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William Thompson and John Stuart Mill on co-operation and the rights of women

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William Thompson and, later, John Stuart Mill argued that women’s inferior position in society was a product of their environment and upbringing. As such, access to the franchise, and opportunities for education and employment would improve the welfare and position of women. Recognition of women’s reproductive roles led Thompson to argue that equality of outcome for women could not be achieved within the competitive framework and required a re-organisation of society into self-supporting co-operative communities in which women’s reproductive role would be valued and childcare and catering provided communally. While John Stuart Mill advocated access for women into all employments, he thought that a purely domestic role was consistent with women’s emancipation provided that role was freely chosen. Free choice was supported by better outside options but the bargaining power of women choosing the domestic route was not addressed by Mill. Mill supported co-operation but his favoured form involved co-operative ownership of firms operating within competitive markets. He believed that a society based on co-operation would foster favourable attitudes towards women’s emancipation and moral improvement more generally, but he saw no direct relationship between the development of co-operative enterprise and the status of women.

Key words: Women, Equality, Utilitarianism, Co-operation, Competition

JEL classifications: B31, B51, B54

1. Introduction

William Thompson’s1 Appeal on behalf of One Half of the Human Race (1825) was written in response to James Mill’s dismissal of the claim of women to equal suffrage in his Essay on Government ([1820] 1825). Although the need to rebut James Mill’s position was the immediate occasion for The Appeal, the work addressed the broader...
question of the nature of women’s oppression and the reforms that were necessary to enable women to lead fulfilling lives and achieve equality with men. Thompson argued that the apparent inferiority in women was not natural to them but was the product of environment and upbringing. This argument had already been articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) but what set *The Appeal* apart from Wollstonecraft’s work was its exploration of the relationship between female inequality and the social organisation of production. Thompson argued that full equality for women could only be achieved within the context of a society based on co-operation rather than competition. The reasons for this view are sketched in the *Appeal*, but a more complete justification based on utilitarian reasoning was set out by Thompson in his major work *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth* (1824).

A generation later, women’s suffrage remained an issue. John Stuart Mill’s attempt to amend the 1867 Reform Act was not successful but a vigorous campaign to extend the franchise continued despite this failure. Mill contributed by publishing *On the Subjection of Women* in 1869 (Mill and Taylor, 1984, CW vol. XXI) As in the case of Thompson’s earlier work, the *Subjection* involved a broad investigation of all aspects of women’s oppression. Likewise, Mill argued that any apparent deficiencies in women should not be assumed to be natural to them but were instead likely to be the product of environment and upbringing. With appropriate education and equal access to the professions, women could take a full part in society. However, this radical view was also accompanied by the claim that a purely domestic role was consistent with women’s emancipation provided that role was freely chosen.

The young Mill had been a strong advocate of competition and a critic of the types of co-operative communities proposed by Thompson. This position was gradually modified, and, especially after 1848, Mill developed a much more positive attitude towards certain forms of socialism and co-operation. Even so, he remained an advocate of competition and his favoured form of co-operation involved the co-operative ownership of firms which themselves operated within competitive markets. Mill considered that a society based on co-operative production would lead to the development of favourable attitudes towards women’s emancipation and population control. In the longer run, he looked forward to the development of partnerships of equals both within the family and in society at large as well as recognition of women’s different but equal contribution within the family itself. For Thompson, on the other hand, such recognition could not be achieved within the competitive system and required a new state of society—that of mutual co-operation in large numbers.

Thompson is variously regarded as the most important theorist of the Owenite co-operative movement, as a utopian socialist and as a contributor to scientific

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2 The view that character is formed by circumstances can be traced to Locke. In the eighteenth century, the idea was developed by Helvetius who was also amongst the first of the modern utilitarians. Adam Smith’s statement that the difference between the philosopher and the porter arose ‘not so much from nature as from habit, custom and education’ shows that the idea that character was formed by circumstances had wide currency. Wollstonecraft was the first to argue that the dependent and degraded state of women was due to nurture rather than nature. In this, she was followed by Thompson and later also by J. S. Mill. The Saint Simonians’ ‘different but equal doctrine’ based on the view that people had different talents and abilities can be regarded as a break from the Lockean view. Despite their emphasis on circumstances, both Thompson and Mill accepted that there were some natural differences between men and women.

3 See Mill and Taylor (1984, CW vol. XXI, p. 278) for Mill’s argument that differences should only be inferred to be natural if they could not possibly be artificial.
socialism. In so far as economists have considered his work, they have focussed mainly on *Distribution of Wealth* which was published in 1824, a year before the *Appeal*. In recent years, the *Appeal* has received attention from feminists, philosophers and political theorists and some comparisons have been drawn between it and J. S. Mill’s better-known work. This seems natural given that the *Appeal* and *On the Subjection of Women* are the two major nineteenth-century works on women’s equality. There is also the fact that both Thompson and Mill acknowledged the input of female ‘co-authors’—in Thompson’s case that of Anna Wheeler and in Mill’s case that of his wife Harriet Taylor and to a lesser extent that of his stepdaughter Helen Taylor. The influence and input of these female collaborators was important and, although it is acknowledged in the present paper, it is not its main focus.

Both Thompson and J. S. Mill identified as utilitarians. In *Distribution of Wealth* Thompson wrote that the leading principle of his inquiry was the pursuit of the greatest possible sum of happiness. He praised Jeremy Bentham’s role in developing and establishing this principle as the proper test of morals but also acknowledged that the principle had been recognised earlier by Helvetius and others. Thompson’s early engagement with Bentham on educational matters resulted in an invitation to spend time at Bentham’s home which Thompson took up in 1822 (Pankhurst, 1954). While there, he wrote his main work *Distribution of Wealth* and came into contact with the leaders of Utilitarian thought including James Mill. Thompson adopted much of Bentham’s framework and reasoning, but he took utilitarianism in new, less individualistic, directions recognising that individuals’ opportunities for happiness depended on the social structures within which they were located. Moreover, against Bentham’s declaration that the game of push pin could be at least as valuable as poetry or music, Thompson was clear that some pleasures were of less value than others. In taking this view, however, he recognised that basic needs had to be met before one could enjoy the higher pleasures (Kaswan, 2014, pp. 67–8).

Under the tutelage of his father and Bentham, John Stuart Mill had absorbed the utilitarian creed from an early age. Following a mental crisis in his early twenties, he rejected utilitarianism for a time but was later reconciled with the philosophy albeit in a somewhat altered form. Like Thompson, he rejected the view that all pleasures were equal and emphasised that quality mattered in the estimation of pleasures. Moreover, although he recognised the importance of circumstances in shaping human character, he held that individuals were not totally devoid of agency and had the ability to remould and remake their own characters (Mill, 1981B, *CW* vol. VIII, p. 870; Ball, 2000).

The present paper begins with a discussion of the background to Thompson’s *Appeal*. It then sets out in some detail the nature of its arguments in defence of women’s suffrage and women’s rights more generally. The *Appeal* itself does not contain much by way of underpinning economic analysis. For this, it is necessary to have recourse to Thompson’s *Distribution of Wealth* in which he outlined the merits and demerits of competitive capitalism and provided reasons for his support for Robert

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4 See, e.g., Dooley (1996) and Kaswan (2014) both of whom focus mainly on Thompson; Gardner (2013) who has a chapter on Wheeler and Thompson and another on J. S. Mill; Kelly (2015) and Jose (2019) both of whom focus on Wheeler and Thompson; and Morales (1996) and Ball (2001) both of whom focus on Mill. McCabe (2021) discusses the views of Anna Wheeler and Harriet Taylor. She considers their role as co-authors, their treatment of marriage as a form of slavery, and their attitude to socialism.
Owen’s system of mutual co-operation. The later sections of the paper examine the approach of John Stuart Mill to the rights of women and to co-operative production and compares and contrasts Mill’s views with those taken by Thompson.

2. William Thompson on women’s suffrage and the advantages of co-operation

2.1 The background to The Appeal

James Mill (1773–1836), a leading propagandist for the utilitarian cause in the early nineteenth century, completed his Essay on Government in 1820. In the essay, Mill argued that the end of government is ‘to increase to the utmost the pleasures, and diminish to the utmost the pains, which men derive from one another’ (Mill, 1825, p. 1). Having considered, in turn, direct democracy, aristocracy and monarchy as means of achieving these ends, Mill argued that the solution to the problem was the ‘grand discovery of modern times’, the system of representative government’ (Mill, 1825, pp. 16–20). The question then to be considered was how to make sure that the representatives ruled in the interests of those who chose them (Ball, 2018). Mill’s answer was that frequent elections would ensure a conformity between the conduct of the representatives and the will of those who appointed them. The final issue to be addressed was who should select the representatives? Here, Mill rejected the view that the size and composition of the electorate was unimportant and instead argued that the benefits of the representative system would be lost unless the public or at least a large proportion of it had a vote. While there is some ambiguity about Mill’s final position, the general view is that he was advocating universal or near-universal suffrage for males aged forty or above (Harburger, 1962). On one issue, however, that of the exclusion of women, there is no lack of clarity. Mill wrote:

One thing is pretty clear, that all those individuals whose interests are indisputably included in those of other individuals, may be struck off without inconvenience. In this light may be viewed all children, up to a certain age, whose interests are involved in those of their parents. In this light, also, women may be regarded, the interest of almost all of whom is involved either in that of their fathers or in that of their husbands. (Mill, 1825, p. 21).

