaged is debatable. What is of significance for this discussion, however, is that his principal concern was with articulating the basis for women’s (and by extension men’s) sexual freedoms. In Goldstein’s sympathetic view, Fourier was writing “exclusively of sexual repression or its absence” (1982, 102). While her interpretation might overstate the exclusiveness of Fourier’s focus, the fact remains that the conception of “liberty” in his trope was one of amorous liberty. This might have been a step forward, at least in principle, in undermining patriarchal privileges and the sexual double standard, but it is doubtful whether this would have brought about subsequent improvements in women’s economic and political liberty. The experiences of waves of “sexual liberation” at different times during the twentieth century, during the 1920s, 1940s, and 1960s, for example, would suggest that increased sexual liberty has had mixed benefits for women (see Rossi 1970; Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs 1987; and Morales 1996). This is because the advent of the sort of sexual liberty envisaged by Fourier for women, without a concomitant shift in men’s social and political power, leaves women vulnerable to just the sorts of scourges that he was concerned to challenge and eliminate. On these grounds
alone it is evident that limitations exist to the possibilities of Fourier’s use of this trope to undermine the masculinist ontology of dominant political discourses.

Other considerations also illustrate the degree to which this ontology also shaped Fourier’s radical analysis. One is Fourier’s oft-noted habit (for example, see Beecher 1985 and Goldstein 1982) of uncritically reproducing the then-prevailing assumptions about women’s nature. He regularly described women as the “fair sex,” or the “weaker sex.” Another is that in his utopian vision of a new world he still assumed that most women would continue to take up their so-called natural roles as homemaker, or at least as helpmates to men. Third, Fourier’s views were not too far out of step with the terms of various discourses about women in the new French Republic following the revolution (Scott 1989), despite his opposition to much of what they stood for. For example, Beecher notes that Fourier “while developing an argument . . . can interrupt himself to observe that he has doubtless failed to make the issues intelligible to his female readers because he lacks the ability to satisfy what Diderot calls the taste of women for ‘flowers of rhetoric’ and ‘the dust of butterfly wings’” (1985, 129). Despite appearances, his views were inscribed with much the same masculinist prejudices as those of his predecessors and contemporaries.

III

Marx and Engels were certainly closer to the ideas of Fourier than to the ideas of Mill, at least in spirit. While neither accepted Fourier’s sexual theories, especially their radical departure from monogamous sex-love pairing, Marx and Engels did accept the idea that women’s emancipation provided a measure of social emancipation. In 1844, they approvingly cited in The Holy Family the idea that “the degree of emancipation of woman is the natural measure of general emancipation” (1975, 230). In the Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx 1975) there is a distinctly Fourierian emphasis in the discussion of the relations between women and men where Marx pointed out that “it is possible to judge from this relationship the entire level of development of mankind” (1975, 347). Once again, the measure of social emancipation is conceptualized in terms of women’s emancipation. Similarly, in Anti-Duhring (Engels 1975) Engels repeats word for word Fourier’s trope as translated by Marx in The Holy Family. Engels makes the point explicitly that Fourier “was the first to declare that in any given society the degree of woman’s emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation” (1975, 297, 450n154). On this basis subsequent Marxists have made the case that Marxism was therefore sympathetic to, if not a source of, feminist political thought. Yet when Marx’s and Engels’s use of this trope is placed in the context of their writings it is not at all clear that it challenges or subverts the masculinist assumptions of their theories.