Although the position articulated above may have been a widely accepted one at the time and may have been made for pragmatic political reasons, it came as something of a surprise to some of Mill’s utilitarian followers including his son John Stuart Mill (Mill, 1981A, p. 107). Bentham also let it be known that he was advocating universal or near-universal suffrage for males aged forty or above (Harburger, 1962). On one issue, however, that of the exclusion of women, there is no lack of clarity. Mill wrote:

5 Commenting on the pragmatic argument in the Appeal, Thompson wrote: ‘Some no doubt, anxious to establish political rights for the male part, or even a considerable portion of the male part, of the species, have, merely through prudence, kept back the consideration of the political rights of women, lest so large a demand on political power should lead it to throw discord between the claimants of the political rights of men (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. 26). Thompson acknowledged that this motive was ‘good as to politics’.

6 Bentham’s own position on women’s rights was not entirely clear cut. Even those such as Williford who see him as a defender of women’s rights acknowledge that Bentham equivocated when it came to recommendations for reform because he thought the time was not yet right (Williford, 1975, p. 169; Crimmins, 1994, pp. 263–4). On the other hand, Ball argues that Bentham was against enfranchising women and indeed supported their wider exclusion from political life not just on grounds of expediency but because of his view that women’s sympathetic biases made them incapable of thinking about, much less promoting, the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Ball, 1980, p. 101). Ball considers that Bentham’s claim to have disagreed with Mill’s position in the Essay on Government reflected a deterioration in relationship between the two men after 1818 rather than a change in Bentham’s own position.
Thompson and Anna Wheeler whose argument was set out in the *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, To Retain Them in Political, and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery.*

William Thompson (1775–1833) was a member of a prosperous Protestant family who were landowners and merchants in Country Cork, Ireland. A committed reformer, he supported the campaign for Catholic emancipation and was active in efforts to improve the education available to the poorer classes of Irish society. He also became actively involved in setting up of co-operatives and, alongside Robert Owen, worked to promote the co-operative movement both in Britain and in Ireland. Thompson’s best-known work, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth,* was published in 1824. The completeness of this work led Foxwell (1899, p. xxxviii) to suggest that Thompson should be regarded as the ‘father of the English Socialist School’. Menger (1899, p. 51) was of the view that Thompson influenced later writers on socialism including Marx and Robertus and regretted the neglect of a writer who was the most eminent founder of scientific socialism.

Like Thompson, Anna Wheeler was born into a well-off Protestant family. Ignoring advice from her mother, she married at 15 but the marriage was not a success. Anna eventually left her husband and, following a four-year sojourn in Guernsey where her uncle was governor, she departed for Caen in France where she became part of a Saint-Simonian circle. Already having some contact with the Owenite movement in Britain, she worked to promote links between Owen and the followers of Saint-Simon and Fourier in France. Like Thompson, she moved in utilitarian circles in London and was an active promoter of the co-operative movement. The precise nature of the relationship between Thompson and Wheeler is not clear but there are grounds for believing that Thompson was not exaggerating when, in the introduction to the *Appeal,* he described himself as her interpreter and the scribe of her sentiments (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. xxiii). In that respect, their relationship has parallels with that between John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor a generation later (Foxwell, 1899, xlvii; Pankhurst, 1954, p. 75; Dooley, 1996, p. 81).

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7 The family had been prosperous but there is evidence that William Thompson himself was not a success in business (Lane, 2014, p. 27).

8 For details of Wheeler’s political activities such as her association with the Saint Simonian feminists involved with *Tribune des femmes,* see Simeon (2021). Dooley (1996) provides detail on her association with Fourier.

9 In the introductory letter addressed to Mrs Wheeler in the *Appeal,* Thompson indicates that he had hesitated to write because he was anxious that she should ‘state to the world in writing, in her own name, what she had so often so well stated in conversation, or under feigned names in some periodical publications’ (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. xii). Although Mrs Wheeler lacked neither the courage nor comprehensiveness of mind required for the undertaking, she lacked leisure and the resolution to carry out the task. A few of the pages of the *Appeal* had been written by her but the remainder should be considered their joint property, he being her interpreter and scribe (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. xiii). Dooley (1996), Cory (2004), Gardner (2013), Jose (2019) and McCabe (2021) discuss the issue of the extent to which Wheeler should be considered a co-author of the *Appeal.* Cory makes a strong case on stylistic grounds that Wheeler contributed to the writing of the section on married women and that she was the prime author of the section entitled ‘The Appeal to Women’. Gardner argues that Wheeler should be regarded as a full co-author because she brought to the work an understanding of the condition of women based on her experience. Even if Gardner’s argument about the nature of Wheeler’s contribution is accepted, it does not follow that we should insist on regarding Wheeler as a co-author. We have no evidence that she would have welcomed such a claim or considered it warranted. The approach taken here will be to attribute to both authors those sections for which there is strong evidence of Wheeler’s direct input.
2.2 The Appeal

The Appeal opens with a long letter addressed to Mrs Wheeler in which James Mill’s Essay is described as a rude gauntlet thrown down against half of mankind (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. xxv). Thompson made it clear that both he and Wheeler took the view that equality of outcome for women (attaining equal happiness with men) required much more than securing their right to vote or even the removal of all unequal legal and moral restraints.10 As long as individual competition was the moving principle of the society, women’s inequality of strength and the loss of time due to pregnancy and childcare meant that they would remain at a disadvantage even if they had better access to education and their legal rights were secured (Thompson, [1825] 1983, xxvi–xxvii). ‘Their rights might be equal but not their happiness, because unequal powers under free competition must produce unequal effects’ (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. xxx). Equal happiness of both sexes required a new state of society—that of mutual co-operation in large numbers in which the utility of man’s superior strength is balanced by the peculiar faculty of women in bearing and rearing infants.

The main body of the Appeal is comprised of two parts. Part I examines Mill’s argument in support of the extension of the franchise. Part II, which makes up the bulk of the work, is organised around three main questions. The first of these is whether there is an identity of interest between men and women. The second invites the reader to suppose that the interests of women are involved in those of men, and then asks if this is sufficient reason to deprive either party of civil and political rights. The final question asks if it is possible to achieve enjoyments proportioned to exertions and capabilities in the absence of equal civil rights and whether these, in turn, are possible in the absence of political rights. An address to women concludes the Appeal.

2.2.1 Part I of The Appeal  Thompson began by noting that the foundation for James Mill’s argument for the extension of the franchise lay in his view that human beings had a natural tendency to seek to exercise power over their fellow human beings unless restrained by various checks. This being the case, should a small number of people choose the representatives, those chosen would promote the interests of that small number and all the benefits of the representative system would be lost. Thompson had a number of lines of attack. One was that, by excluding half the human race, Mill appeared to undermine his own argument that the electorate should be large. Secondly, he questioned Mill’s assumption that the interests of women were involved in those of men, and then asked if this is sufficient reason to deprive either party of civil and political rights. The final question asks if it is possible to achieve enjoyments proportioned to exertions and capabilities in the absence of equal civil rights and whether these, in turn, are possible in the absence of political rights. An address to women concludes the Appeal.

10 The introductory letter noted Mary Wollstonecraft’s pioneering writings on behalf of women but regretted that the narrowness of her views had limited their usefulness. Still, The Appeal and Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) have much in common including the argument that the existing dependent and degraded state of women was not something natural to them. Wollstonecraft also argued that civil and political oppression of women and their confinement to the domestic sphere narrowed the range of their interests and stunted their intellectual development. She characterised women’s position within marriage as one of slavery. Although Wollstonecraft was an active champion of the French revolution and critic of Edmund Burke, her focus in A Vindication was on the rights and opportunities of women and she did not attempt a wider critique of the existing system of society, nor did she advocate the system of mutual co-operation.
benefit. Under existing and all past circumstances, this was true for the majority of men but in different circumstances, knowledge and benevolence would be increased and men would see their interest in tracing the consequences of their actions on the happiness of others as well as on their own (Thompson, [1825] 1983, pp. 14–7).11

2.2.2 Part II of The Appeal

2.2.2.1 Is there an identity of interest between men and women?

In broaching the question of whether there was an identity of interest between men and women, Thompson identified three classes of women: (i) women without husbands or fathers; (ii) adult daughters in their fathers’ establishments; and (iii) wives. On Mill’s own arguments, women in the first category ought to have votes. With regard to the second category, it was true that adult daughters in their fathers’ establishments could benefit from family prosperity but their interests were more likely to be involved with those of their mothers than their fathers. In any case, the law as it stood limited fathers’ legal control over their daughters (Thompson, [1825] 1983, pp. 34–53).

Thompson and Wheeler12 began consideration of the extent to which the interests of wives were involved with those of their husbands by noting that, although marriage was commonly referred to as a contract, it had none of the characteristics of a fair contract. Women had no input into the terms of the contract which deprived them of whatever rights they had before marriage. The argument that women entered the contract under their own free will was no defence because, given their lack of access to property and education, staying single was not a real choice (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. 57). The marriage codes of all nations rendered women the slaves of men and this fact had a corrupting effect on the morals of men as well as depriving women of their happiness.