Neither Marx nor Engels addressed the liberation of women in a direct fashion until Engels’s essay, On the Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State (1973) was published in 1884, a year after Marx’s death. In that work Engels states that he and Marx had discussed this issue, and that Marx had intended to publish something similar. Marx’s own discussion on women was sporadic, at best. His most explicit discussion of the relations between the sexes was in The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (1975), in the passage already noted. In the rest of his writings women, more often than not, served as gendered ciphers to illustrate the iniquities of capitalism, thereby reproducing many of the prevailing assumptions about women’s supposed nature and their place within family relations (Di Stefano 1991; MacKinnon 1989). While the
historical specificity of family arrangements was acknowledged (Marx and Engels 1976), it was not until Engels’s 1884 *On the Origins of the Family* (1973) that any attempt was made to explore this claim. The institutions and social relations that developed to enable men and women to procreate and rear children, to enable men to “daily re-create their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind” (Marx and Engels 1976, 48) varied across and between different historical societies. For Engels, women’s liberation could be achieved by bringing women into the domain of the social where history is made, where social relations are constructed, and nature is transformed. By controlling and transforming nature, by going beyond the domain of necessity (for example, see Marx 1978, 820 and 1975), men made history, and in so doing, emancipated women to the freedoms enjoyed by men.

Yet while the family could be understood as a part of history, the internal dynamics were taken for granted by Engels in that he, like Marx, still assumed that the sexual division of labor was a fact of nature, not of society. And even when women were to be brought out of the private sphere of the family into the public sphere of the social where history is supposedly to be made, the sexual division of labor remained constitutive of both family and social life. Neither Marx nor Engels challenged the so-called naturalness of the division of labor by sex for reproductive purposes. Indeed, Marx’s discussion about the relations between the sexes in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1975), in which he waxed lyrical over the prospects of a truly human set of social relations, was predicated on a view that conflated women with nature, with the natural order. Marx never challenged the sexual division of labor as a possible social construction. It was assumed to be given by Nature. In *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1976) and Volume I of *Capital* (Marx 1977), for example, it is claimed that the sexual division of labor “springs up naturally” (Marx 1977, 332); “develops spontaneously” (Marx and Engels 1976, 50); “is a division that is based on a purely physical foundation” (Marx 1977, 332); is “nothing but the division of labour in the sexual act” (Marx and Engels 1976, 50); and the “physiological division of labour is the starting point” (1977, 332–33).

But this division of labor also remained Marx and Engels’s end point. When either human reproduction or housework was discussed it was treated as a consequence of the sexual division of labor, a fact of nature. Neither human reproduction nor domestic work were treated as instances of appropriation of raw materials subjected to a human labor process to be modified in accordance with human wants and needs (see Di Stefano 1991 and O’Brien 1981). Granted, the actual biological mechanics of fertilization, gestation, and childbirth might have very minimal instances of human control and manipulation. The fact remains, however, that these phenomena take place within historical relationships not given by nature. Marx and Engels’s assumptions about the sexual division of labor place it outside the domain of productive labor where history is supposedly made—it remains grounded in nature rather than society. Had Marx subjected the concept of “sexual division of labour” to the same sort of critique that he applied to other aspects of socially constructed categories it is likely that he would have developed an analysis that might have avoided “any reactionary endorsement of patriarchal relations” (Soper 1979, 96).

Moreover, the “naturalness” of the sexual division of labor is reflected in the terminology of Marx’s trope where he states that women’s emancipation was a “natural measure” of social emancipation. Understood in terms of the above discussion, this trope
does not render Marx’s and Engels’s perspectives any less masculinist or gender-blind. Marx in particular seemed to have distinctly bourgeois attitudes toward the role of women, at least in terms of marriage and the family. Unlike Fourier, Marx did not support the radical transformation of bourgeois family relations. Despite his concern that men and women should work toward transforming their existing world to create one in which classes would not exist, and hence class position would no longer be a determinant of men’s and women’s personal power, Marx’s assumptions about men’s and women’s personal relations remained confined within the very bourgeois thinking that he had critiqued so effectively in the field of political economy.