There was no identity of interest. Differences in the education and acquired dispositions of men and women impoverished the relationships between them and reduced them to their animal nature. Wives were excluded from social pleasures by the marriage code requiring obedience to their husbands and the restrictions that this placed on their freedom rendered the state of the civilised wife worse than that of the female West India slave. So-called civilised wives had no right to property in their capacity as wives. Even if husbands were in the habit of not restricting their wives’ activities and pleasures, the wives would still be in the position of slaves because they would only enjoy their own activities at the pleasure of their husbands (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. 89). Thompson and Wheeler concluded that James Mill’s statement that the happiness of wives was involved with that of their husbands and for this reason women’s political rights need not be considered was a most glaring and pernicious falsehood. On the contrary, all women, but particularly married women, were more in need of political rights than any other portion of human beings (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. 107).

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11 In A System of Logic [1843], John Stuart Mill also criticised what he referred to as the interest—philosophy of the Bentham School which he argued was far from being universally true (1981B, CW vol. VIII, pp. 890–1). See also Robson (1968, pp. 35–49).

12 As indicated in footnote 5, there are grounds for regarding this section as the joint product of Thompson and Wheeler and, as such, it will be referenced in this manner.
2.2.2.2 Should women be deprived of political rights if their interests were involved with those of men?

Having undermined the basis for Mill’s assertion that the interests of women were involved in those of men, Thompson sought to show that, even if the interests of women were so involved, it would not follow that women should be deprived of political rights.

Political rights were important for two main reasons: (i) they provided a guarantee of the continuance of rights of property and person and (ii) they provided opportunity for the exercise of intellectual powers and the enlargement of the sympathies of human beings (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. 121). If the interests of men and women were completely involved in each other, this might be a good reason for indifference as to which party was excluded from exercising political rights. However, the loss of the second benefit to be derived from the exercise of political rights would remain. This aspect had been entirely overlooked by James Mill in his *Essay on Government* (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. 122). Here, Thompson pinpointed an important difference between his own conception of happiness and that employed by Bentham. In the Benthamite hedonic subjective approach, well-being consists primarily of happiness; Thompson’s approach is broader and includes access to the opportunity to develop one’s own potential (Kaswan, 2014, pp. 198–203; Bruni and Porta, 2005, pp. 6–9).

Thompson considered the respective strengths and weaknesses of men and women in their capacity as legislators. He argued that women were the equal of men in terms of intellectual aptitude and, being more inclined to rule by persuasion than through the exercise of power, would frame and enact their laws in such a way that they would achieve the support of those affected by them (Thompson [1825] 1983, pp. 141–4). He then went on to take account of the feelings of those who objected to female suffrage and took pleasure in the comparative misery of their fellow creatures. According to Thompson, the loss of those who objected would be more than counteracted by the ‘immense accession of happiness’ which would arise because of sympathy with women’s enjoyment.13 However, he noted that the development of ‘kindly feelings of joy in the welfare of others’ was extremely difficult under the system of individual competition in which the interests of all are put in opposition to each other. The full development of such feelings would have to await the development of arrangements based on mutual co-operation. Even so, removing the restraints of exclusions and unequal laws would improve the situation of women and help to lay the groundwork for the voluntary establishment of co-operative associations (Thompson, [1825] 1983, pp. 150–1).

2.2.2.3 Are civil and political rights necessary?

In the final part of the *Appeal*, Thompson addressed the issue of whether civil and political rights were necessary to secure enjoyments proportioned to exertion and capabilities. Because of their lower muscular strength and the fact that their activities were interrupted by gestation, women acquired less than men under a system of individual competition even where they were on average of equal culture. Still, Thompson did

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13 Here Thompson implicitly assumed that interpersonal comparisons of utility were possible and that the additional happiness of the women together with the additional happiness of those who sympathised with them would outweigh the loss of happiness of those who disapproved of women’s political rights. As we discuss later, Thompson was well aware that there were conceptual and measurement difficulties associated with interpersonal comparisons of utility as well as with its aggregation (Thompson, 1824, Ch. 1, Sections 2 and 3).
not favour equalising enjoyments by taking from the strong and giving to the weak because he thought that nobody would be industrious in such circumstances. What women actually wanted was the removal of the additional bars that prevented them from enjoying what their faculties would procure for them under equal competition.\footnote{The argument articulated here is focussed on the removal of obstacles to women’s progress while recognising that this will still involve inequality. In the address to women, the focus is on the achievement of equality and it is argued that this can only be achieved in a society based on mutual co-operation.}

This required that they have access to the same means of acquiring every species of knowledge as men and that they also have ‘access to every art, occupation and profession, from the highest to the lowest’ (Thompson [1825] 1983, pp. 158–9).

Equal civil and criminal laws were necessary to promote the happiness of women but the political rights of electing and being elected to all legislative and administrative offices were necessary to guarantee the establishment, continuance and execution of these laws. Well-intentioned men legislating on behalf of women would lack the knowledge necessary to represent women's interests adequately. Even if women did not offer themselves for offices and exercise their political rights in proportion to their numbers, the fact that they had this right would cause male legislators to behave differently. Finally, political rights could act as a check to women’s preoccupation with domestic affairs and help to overcome its unfavourable effect of narrowing their perspectives. Thompson was of the view that, with appropriate education, women could occupy three-fourths of the professions, arts and trades carried out by men. Even in the production of wealth, the importance of brute strength was declining. As a result, Thompson was confident that, as society advanced, physical strength would become less important and pleasures arising from the cultivation of the intellect would become more important (Thompson, [1825] 1983, pp. 165–85).\footnote{The focus on the opportunities made possible by technological change is interesting in that it points towards a recognition of the role played by the forces of production in determining the nature of the available possibilities.}

\subsection*{2.2.2.4 The address to women.}

The final element of the Appeal is the address to women. The early part of the address went over ground already covered but in the form of a call to action. Later parts put forward arguments as to why women do badly under a system of individual competition and accumulation of wealth. These included (i) the prospect of misery on the death of the active producer within the family; and (ii) the fact that men’s superiority in production and accumulation made them feel superior to women and caused them to ignore the contribution women made to the welfare of their families because this was not in the form of money. These shortcomings could be overcome in the system of association, or labour by mutual co-operation. Under such a system, all possessions and means of enjoyment would be the common property of all. Children would be provided for independently of the exertions or bounty of any individual parent. Under this system, a man possessing more individual wealth than the woman could no longer enslave her. Women would have equal access to improvement and use of their faculties as men. Women’s role in human reproduction would be valued and thus set against any superior productivity in men’s production of material goods. The liberty and happiness of men was not achievable as long as they held women in chains. The intellectual and moral benefits resulting from the elevation and liberation of women would not only increase the happiness of women but also that of men.
2.3 The system of individual competition

To better understand Thompson’s allusions to the system of individual competition and the proposals for a system of mutual co-operation in the *Appeal*, recourse has to be had to Thompson’s other works, in particular, *The Distribution of Wealth* (1824). The full title of the work *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth most conducive to Human happiness, applied to the newly proposed system of Voluntary Equality and Wealth* provides signals as to the nature of its arguments. The object to be achieved was the utilitarian one of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This required that attention be given to both the production and distribution of wealth. As Thompson put it, the most important problem in political science was ‘how to reconcile just distribution with continued production’ (*Thompson, 1824*, p. xiv).

For Thompson, labour was both the cause and the sole measure of wealth.\(^{16}\) He defined wealth as any physical object of desire produced by labour (*Thompson, 1824*, pp. 6–9). Moral and intellectual pleasures were sources of enjoyment but were not wealth. Wealth was produced for the purpose of adding to happiness and the greater the happiness produced the more satisfactory the effort (*Thompson, 1824*, p. 18). How then to maximise the happiness produced by any given amount of wealth?

Capacity for enjoyment was the first consideration. If someone had a greater capacity for enjoyment per unit of wealth than others, that person should be given more wealth as it would be more productive of happiness in that use (*Thompson, 1824*, p. 19). But, if unequal susceptibility justified unequal distribution, would not equal susceptibility justify equal distribution? Thompson argued that being similarly constituted, all members of society were capable of deriving similar portions of happiness from a given amount of wealth.\(^{17}\) Against those who would suggest otherwise, he argued that many apparent differences were due not to differences in capacity but to circumstances and education and others were in fact trifling. But even if differences were important there was no means of measuring them. Consequently, they could have no bearing on our moral and political calculations (*Thompson, 1824*, pp. 22–3).\(^{18}\) Even if they could be measured, the question would arise as to who should do the measuring?

Having made the case for an equal distribution of wealth on grounds of equal capacity for enjoyment, Thompson turned his attention to the need to provide the labourer with the incentive to exercise habits of industry. The strongest stimulus to production would be provided if those doing the work received the full benefit of their efforts. This amounted to the output of said labour less the value of inputs including advances of food and an allowance for the depreciation of capital used up in production (*Thompson, 1824*, pp. 40–1).

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\(^{16}\) While Thompson claimed that labour was the sole measure of value, he also suggested that it was not always an accurate one. This was because: (i) desires and preferences which influenced exchangeable value varied with circumstances and (ii) the value of particular species of labour was increased due to circumstances such as danger, noxious smells, noxious airs, moisture, cold and extra-exertion (*Thompson, 1824*, pp. 15–6).

\(^{17}\) This argument has some affinity with the Harsanyi doctrine according to which two individuals would be equally well off with the same alternative if these individuals had the same biological features and the same life histories (*Weymark, 1995*).

\(^{18}\) The original of this argument is to be found in Bentham’s *Essay on Representation* (*Schofield, 2004; Guidi, 2008*). Commenting on Bentham’s treatment of individual difference, *Warnock (2003*) noted that the legislator is not usually required to take such differences into account and indeed in many ways is required not to. Thompson, himself, alludes to the calm reasoner or legislator being indifferent as to who enjoys the happiness (*Thompson, 1824*, p. 19).
Production being given, Thompson argued that all voluntary exchanges of the output produced increased happiness. Moreover, engaging in the market had the added benefit of bringing home to people the numerous ways in which they co-operated with others and of encouraging them to become interested in the success of their joint labours.

While voluntary exchange increased happiness, the forced abstraction of products of labour reduced it. Even if the loss of happiness to the producer was fully compensated by an increase in the happiness of the abstractor, the incentive for productive effort would be diminished. This, in turn, would lead to a diminution of output and hence also a reduction in consumption and happiness (Thompson, 1824, pp. 63–7). However, matters did not end there because it was unlikely that the loss of happiness in the case of the producers was compensated for by the increase in the happiness of the abstractors. To show this, Thompson supposed a forced abstraction of a given amount wealth by a single person from each of 1,000 producers. He then argued that the loss to each of the producers multiplied by the number of producers would not be compensated by the gain of the abstractor because while the ‘effect on happiness of the first part is great and striking; ..each succeeding portion diminishes in effect, till all expectation of increase of comfort is relinquished’ (Thompson, 1824, p. 73). Based on this and the issue of incentives for productive effort, Thompson concluded that no part of the produce of labour should be taken from any producer without an equivalent deemed by him to be satisfactory.

Thompson recognised that securing for every labourer the free use of his labour and its products or what these products could be exchanged for could give rise to inequality in distribution but he argued that, without this degree of inequality, there would be no security and hence no production and no wealth to distribute (Thompson, 1824, p. 144). But, while some inequality had to be accepted to provide incentives for production, Thompson was adamant that no other species of inequality of distribution could be justified because it would be injurious to the incentive to produce and detract from the maximisation of utility (Thompson, 1824, p. 151). In this context, he explored the question of what share of output might reasonably be paid to those supplying capital.

If, as Thompson believed, labour is the sole source of wealth, profit could have no other source than the value added to raw material by labour and skill. Thompson acknowledged that without the use of capital, labour would be less productive. Consequently, as long as the labourer relied on others for access to these means of labour, he would be obliged to give up part of his output for their use. There were two approaches to the question of how much this payment should be. From the labourer’s point of view a fair amount would compensate the provider for the wear and tear on his capital and provide for his support in equal comfort with the more actively employed labourers. The measure of the capitalist on the other hand would be the additional/surplus value produced by the same quantity of labour in consequence of its use of machinery and other capital provided (Thompson, 1824, pp. 167–73). While the difference between the two measures could be large, a measure somewhere between the two formed out of the conflict of their opposing interests was likely to prevail (Thompson, 1824, p. 171).

Thompson’s labour theory of value lacks the consistency of that of Ricardo or Marx (King, 1983; Hunt, 1989). The reference to additional or surplus value here seems to be to the money value of the additional output produced by the use of machinery and other capital. This is arguably closer to the later productivity theories than to the Marxian concept of surplus value. Morilhat (2014) provides a detailed investigation of Thompson’s theory of value and rejects the view that Thompson can be considered the inventor of the Marxian concept of surplus value.
Thompson contrasted the system observing the natural laws of distribution in which exchange was voluntary and labour was entitled to the entire use of its products with the existing system of forced unequal distribution (Thompson, 1824, pp. 366–7). The former would achieve the greatest amount of equality compatible with security of production\(^\text{20}\) while the existing system of insecurity gave rise to moral, economic and political evils. In order to move from the existing unequal system to the natural system, a number of fundamental reforms were necessary. These were: (i) the universal establishment of representative institutions; (ii) the gradual removal under these of the institutions violating equal security\(^\text{21}\) and (iii) the diffusion of every species of knowledge of physical and moral truth particularly to the community most devoid of knowledge (Thompson, 1824, p. 366). Thompson was especially concerned that instead of remaining the handmaid of labour in the hands of labour, knowledge had become separated from labour and arrayed against it. He regarded this as unnecessary because, as a source of happiness, knowledge had a striking peculiarity that its possession by one person did not reduce the quantity available to others. The more knowledge was diffused the more it multiplied itself and the more its enjoyment was increased by mutual communication. Every acquisition of knowledge by the individual, instead of diminishing the power to himself and others of future acquisitions, made them more easy and certain (Thompson, 1824, pp. 274–5).

2.4 The system of Mr Owen

As viewed by Thompson, the natural system of distribution had great advantages in the form of abundant production and the development of all active faculties but, in addition to the fact that it involved a degree of inequality, it had other important drawbacks. These were: (i) that it retained the principle of selfishness in the ordinary affairs of life; (ii) that it paralysed the productive powers of women by the waste and other mischiefs of individual family arrangements; (iii) that it could lead to unprofitable modes of individual exertion; (iv) that it provided no adequate resource for sickness, old age, disability and other accidents of human life; and (v) that it obstructed the progress of useful physical and moral education and the progress of general knowledge (Thompson, 1824, p. 369).\(^\text{22}\) Given these evils, the question to be considered was whether it was possible to devise a system which could preserve the advantages of individual competition without the accompanying evils? Thompson argued that such a system had to respect the natural laws of distribution, i.e., that labour should have the entire use of its products, and that the principle of voluntary exchange should apply. Thompson suggested that the system of mutual co-operation and equality of

\(^{20}\) Thompson’s view of security involves ‘the exclusive possession by every man of all the advantages of his labour’ without which labour would not be called forth (Thompson, 1824, pp. 144–51). In Bentham’s definition, the focus was on what enabled people to look to the future in the knowledge that their property would be protected and contracts enforced (Mitchell, 1923).

\(^{21}\) The list of such institutions included: laws preventing access to gaming and fishing rights; laws requiring long apprenticeships; restrictions on the mobility of labour; monopolies; bounties; restrictions on wages; laws preventing peaceful combinations of workers; laws establishing hereditary power or perpetuity of property; taxes of various kinds; and institutions whose effect was to monopolise knowledge to a few. Thompson indicated that he had initially discussed the institutions of insecurity in a long chapter of around 100 pages. However, he decided to withhold this material, in part, so that the whole of his inquiry could be published in a single volume (Thompson, 1824, p. 363). Although Thompson doesn’t specifically say so, this may have been necessitated by his decision to investigate the system of voluntary exchange which may not have been part of his original plan.

\(^{22}\) In his later work, Thompson placed more emphasis on the issue of unemployment arising due to the introduction of machinery and fluctuations in demand (Thompson, [1827] 1997, pp. 89–92).
distribution put forward by Robert Owen met these criteria. The leading features of Owen's system as enumerated by Thompson included: that participation be voluntary; that communities of co-operators should be large enough to benefit from the division of labour and produce all the necessary means of enjoyment; that methods of production be chosen with a view to full employment and maximisation of output; that individuals with the means to do so should contribute to the cost of housing, stock and machinery; that each individual should be fed and clad out of the common store and that housing should consist of individual and communal elements; that individuals should alternate between agriculture and manufacturing in their productive activities with a view to increasing productivity and improving their health; that women should be relieved of the care of children older than two; that children should be educated in common and that meals should be cooked communally; that children should be provided with the best possible education if necessary by assistance from without; that there be freedom of worship; that governance should be by means of a system devised and agreed upon by the whole community; that the acquisition of knowledge and skills be promoted; that all misunderstandings be resolved by conciliatory means; and that every member should be at liberty to leave at any time taking with them the proportion of stock to which they had a claim (Thompson, 1824, pp. 386–91).

Amongst the benefits attributed to such a co-operative system by Thompson were: the development of social taboos against drunkenness and other behaviours which lessen production; reduction in conspicuous consumption allowing resources to be deployed to articles of greater utility; reduction in waste of labour and skill arising from the operation of combination laws, corporation laws and wages-regulation laws; elimination of the waste of life and health due to poverty, ignorance and neglect; reduction or elimination of the unhappiness arising from animosities engendered by the institutions of insecurity; elimination of the waste engendered by the present system of domestic economy in which individual households provided their own catering and childcare thereby preventing women from contributing to social production; elimination of the need for wasteful retail establishments; and elimination of vulnerability to the vagaries of the market and more certain management of the economy based on verified data.

In a later 1827 work, Labour Rewarded, Thompson reported that his initial response to Owen's system was to regard it as nothing more than an improved system of pauper management. However, he became convinced of its desirability and practicality when he examined it as part of his study of the relationship between the distribution of wealth and human happiness. Having devoted a half a year to the study of the system, Thompson concluded that the system of mutual co-operation was the only one which could secure to labour the whole product of its exertions, and that those who pronounced Owen’s system to be impracticable had not studied it carefully enough (Thompson, [1825] 1983, p. 443 and [1827] 1997, pp. 98–9; Pankhurst, 1954, pp. 22–3). It had become clear to Thompson that, in a system with an advanced division of labour, it was impossible to secure to each individual the exact products of his individual labour. However, in the co-operative communities proposed by Owen, labour could collectively secure the products of their co-operative labour (Thompson, [1827] 1997, p. 99).