IV

In his essay *The Subjection of Women*, first published in 1869, John Stuart Mill echoed his father by using a similar version of this trope:

> Experience does say, that every step in improvement has been so invariably accompanied by a step made in raising the position of women, that historians and philosophers have been led to adopt their elevation or debasement as on the whole the surest test and measure of the civilization of a people or an age. (J.S. Mill 1983, 37–38)

Like his father, Mill shared some of the views and values that saw civilization as being amply exemplified in English commercial society. And furthermore, he understood “civilization” to be a progressive unfolding of material benefits and developments in the sciences and the arts that he described as “the growth of man’s power over nature” (Mill 1970, 56; see also Millar 1771). However, and more significantly, unlike James, the younger Mill did not accept, either as a principle or a practice, the political subordination of women. The opening sentence of his 1869 essay made this explicit: “The legal subordination of one sex to the other . . . is wrong in itself” and is “one of the chief hindrances to human improvement” (J.S. Mill 1983, 1).

This was not a new view for Mill, nor was his linking of women’s social and political emancipation with the general improvement of society. In his *Principles of Political Economy* published twenty-one years earlier in 1848, he had expressed similar sentiments, namely that “the ideas and institutions by which the accident of sex is made the groundwork of an inequality of legal rights, and a forced dissimilarity of social functions, must ere long be recognised as the greatest hindrance to moral, social, and even intellectual improvement” (J.S. Mill 1970, 125). The chief difference between these two statements is to be found in Mill’s shift in emphasis. In the *Principles* he had been somewhat tentative, merely expressing a hope that the injustice would “ere long be recognised” and that something would then be done about it. By 1869, he had become more forceful and direct, asserting not just the fundamental wrongness of such a principle, but that “it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (J.S. Mill 1983, 1).

The advocacy of a “principle of perfect equality” was a defining feature of Mill’s analysis. It distinguished his liberalism from that of his father and Bentham, and underpinned his conception of human improvement and social progress (Morales 1996, 42, 64). He applied this principle throughout the *Subjection of Women* to provide a telling critique of the relations between the sexes, particularly marriage. Borrowing heavily from William Thompson and Anna Wheeler (see Pateman 1988), Mill recognized that women
were trained to subordination, to accede to the power of men (whether husband, father or brother) and to be happy and willing to do so. Mill’s principle of perfect equality led him to argue that the aim should not be to enable women to replicate men’s power. This would simply result in women developing the same crippling values and characteristics of the tyrant, since men, in Mill’s view, were as corrupted by their power over women as women were oppressed by that power. Rather, the social, legal, and political basis for men’s power should be removed so that the relations between the sexes in marriage “should be a school of sympathy in equality, of living together in love, without power on one side and obedience on the other” (J.S. Mill 1983, 82). This was the key issue for Mill—the removal, or at least radical diminution, of men’s power and privilege. In this respect his critique of bourgeois marriage appears every bit as radical as those made by socialists such as Fourier, Marx, and Engels. Indeed it was to the early socialist thinkers that Mill attributed his conception of perfect equality (J.S. Mill 1958, 142). Clearly Mill aimed to challenge and transform men’s power, to challenge core aspects of the masculinist ontology of his fellow liberals.

However, when he turned to discussing what marriage might be like under conditions of “perfect equality,” the masculinist ontological commitments resurfaced. Despite his view that all occupations should be available equally to women and men alike because “the power of earning is essential to the dignity of a woman” (J.S. Mill 1983, 89; 1970, 324–25), women would still choose marriage over paid work: “Like a man when he chooses a profession, so, when a woman marries she makes a choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a family, as the first call upon her exertions, during as many years of her life as may be required the purpose; and that she renounces, not all other objects and occupations, but all which are not consistent with the requirements of this” (J.S. Mill 1983, 89). In making their “choice,” women’s political and economic status was being treated the same as men’s (Gatens 1991, 46). Women choose what has traditionally been seen as women’s work whereas men choose any work that takes their fancy, a seemingly limited choice indeed (Di Stefano 1991, 171). Furthermore, Mill allowed that the husband, who he assumed for the sake of argument to be older than his wife, could be expected to exercise greater authority in decision-making (J.S. Mill 1983, 90). By allowing effective power in the relationship to be returned to the man, Mill moved well away from the “perfect equality” of his original position. In so doing, he returned the discussion closer to that of his predecessors than he might have cared to admit. The model of domestic relations under “perfect equality” was not so different from that articulated by Millar nearly one hundred years earlier.