Thompson was of the view that common provision of catering and childcare would be more efficient that the existing provision within individual households and would free women to take part in other work.
Thompson shared Owen’s views on the importance of environmental and educational influences on the formation of character but whereas Owen often acted as if reform had to come from above, Thompson emphasised the need for this to emerge from working people themselves. A difference is also discernible in their approach to raising the initial capital for the co-operative communities. Owen sought to persuade well-off subscribers to put up the money whereas Thompson favoured the self-financing proposals drawn up by the London Co-operative Society (Thompson, 1827, pp. 106–7; Pankhurst, 1954, pp. 153–82; Podmore, 1906, p. 379). In the event, neither course appears to have been particularly successful. Finally, whereas Owen regarded political reform as something of a diversion which would accomplish little, Thompson was of the view that representative political institutions were necessary for security and that some improvements could be achieved by the elimination of monopoly and other abuses within the existing system. That said, Thompson remained convinced that the demands of gestation and child rearing would prevent women from achieving equality under the system of competitive individualism. However, he was also optimistic that advances in technology would reduce the advantages that men had as a result of superior physical strength.

3. J. S. Mill on the rights of women and on co-operation

As we shall see, with the exception of the role of married women, John Stuart Mill would have found much to agree with in Thompson’s *Appeal*. With regard to co-operation, there was some convergence over time with Thompson’s views although Mill retained a strong belief in the value of competition. Thompson supposed that full accommodation and compensation for the irreducible differences between men and women could only be achieved by a system of voluntary co-operation. Even within this system, specific attention had to be given to the means by which women could be freed from many of the customary burdens associated with childcare and household work. Mill also sought to find a social and institutional structure within which the specific contribution of women would receive adequate recognition. His solution involved making marriage and childminding a free choice by ensuring that women had access to other opportunities of obtaining a livelihood.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73), the eldest son of James Mill, was provided with an exceptionally rigorous education by his father. According to his own testimony, by his late teens, he was a convinced Benthamite to whom the description ‘a mere reasoning machine’ was not inappropriate. In his twentieth year, however, he underwent a mental health crisis and began to question the Benthamite doctrine itself. The break was sharpest in the field of ethics with the young Mill particularly objecting to Bentham’s stress on the role of calculation in human behaviour and his depiction of human behaviour as inherently selfish. Although he criticised Bentham’s

24 It is worth noting that in his discussion of system of individual competition in the first half of the *Inquiry*, Thompson spoke of the invigorating effects of competition in which one improvement paved the way for another. He referred to competition as a check necessary to the producers’ own interest and their own good management. However, while competition had beneficial effects in conditions of security, this was not the case under conditions of insecurity which injuriously kept down wages. As Claesys (1987A) notes, once Thompson had converted to communitarianism, he paid less attention to economic benefits of competition and focussed more on its moral downsides.

25 Mill’s first open attack on Bentham was made under the cover of anonymity after Bentham’s death as an Appendix to Bulwer Lytton’s *England and the English* (Lytton, 1833). The novelist and politician Bulwer Lytton was at the time married to Rosina Bulwer Lytton, daughter of Anna Doyle Wheeler, and a novelist in her own right. The marriage was not a success and ended in separation in 1836.
utilitarianism, Mill ultimately remained faithful to the Greatest Happiness Principle. In *Utilitarianism*, published in 1863, he averred that: ‘actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness’ (Mill, 1969, *CW* vol. X, pp. 210–1). According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, the ultimate end ‘is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quality and quantity’ (Mill, 1969, pp. 214–5). In this, Mill’s utilitarianism has something in common with that of Thompson who also considered some pleasures to be superior to others and whose conception of happiness related to general well-being. Like Thompson also, Mill counted the impact on character amongst the consequences of an action. However, there were some differences of emphasis. While both authors accepted that circumstances influenced character, Mill argued that the individuals own desire to mould it in a particular way was to be considered as one of those circumstances (Mill, 1981B, *CW* vol. VIII, pp. 840–2; Ball, 2000, p. 31). Thompson, with his emphasis on the importance of social conditions, was closer to Owen whose ‘fatalistic doctrine’ was a target of Mill’s criticism (Kaswan, 2014, pp. 57–66). However, as noted earlier, Thompson placed greater emphasis than did Owen on the agency of those most affected by the circumstances.

3.1 The influence of Harriet Taylor

Mill’s criticism of Bentham was accompanied by an openness to a broad spectrum of other influences stretching from Carlisle and Coleridge to the Saint Simonians, but the most important influence of all was that of Harriet Taylor whom Mill met in 1830 and married in 1851. Mill was unsparing in his praise of Taylor but rather than enhance her reputation, his extravagant praise aroused scepticism. As Hayek put it: ‘If Harriet … was anything like what Mill wished us to believe, we should have to regard her as one of the most remarkable women who ever lived’ (Hayek, 1951, p. 13). Views of Harriet’s influence have waxed and waned but there is strong evidence that her views on socialism and women’s equality were more radical than those of Mill (Phillips, 2018).

As a young man, John Stuart Mill was taken aback by the position on women taken in his father’s *Essay on Government* (1825). We cannot know for certain that J. S. Mill read Thompson’s work but it is likely that he did since, in his autobiography, he refers to Thompson as ‘author of a book on the *Distribution of Wealth*, and of an *Appeal* on behalf of women against the passage relating to them in my father’s *Essay on Government*’ (Mill, 1981A, *CW* vol. I). As we shall see, there are echoes of arguments put forward by Thompson in Harriet Taylor’s essay *The Enfranchisement of Women* published (under Mill’s name) in the *Westminster Review* in 1851; in the *Principles of Political Economy*; and in *The Subjection of Women* written after Harriet’s death but published in 1869. In *The Enfranchisement*, Harriet reported on campaigns in America which aimed to take forward women’s education, civil rights, and their right to partake in the institutions of governance. Examining the arguments that were being made against extending the franchise to women, Harriet found the origins of inequality in men’s superior physical strength but attributed its continuation to the tyranny of custom. She commended the American campaigners ‘for refusing to entertain the question of the peculiar aptitudes

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either of women or of men' and for arguing that these questions could only be an-
swered by perfect freedom (Mill and Taylor, 1984, p. 400). Harriet disposed of several
arguments against reform including the demands of maternity and women’s acquiesce
in their existing roles. She argued that the lot of women narrowed their horizons and
caused excessive focus on domestic issues which, in turn, impoverished their relationship
ships with men. It also arrested the personal development of both men and women and
lessened their contribution to progress in the wider society.

It is interesting to note that in The Enfranchisement, Harriet responded to an argu-
ment that had been made earlier by J. S. Mill that giving women the same freedom
of occupation as men would intensify competition and reduce wages. She acknowled-
ged that this was a possibility but argued that it gave no excuse for withholding from
women the right of citizenship. Turning to the economic aspect, Harriet contended
that it was infinitely preferable ‘that part of the income should be of the woman’s earn-
ings, even if the aggregate sum were little increased by it, rather than that she should be
compelled to stand aside in order that men be the sole earners, and the sole dispensers
of what is earned’ (Mill and Taylor, 1984, CW vol. XXI, p. 403). This was because ‘A
woman who contributes materially to the support of the family, cannot be treated in
the same contemptuously tyrannical manner as one who, however, she may toil as a
domestic drudge, is dependent on the man for subsistence’ (Mill and Taylor, 1984, p.
404). In any case, Harriet argued that remedies would be found in time for the depres-
sion of wages by the increased competition. A palliative that could be employed
immediately was active exclusion of children from industrial employment. She also ex-
pressed the hope that neither ‘improvident multiplication nor the division of mankind
into capitalists and hired labour would always continue’. While she hoped that regulation
of the reward of labourers by demand and supply would not continue for much longer,
she was adamant that ‘it was tyranny to shut out one half of the competitors’ as long as competition was the general law of human life (Mill and Taylor, 1984).

3.2 The Subjection of Women

Although The Subjection of Women was written a few years after Harriet’s death in 1858,
Mill delayed publication until 1869 when the time appeared ripe for progress on the
issue of women’s suffrage. Mill later attested that all that was most striking and pro-
found in the work belonged to his wife and was the fruit of innumerable conversations
and discussions on a topic that had a large place in their minds (Mill, 1981A, CW vol. I, p. 265).

Mill opened by stating his long-held view that the legal subordination of women to
men was wrong in itself and one of the chief hindrances to human improvement. He
was clear 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’ (Mill and Taylor, 1984,
CW vol. XXI, pp. 261–2). Like Wollstonecraft and Thompson, Mill attributed the ori-
gins of women’s oppression in earlier stages of society to women’s inferior physical
strength. Its continuation, due to custom, was in this case a relic of the past and out of
tune with the future. Mill re-iterated Harriet’s view that freedom of individual choice
was the only thing that could lead to the adoption of the best processes, and put each
operation into the hands of those who are best qualified for it. Like Thompson and

27 The argument was made in an unpublished essay on marriage written by J. S. Mill at an early stage in
his relationship with Harriet. See later in the present section.
Wollstonecraft, Mill suggested that what was now called the nature of women was an artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, and unnatural stimulation in others (Mill and Taylor, 1984, p. 277).

In the second chapter, Mill described the legal position of women and acknowledged that, as far as the law was concerned, married women were as subordinate as slaves. Although, in most cases, the actual treatment was better than the legal position, this was no justification for the continuance of unjust laws. Just as in the case of a business partnership, in a voluntary association between two people, it was not necessary that one of them should have absolute control or that the law should determine which of them it ought to be. The natural arrangement was a division of powers depending on individual capacities and suitabilities. Justice and the happiness of both parties required the equality of married persons before the law. A justly constituted family would be a school of morality: of the virtues of freedom, sympathy and equality, ‘of living together in love without power on one side or obedience on the other’ (Mill and Taylor, 1984, pp. 294–5).

Towards the end of the chapter, Mill defended the common arrangement, by which the man earns the income and the wife superintends the domestic expenditure as the most suitable division of labour. Harriet’s argument about the importance of an independent source of income for the status and bargaining power of women within the household is now qualified and is deemed to be relevant only in an unjust state of things or where marriage is not an equal contract or the women lacks independent property. Mill suggests that it might even be the case that a man, who is legally the wife’s master, could abuse his power by forcing her to work (Mill and Taylor, 1984, p. 298). In any case, in bearing children and taking responsibility for their care and education as well as the general management of the household, the wife was already doing more than her share and any additional outside work seldom relieved her from this. Mill concluded that, in an otherwise just state of things, it was not desirable that the wife should work outside the home. ‘Like a man when he chooses a profession, so, when a woman marries, it may in general be understood that she makes 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 for the purpose; and that she renounces, not all other objects and occupations, but all which are not consistent with the requirements of this’ (Mill and Taylor, 1984).

Having thus suggested that women might choose domesticity over outside employment, in the next chapter, Mill argued for the admissibility of women to all the functions and occupations hitherto retained as the monopoly of men. Mill thought that the real reason for this monopoly was to maintain women’s subordination in domestic life. Were it not for that, most would admit the injustice of excluding half the human race from the greater number of lucrative occupations, and from almost all high social functions. In arguing that women were indeed fit for lucrative occupations and high social functions, Mill did not base his claim on the absence of mental differences between men and women but instead based it on the capacities which women had already practically shown.28

28 Some scholars have argued that, in using women’s behaviour as a sign of their abilities and nature, Mill seems to forget his own argument that their behaviour is a result of conditioning (Smith, 2001). Such an argument fails to acknowledge that removing the effects of social conditioning takes time and that Mill needed to show that women were capable of fulfilling social roles in the here and now.
In the final chapter, Mill sought to outline the benefits that recognition of women as equals and their admission to all honourable employments, training and education would bring (Mill and Taylor, 1984, p. 354). The first advantage would be having human relations regulated by justice rather than injustice. The second would be that of doubling the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity. Other benefits related to the broadening of the scope of women’s interests beyond the sphere of domesticity, the building of their self-esteem and the enhancement of marital and public morality.

It will be evident from the above that many of the arguments put forward by Mill were similar to those previously advanced by Thompson a half-century earlier. Both believed that much of women’s existing behaviour could not be regarded as natural but rather as a product of their environment and social conditioning. Both emphasised that, under existing socio-economic conditions, women did not have realistic alternatives to marriage and that the legal system deprived them of their rights within marriage. This, in turn, impoverished the marriage relationship itself to the detriment of both men and women (Shanley, 1981). The major difference between Mill and Thompson can be said to lie in their solution to the problem of the sexual division of labour. Thompson thought that recognition of women’s full contribution could only take place within a co-operative community that would also facilitate a move from individualised households to more efficient communal arrangements for food preparation and childcare. Mill was not unhappy with the traditional division of labour as long as it was freely chosen but that, in turn, required that women had viable alternatives to marriage and the domestic life. Mill’s seemingly positive attitude towards the traditional division of labour has generated a large literature with some authors arguing that it contradicts his view that there was nothing natural about women’s current condition. Others have credited him with recognising the value of child-rearing and household work (Ball, 2001; Hirschman, 2008; Sigot and Beaurain, 2009; Gouverneur, 2018).

Still others have focussed on the importance of Mill’s vision of family life as a partnership of equals (Shanley, 1981; Sigot and Beaurain, 2009).

For Mill, the availability of options other than marriage were important not just because it was necessary to underpin marriage as a free choice for women but also because of its bearing on the population question. One of his deepest convictions was that level

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29 Ball argues that both Mill and Thompson were guilty of inconsistency in that, on the one hand, they held that women were the equal to men but, on the other, saw them as essentially different (Ball, 2001, p. 520). The Lockean vision which sees difference as being produced and therefore removable and the Saint Simonian vision which takes differences as given and requiring accommodation imply different approaches to women’s equality. Both Thompson and Mill recognised that some differences were natural while most were not. Of the two, Mill placed the greater emphasis on natural difference. His position on the role of married women could be regarded as close to that of the male Saint Simonians and, indeed, we know that at one point he was chastised by Harriet Taylor for conceding too much to Comte by allowing that there was some natural fitness of the sexes for different occupations (Philips, 2018, p. 635). We know, however, that the pragmatic female Saint Simonians adopted positions that were closer to that of Thompson and for that matter Harriet Taylor (Moses, 1982; Forget, 2001).

30 By contrast some, e.g., Dooley (1996) have argued that Thompson and Wheeler did not give sufficient recognition to the importance of private and family life.

31 The issue of population was one on which Thompson and Mill were divided. While Thompson thought that foresight and prudence should be observed in contracting marriage and in having children and that, in general, population checks might help to ‘prevent misery which it might otherwise attain’, he argued that population checks would not secure for the labourer the whole produce of his work (Thompson, 1827, pp. 68–74). Thompson also cast doubt on the extent to which it would be possible to implement effective population checks in an open competitive system with free movement of labour and free imports.
of wages and consequently the living standards of the poor depended on a reduction in the number of competitors (Mill, 1909, pp. 372–84). In his *Principles of Political Economy*, he approvingly cited Sismondi to the effect that every prudent man delayed marriage until he had an assured means of living and no married man had more children than he could properly bring up. He also noted that, in a number of European countries, restraint on population growth was achieved by means of legal sanctions (on improvident marriages) or customs equivalent to it (Mill, 1909, pp. 353–60). While Mill was unwilling to advocate legal sanctions, he hinted that where a large majority had voluntarily consented to restraint, the law might enforce such restraints against recalcitrant minorities (Mill, 1909, p. 378). This, however, would be unnecessary if women had the same rights as men:

Let them cease to be confined by custom to one physical function as their means of living and their source of influence, and they would have for the first time an equal voice with men in what concerns that function: and of all the improvements in reserve for mankind which it is now possible to foresee, none might be expected to be so fertile as this in every kind of moral and social benefit (Mill, 1909, p. 379).

Mill clearly believed that access to remunerative employment would improve the bargaining power of women and lead to reduced child-bearing which, in turn, would have wider beneficial effects. What is less clear is whether women’s voice derived from a reduction in those choosing marriage or from better bargaining power within marriage or both. It should be noted that, for Mill, advocacy of reduced child-bearing was important not just for instrumental reasons but also to prevent the degradation and slavery of women ‘while their whole lives are devoted to the function of producing & rearing children’ (Mill, 1972, *CW* vol. XIV, pp. 88–9).

While improvements in the bargaining power of women could help to reduce population growth, Mill was also conscious that greater female engagement in the labour force could have negative effects. As noted earlier, this issue was first outlined in the unpublished essay on marriage which Mill wrote at the behest of Harriet Taylor at an early stage in their relationship. There, Mill argued that marriage could not be properly examined without taking into account wider questions relating to the status of women (Mill and Taylor, 1984, *CW* vol. XXI, p. 42). If marriage was to be a relationship between two equal beings, the first and indispensable step was that women be so educated as not to be dependent either on her father or her husband. However, Mill continued:

It does not follow that a woman should actually support herself because she should be capable of doing so: in the natural course of events she will not. It is not desirable to burthen the labour market with a double number of competitors. In a healthy state of things, the husband would be able by his single exertions to earn all that is necessary for both; and there would be no need that the wife should take part in the mere providing of what is required to support life: it will be for the happiness of both that her occupation should rather be to adorn and beautify it. (Mill, 1972, p. 43)

A good education and access to the labour market would mean that women would not be forced to marry to obtain a livelihood but if all women chose to enter the labour market, there would be a detrimental effect on wages. This was not simply a matter of wages being driven down by an increase in the labour supply. In normal circumstances, where the husband was the sole breadwinner, the minimum wage had to be sufficient

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32 Gouverneur (2019) provides a detailed discussion of Mill’s views on wage inequalities between men and women.
to provide for the upkeep of the family including the wife and children. If, however, other sources of income were available to the family through the labour of women and children, this would have the impact of driving down the minimum wage. The law and custom meant that the occupations available to women were relatively few. In these occupations, wages were driven down to extremely low levels—to the cost of upkeep of a single woman as opposed to the cost of upkeep of a family in the case of males (Mill, 1909, p. 401).