Other criticisms could also be made of aspects of Mill’s feminism, such as his failure to address adequately “the political implications of the sexual division of labour” in the family (Di Stefano 1991, 177), his fuzziness over the idea of “nature” (Annas 1977), his masculinist assumption that to be human is to transcend one’s “animal function” (Gatens 1991; Zerilli 1994), and his tendency to essentialism (Tulloch 1989; MacKinnon 1987). Even so, these criticisms do not negate the fact that, of the men philosophers under discussion, only John Stuart Mill accepted as a given the necessity to oppose the principle of the legal subordination of one sex to the other. But he was not able to shed, to any great extent, the embedded masculinist assumptions of his liberal heritage. What he challenged on the one hand he reinforced on the other, to paraphrase one of Mill’s sympathetic feminist interpreters (Morales 1996, 152).
At the same time as James Mill, Fourier, Marx, Engels, and John Stuart Mill were developing their various political theories, women thinkers were producing considerable political writing that likewise affected the discursive fields being marked out by these men. As Karen Offen (2000) has demonstrated, there was no shortage of fruitful intellectual intercourse between men and women thinkers. Apart from the significant impact of the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) in the wake of the French Revolution (for example, see Wollstonecraft 1978 and 1975), the first half of the nineteenth century also saw the publicly articulated views of Anna Wheeler (1785–1848), Flora Tristan (1803–44), Harriet Taylor (1808–58), and Frances Wright (1795–1852), to name just a few of the better-known women writers and activists. And in the latter half of the eighteenth century, especially around the time of the French Revolution, there were women such as Olympe de Gouges (1748–93), Claire Lacombe (1765–?), Théroigne de Mericourt (1762–1817), Catherine Macaulay (1731–91), and many others were actively arguing for the extension of social and political rights to women (see Moses 1984, xi–xii). Yet within the work of the men philosophers discussed above, one would search in vain for references to, discussions of, or even explicit acknowledgments of the ideas of these women thinkers. Even John Stuart Mill, whose *Subjection of Women* (1983) clearly bore the imprint of the feminist ideas of Anna Wheeler (Pateman 1988, 160; Ball 1980b), did not really discuss or acknowledge the influences of feminist thinkers except in his autobiography (J.S. Mill 1958); and even then it was limited to the contributions of the French socialists. Granted, in *On Liberty* (1976, 64) Mill explicitly acknowledged his collaboration with and indebtedness to Harriet Taylor, and in his *Autobiography* he expanded that acknowledgement. In this respect the younger Mill may be considered the exception. Nonetheless, the broad claim still stands—the supposed “fathers” or “godfathers” of feminist political theory did not bother discussing or engaging the writings of contemporary women thinkers. This was not mere oversight.

In part this lack of acknowledgment derives from the social practices that discouraged women from participating actively in the public sphere, practices clearly assumed in works such as Millar’s (1771) with respect to social ranks and manners. However, a second and more significant issue is the habit of mind, a manner of discoursing, that constructs the fields of philosophy and political theory as a “conversation” (Wolin 1960) or “dialogue” (Rorty 1979) between successive theorists of different generations. That is to say that political thinkers, especially in the modern era, often represent themselves as part of a “transhistorical dialogue that links the voices of the present with those of the past” (Zerilli 1991, 254). But it is a very one-sided, or at least gendered, dialogue. These so-called dialogues constructed women out of the “conversation” because the manner in which the discourses of political theory were structured, conceptually and methodologically, favored or reflected men’s modes of intellectual practice. And the core assumption, so self-evident as to require no discussion or explanation, was that the thinker was a man, and hence the agent of the discourse was a man, or the perspective from which the ideas were framed was that of a man’s (de Beauvoir 1988, 15). This assumption was present even in J.S. Mill’s decidedly sympathetic arguments for women’s political rights. There is also a third, equally compelling, reason why the few women thinkers who braved the public arena were not going to have their work acknowledged. In one way or another, though with differing
degrees of emphasis and priorities, they aimed to challenge fundamental aspects of the masculinist manner of apprehending the world. Women thinkers were not simply accommodating themselves to the dominant masculinist ideas.

It is precisely for this reason that caution has to be exercised when constructing histories of feminist political theories. As has been noted, the hyphenated terminology of liberal-feminism, Marxist-feminism, socialist-feminism, and so on was important in establishing political identities for feminists, especially in relation to nonfeminists (Freeman 1995, 406). And given that the discourses of political theory favored or reflected men’s modes of intellectual practice, a tendency emerged to overplay the significance of the specific, adjoining political theory, be it liberalism, socialism, Marxism, or another. Despite the best of intentions a displacement occurred in the interpretation of the relationship as a hyphenated connection involving two (possibly equally poised) distinctive theoretical approaches. In its stead emerged a causal interpretation that favored the adjoining theory by placing it in a dominant discursive position. Hyphenated feminisms therefore run the risk of taking as their own the ontological commitments of their adjoining theories, including some or all of those theories’ masculinist biases; they end up carrying unwanted ontological conceptual baggage (Jose 1995).

This same argument exposes the inner logic of deploying a trope measuring social progress by the degree to which women were emancipated. The above discussion of the use of this trope by a number of important radical political philosophers in the early nineteenth century clearly demonstrates that the trope was not of itself especially radical, at least from a feminist perspective. It was in fact a commonplace of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century thought, grounded in a distinctly masculinist ontology. To use this trope as a means to signify the feminist credentials of these particular radical men philosophers, and hence their contribution to the history of feminist thought, is therefore misleading. But it does more than merely overstate their putative feminism.

Of equal importance has been the intellectual move of treating these views as if they themselves were feminist theory. This enables the particular views of men political theorists (about women’s political rights) to be moved into the foreground, even though, as has been argued above, such views were often of small moment in their overall philosophies. This perpetuates the idea that political theory is really men’s business, a conversation with and among men philosophers, as if women thinkers were bystanders in their own histories. This leaves unchallenged the practice of mainstream summaries and descriptions of feminist theory to account for feminist theory in terms of the various modern political theories. Just as importantly, it also perpetuates the idea that feminist political theory, as a distinctive orientation within the field of political theory, had nothing new or original to offer. Therefore, using this trope to ground the history and development of modern feminist political theory ends up mapping a patrilineal genealogy for feminist political thought.

Establishing a space for feminist political theory, especially for identifying feminists and their ideas, remains an important focus of feminist scholarship. And although significant gains have been made in our understanding of the development of feminist political theory, it is no exaggeration to note that this space remains heavily contested. Just as mainstream scholars in earlier decades were reluctant to concede any legitimacy to feminist scholarship, it remains the case today that theory with a distinctly
feminist orientation (including feminist political theory) still has to struggle for recognition (Freeman 1995). The point of this paper has been to argue for a more positive, less masculinist, account of the history of feminist political thought. It has done this by critiquing the trope linking women’s political emancipation with the emancipation of society. In particular, the argument has been directed against treating feminist political theory, however unintentionally, as a derived subset of men’s political theory. In the rich tapestry of political thought, feminist political thought is neither an occasional footnote to the history of political theory nor an aside or digression from the conversations of men philosophers. It is the conversation.

Notes
This paper is based on an earlier version entitled “So They Were All Feminists Then? Radical Philosophers as Feminists in the Early Nineteenth Century” that was first presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association 2001 Conference, Parliament House, Brisbane, Australia, September 24–26, 2001.