While Mill approved of the restrictions on the employment of children introduced in a series of Factory Acts in the course of the nineteenth century, he opposed the application of restrictions to women on the ground that they were as capable as men of appreciating and managing their own concerns (Mill, 1909, p. 759). Improving the condition of women, required ready access to all occupations, not restrictions on those which were currently open (Mill, 1909, p. 959).

It is clear that Mill’s focus was on providing women with legal equality within marriage and opportunities for participation in economic life so that they had options other than marriage and domesticity. He attached great importance to women’s traditional work of child-bearing and caring and took the view that provided marriage was freely chosen these traditional roles could and would be valued within the family relationship. This, as we saw earlier, was not the view of Harriet Taylor and Mill does not adequately address the issue of maintaining women’s bargaining power within the marriage. Thompson’s proposals also involved the ending of legal inequality and the provision of opportunity but he argued that women would be at a disadvantage as long as economic activity took place in conditions of competition and they bore the entire responsibility for childcare. His proposals would free women from domestic drudgery though communal provision of childcare, meals and education and direct recognition of the contribution of child-bearing and caring to happiness. A crucial difference was that the contribution of women to gestation and childcare was to be recognised within the co-operative community rather within the individual family as was the case with Mill. Although Thompson’s communal solutions did not come to pass, women’s greater involvement in economic life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been accompanied by the outsourcing of childcare and domestic work partly through state provision but more often by means of markets. Mill is unlikely to have approved since, as Ball (2001, p. 525) notes, he thought that there was something essentially repulsive about a society only held together by bought services.

3.3 Mill on the co-operative movement

Mill regarded the emancipation of women, and co-operative production as the two great changes that would regenerate society. Here we explore the extent to which he regarded these two changes as connected. In his *Autobiography*, he made it clear that his support for women’s emancipation was ‘among the earliest results of the application of

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33 The analysis, which is in line with the wage theories of the classical economists, also applied to situations where labour had access to land or to allotments. According to Mill people who lived by wages, with land as an extra resource, tended to have low wages whereas those who could subsist entirely on their land, and were thus not compelled to sell their labour required high wages to incentivise them to work (Mill, 1909, p. 371).

34 The opposition to the application of restrictions to women represented a change of position for Mill who in 1832, had expressed his opposition to the employment of females of any age in manuf actories (Gouverneur, 2019, p. 1220).

35 Letter to Parke Godwin, 1 January 1869 in Mill (1972, CW vol. XVII, pp. 1535–6).
my mind to political subjects’ (Mill, 1981A, CW vol. I, p. 253n.). In this early period also, Mill and his friends took part in debates on the merits of Owenism organised by the Co-operative Society. Thompson, ‘the principal champion on the co-operative side’ was opposed by Mill and his colleagues (Mill, 1981A, CW vol. I, p. 129). Material prepared for these debates by the young Mill shows that he accepted that the competitive system suffered from many defects. For him, however, the real question was whether these defects exceeded those of the co-operative system. Mill strongly rejected the view that labour was the only source of wealth and instead argued that wealth was produced by ‘labour assisted by tools, materials and advances’ which were supplied by the capitalist who was entitled to some remuneration for this assistance (Mill, 1988, CW vol. XXVI, p. 309). The capitalist, Mill argued, had ‘worked harder, or squandered less, or had more skill, or more ingenuity, or a smaller family ... thus acquired the means of paying others to work for him’ (Mill, 1988).

In notes for the last of the debates, Mill took a slightly different tack and argued that ‘under a system of free competition, combined with good laws, government and education, and with a due regulation of the numbers of the people, every labourer would enjoy the whole produce of his labour, with the exception of what he might voluntarily give up, to obtain a greater good’ (Mill, 1988, p. 314). This suggests that the young Mill looked positively on Thompson’s system of individual competition but not Thompson’s system of voluntary equality of wealth. Mill contested Thompson’s view that competition was incompatible with the full operation of the principle of benevolence; argued that the difficulty of apportioning the supply to the demand was a feature of commerce rather than competition; and that although the introduction of machinery might cause unemployment in the short-run, its long-run effects were wholly benign (Mill, 1988, pp. 316–8). Finally, Mill argued that the alleged tendency of competition to make every man a rival was a problem that arose from the failure to regulate population rather than competition itself. Turning to Mr Owen’s system, Mill argued that it would provide inadequate incentives for production; that management would be poor because of the lack of clear lines of responsibility; that it would require a degree of control directly opposed to individual freedom; and that the capital costs of widespread implementation would be exceedingly large (Mill, 1988, CW vol. XXVI, pp. 313–22; Cinelli and Arthmar, 2018). All of this is in keeping with Mill’s own admission in his autobiography that, in those days, private property and inheritance appeared to him the dernier mot of legislation.

Mill’s position on the impact of the commercial spirit on the human psyche was soon to change. In a letter to the Saint Simonian, Gustave d’Eichtal, in May 1829, he expressed fears that, along with its good effects, the commercial spirit was almost sure to bring with it a certain amount of evil. This was because, once the pursuit of wealth became the main object of a man’s life, ‘it almost invariably happens that his sympathies & his feelings of interest become incapable of going much beyond himself & his family’ (Mill, 1963A, CW vol. XII, pp. 31–2). Other changes were more gradual. As late as 1844, in a letter to the editor of the Edinburgh Review about a proposed article on the claims of labour, Mill affirmed the necessity of expressing sympathy with working people while at the same time taking a stand against the view that bettering their condition was the responsibility of others and that ‘whatever is possessed by other people, more than they possess, is a wrong to them’ (Mill, 1963B, CW vol. XIII, p. 644). It was only following the 1848 revolution in France that Mill made significant changes in the 3rd (1852) edition of his Principles of Political Economy. The tone, which had been
previously unfavourable to socialism, now reflected views closer to those of Thompson. One important change was his acceptance that the work incentives provided by communist associations were at least as good if not better than those provided by wage labour. In addition, he argued that the superintendence of the whole community would be a more than adequate replacement for that of masters or paid supervisors (Mill, 1909, pp. 204–50). Mill also suggested that mankind were capable of much greater public spirit than was generally assumed and, where this was insufficient, community opinion could help to enforce good behaviours and the implementation of new norms such as control of population (Mill, 1909, pp. 206–7). Although Mill thought that apportioning the labour of the community between members would continue to pose some real difficulties, he believed that these difficulties were not insuperable. Nonetheless, he re-iterated his view that communism at its best ought to be compared with the regime of individual property at its best not as it currently existed (Mill, 1909).

A positive view of co-operation was especially evident in the chapter on the probable futurity of the labouring classes in the Principles. The chapter had been written on Harriet’s insistence and, as Mill noted, ‘the more general part of the chapter, the statement and discussion of the two opposite theories respecting the proper condition of the labouring classes, was wholly an exposition of her thoughts, often in words taken from her own lips’ (Mill, 1981A, CW vol. I, p. 257). This part of the chapter is interesting for two reasons (i) it contains Mill’s most significant discussion of the educational potential of working-class struggle and self-organisation and, (ii) it points to parallels between the situation of the working class and that of women.

Of the two theories in question, one was a theory of dependence and protection in which the rich acted in loco parentis to the poor. The other was a theory of self-dependence in which the well-being of the people required justice and self-government. Mill and Harriet argued that the patriarchal or paternal system of government had been rejected by working men in the most advanced countries. This happened when working people had access to sources of ideas in opposition to the creeds professed by their superiors, ‘when they were brought together in numbers, to work socially under the same roof’; when they were no longer dependent on a single employer and were able to seek a share of government by means of electoral franchise (Mill, 1909, p. 756). They continued: ‘The working classes have taken their interests into their own hands, and are perpetually showing that they think that the interests of the employers are not identical to their own, but opposite to them’ (Mill, 1909). Mill and Harriet suggest that the resulting increase of intelligence, education and independence among the working class would manifest itself in provident habits and, in turn, reduce population growth. The positive effect on population would be further accelerated by the opening of industrial occupations to both sexes. ‘The same reasons which make it no longer necessary that the poor should depend on the rich, make it equally unnecessary that women should depend on men’ (Mill, 1909, p. 759). The least that justice required was that law and custom should not enforce dependence by restricting women’s access to employment (Mill, 1909).

In considering the form of property which would enable workers to feel the same interest in their work as those who laboured on their own account, it was made clear that what was being advocated was large productive enterprises rather than a wide diffusion of property in land. Something better should be aimed at than dispersing mankind over the earth in single families, each ruled by a patriarchal despot, and
having scarcely any community interest. In this situation, the domination of the head of the family over the other members is absolute, he regards the family as an extension of himself and his entire focus is on preservation and acquisition on their behalf. Association, not isolation, of interests was the means by which public spirit, generous sentiments and equality could be nurtured (Mill, 1909, pp. 762–3).

In the early editions of the Principles, Mill considered that profit-sharing partnerships as proposed by Babbage provided the blueprint for the future. However, in the third edition, he averred that if mankind continued to improve, the co-operative form of enterprise in which the association of labourers in terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations and working under managers elected and removable by themselves would in the end pre-dominate (Mill, 1909, pp. 772–3). Mill provided detailed accounts of several successful co-operative ventures. His preferred form was large industrial enterprises which provided the best possible incentives for effort and which because of their efficiency could provide the operatives with the same standard of living with less toil and greater leisure (Mill, 1909, p. 762). The moral value of these co-operatives was that they would enable human beings to work with one another in relations not involving dependence and thereby cultivate public spirit, generous sentiments, true justice and equality. As a result, it might eventually be possible to achieve a society which would combine the freedom and independence of the individual, with the moral, intellectual, and economical advantages of aggregate production.