1. While it could be argued that the terms “feminist” and “feminism” are late-nineteenth-century creations, their use here to describe ideas originating in earlier periods is justified on the grounds, as argued by Offen, that the terms “can be said to encompass both a system of ideas and a movement for social change based on a refusal of male privilege and women’s subordination within any given society” (2000, 20). In what follows I am not concerned with the question of the existence of specific social movements as such, but with those ideas that could be deemed feminist in the sense that they recognized and resisted men’s privilege and women’s subordination. For a summary overview of some of the issues involved see Judith Allen (1994 1–31.)

2. For representative, but by no means homogeneous, contributions to this debate see, for example, Diana Coole (1988); Moira Gatens (1991); Alison Jaggar (1983); Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus (1987); Andrea Nye, (1988); Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross (1986); Arlene Saxonhouse (1985); Mary Shanley and Carole Pateman (1991); Christine Di Stefano, (1991); and Linda Zerilli (1994).

3. Protagoras of Abdera was an ancient Greek philosopher (c. fifth century BCE) noted for his principle that “of all things man is the measure, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not” (see Sprague 1972, 18).

4. For some discussion on the issue of a theory’s ontological commitments see Jim Jose 1995.

5. Indeed, one might say the same of the discipline of political science as a whole, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. While there have been distinct improvements over the past forty years, many of the observations and criticisms made by feminist scholars still retain their force in the early twenty-first century. For example, see the assessments of politics and political science made by Boals (1975); Barbara Nelson (1989); Susan Carroll and Linda Zerilli (1993); Virginia Sapiro (1997); and Joni Lovenduski (1998).

6. Section I draws on material published in one of my previous articles (see Jose 2000).

7. Fourier’s debt to Rousseau was quite considerable as can be seen from his comment that Rousseau was “one of the few who set out to tell the truth” about civilization (1996, 281). Even so, there were certainly some significant differences, as
Fourier also made clear (1996, 58, 129). For some discussion of the Rousseau-ian aspect of Fourier’s thought see Daniel Bell (1968/1969) and E.S. Mason (1928).

8. Thompson’s (1970) view, first published in 1825 and based on his close collaboration with Anna Wheeler (see Dooley 1996), that women were trained to grateful servitude can be traced back at least to the ideas expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft in her classic work, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1978), first published in 1792. For example, Wollstonecraft made it clear that, *contra* Rousseau and countless others, women have been “created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (1978, 118); and that as a result of men’s artifices, “women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection” (1978, 132). Similar views were also expressed by Frances Wright in her *Course of Popular Lectures* published in 1829 (see Moses 1984).

9. It should be noted here that Wollstonecraft’s fame did not just rest on her feminist critique of men’s political privileges. In 1790, nearly two years before the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* appeared in print, she had published *Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1975). This was the first published response to Edmund Burke’s, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1969). In many respects Wollstonecraft’s critique set the tone for all subsequent responses to Burke’s counter-revolutionary essay. Yet one would search the standard histories of political thought in vain for discussions of her critique of Burke. Rather, if specific critical responses are noted at all, it is usually Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1971), originally published in two parts in 1791 and 1792, that gets the attention. As one of Paine’s biographers notes, the original publisher, Joseph Johnson, “sensed, correctly, that Paine’s manuscript would attract far more attention and bitter controversy than all of them [already published critiques of Burke] combined” (Keane 1996, 305). Keane’s favorable use of “correctly” reinforces the masculinist bias toward Paine, despite the biographer’s otherwise nuanced sensitivities to the issue of gender. It is only very recently that Wollstonecraft’s critical response to Burke, and its place within the “conversation,” has been acknowledged (Waters 2000, 127).

10. Given that Harriet Taylor also became Mill’s wife, it is not surprising that he would provide some explicit acknowledgment of her role in shaping his ideas (see Mill 1976). But note that Mill also explained that his commitment to “the complete equality in all legal, political, social and domestic relations . . . between men and women” ranked among his earliest convictions and had been formed before he met Taylor (Mill 1958, 206–207n1).

References


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