While the 3rd edition of the Principles displays Mill’s confidence in the future of the co-operative economy at its strongest, he took care to emphasise that his main disagreement with the socialists related to their attitude to competition. Reminiscent of the views expressed by Thompson in the first part of the Inquiry, Mill insisted that the evils that filled the industrial world were not due to competition but to the subjection of labour to capital. With the exception of competition amongst the labourers themselves, competition was beneficial. The real enemy was not competition but monopoly (Mill, 1909, pp. 792–4).

By 1865 when the 6th edition of the Principles was published, Mill’s optimistic predictions about the role of co-operatives became more qualified and he now considered it desirable that individual capitalists employing profit-sharing arrangements should co-exist with co-operative societies for a considerable length of time. Part of this change was due to an observed tendency of successful co-operatives to become joint stock companies owned by a limited number of former co-operators and employing ‘hired labour without any interests in the profits’ (Mill, 1909, p. 790). By doing so, however, they undermined their own competitive advantage which arose solely from the ‘common interest of all the workers in the work (Mill, 1909). Compared with co-operatives or joint stock companies, Mill was also of the view that individual capitalists benefited from unity of authority in decision-making and were more likely to take judicious risks and introduce costly improvements (Mill, 1909, pp. 790–1).

By 1869, when Mill drafted his final work on socialism, he had come to see Owenism and other village communities in new light as alternatives to revolutionary socialism (Claeys, 1987B). Mill contrasted the systems of Owen and Fourier in which plans for a new order of society were on the scale of a village community or township, and would be applied to an entire country by the multiplication of such self-acting units with the bolder ambitions of continental revolutionary socialism.
which involved the administration of the whole productive resources of the country by one central authority. Mill argued that the advantage of the community system was that it could be brought into operation progressively and prove its capabilities by trial. ‘It need not, become an engine of subversion until it had shown itself capable of being also a means of reconstruction. It is not so with the other: the aim of that is to substitute the new rule for the old at a single stroke’ (Mill, 1967, CW vol. V, p. 737). However, Mill was aware that the revolutionary scheme was popular because it promised to achieve its objectives quickly and fulfil aspirations of working people in their own lifetimes’ (Mill, 1967, p. 738).

Despite his earlier doubts, Mill now declared that the ‘practicability of Socialism, on the scale of Mr. Owen’s or M. Fourier’s villages, admits of no dispute’ … a ‘mixed agricultural and manufacturing association of from two thousand to four thousand inhabitants … would be easier to manage than many a joint stock company’ (Mill, 1967, p. 739).

However, Mill questioned ‘whether this joint management was likely to be as efficient as the managements of private industry by private capital’ and suggested that from the point of view of the ‘directing mind’, the incentive would be inferior. He concluded that communism offered no advantages which could not be reached in a system of industrial partnership under which all who contributed to the work benefited from a fixed portion of the gains after a certain remuneration has been allowed to the capitalist (Mill, 1967, p. 743).

Despite the many allusions to the parallels between women’s oppression and that of the working class in the Principles, Mill did not subsequently specify any direct relationship between the development of co-operative enterprise and the status of women apart from a general recognition that progress in the former would create conditions for the improvement in the latter. Sigot and Beaurain (2009, p. 295) suggest that, for Mill, the co-operative model in which there is free association of individuals was not only an ideal for society in the domain of production but also an ideal basis for the relationship in a couple. Although they acknowledge that Mill never draws this parallel explicitly, the view has some plausibility in the case of Mill. However, it is doubtful that Harriet would have agreed given her view that women needed real bargaining power within marriage and also given her concern that the patriarchal family was inimical both to women’s rights and to the consideration of broader social concerns.

In his Autobiography, Mill was critical of his youthful view that the only remedy available to improve the lot of the poor was universal education leading to voluntary restraint on population. The later Mill classed himself as a socialist but not a democrat. He saw the social problem of the future as being ‘how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action, with a common ownership of resources and ‘an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour’ (Mill, 1981A, CW vol. I, p. 238). Mill argued that for any such social transformation to be either possible or desirable, an equivalent change of character must take place both in the uncultivated herd who now compose

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36 In Principles, Mill differentiated between communism which he attributed to Owen, Blanc and Cabet, and socialism which he associated with Saint Simonians and Fourierists. Mill preferred the Fourierists because of his concern that the Saint Simonian scheme vested too much power in the directing authority. Like the Saint Simonians, the Fourierists allowed for an unequal division of produce, but Mill saw them as being more democratic. In addition, he liked the fact that while they required that members reside in the ‘same pile of buildings’, no other community of living was contemplated (Mill, 1909, pp. 207–17).
the labouring masses, and in the immense majority of their employers (Mill, 1981A). Both had to learn through practice to labour and combine for social and public purposes. Mill was confident that mankind had the capacity to change but he accepted that this would only happen by slow degrees. Existing institutions fostered and reinforced deep-rooted selfishness. Still, Mill argued that it would be foolish to engage in premature attempts to dispense with the inducements of private interest in social affairs while no substitute was available.

Although he was more conscious of the limitations of what could be achieved by prudential habits alone, Thompson agreed that self-organisation of the industrious classes in co-operative communities ‘will tend powerfully to call their intellectual powers into full activity’ and that alongside this intellectual improvement there would be improvement of moral habits. Prudential habits would be exercised in every department of life including the increase in children. ‘By every act of voluntary association, every member loses the mere selfish individuality of his character: he acknowledges his interest is united with that of numbers’ (Thompson, [1827] 1997, pp. 85–6).

Despite his acknowledgement of the desirability of intellectual and moral improvement, Thompson maintained that excessive inequality of wealth was the most important defect in the constitution of society and that it engendered all other evils. He had no expectation that the rich as a class would do other than ‘obey the influence of the peculiar circumstances in which they were placed’ (Thompson, 1824, p. 211). The interest of the capitalist was ‘always and necessarily opposed to the interest of the labourer’ (Thompson, 1824, pp. 423–4). Thompson never lost sight of the importance of the material base and argued that the main moral improvement to be expected from the system of co-operation would ‘be produced by the altered circumstances of the community’ (Thompson, 1824, p. 429). Like Mill, Thompson did not regard the existing relations of production as permanent but despite his greater emphasis on material conditions and differences in class interest, his own proposals were conceived as rational, voluntary reforms not the outcome of class struggle.

4. Concluding remarks

While there is considerable commonality between Thompson and John Stuart Mill on the subject of equal rights for women, there are also important differences. Both acknowledged biological and dispositional differences between men and women but argued that many of the observable differences were not natural but rather the product of upbringing and custom. Whereas Mill appears to have been satisfied that equality of opportunity and education would allow women to flourish, Thompson was of the view that equality of outcome for women could not be achieved under a competitive organisation of society. He advocated the re-organisation of production, and society as a whole, on co-operative lines as advanced by Robert Owen. Under the proposed organisation, child-bearing and the care of infants would be valued on the same footing as all other aspects of community work. In addition, women would be freed from domestic slavery because much of the work relating childcare and meal preparation would to be carried on collectively rather than in individual households. Mill, on the other hand, seems to have taken the view that women’s domestic role could be valued within the marriage partnership as long as marriage was a freely chosen occupation. He should be credited with recognising that the role itself deserved to be valued and that such a choice could only be free if women have access to other options. However,
the suggestion that a marriage partnership and paid employment were, at least for a time, mutually exclusive occupations shows the limitations of Mill's feminism.

Both Thompson and Mill were strong advocates of co-operation. Thompson’s proposed reforms went much further but, no less than Mill, he insisted that his proposed reforms should be done voluntarily and referred to his system as ‘voluntary equality of wealth by mutual co-operation’ (Thompson, 1824, Ch. VI). Both authors understood the need for productive efficiency. Thompson thought that this could be achieved by creating self-sufficient communities of appropriate size. Perhaps, more realistically, Mill envisaged specialised producers operating in markets in competition with other co-operatives and capitalist producers. Mill recognised that the commercial spirit might have adverse impacts on the human psyche and delay the character changes he thought were vital for socialist advance. Nonetheless, he remained a strong advocate of the positive role of competition.

Like Helvetius and Bentham before them, Thompson and Mill emphasised the importance of access to education for women but also for working people more generally. For both also, the emphasis on education was linked to the belief that knowledge was vital for economic progress and that its unequal distribution was a source of inequality. Thompson, in particular, emphasised the importance of practical and scientific education which he saw as necessary to enable every labourer to become a capitalist. He also believed that people were formed by their education in its broadest sense, i.e., the life experience which promoted and developed their moral and intellectual capacities. For Thompson, this meant that socio-economic change was necessary to allow the full development of human beings. Mill also thought of education as the life experience that made people what they were. He was well aware of the importance of material conditions and understood that the pursuit of the common good would become natural when it was an important part of daily life. Still, the thrust of his later argument was that socialism required cultural change which would be a long time in coming.

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