

BOOK REVIEW

Catherine Packham, *Mary Wollstonecraft and Political Economy: The Feminist Critique of Commercial Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 302, £85.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 9781009395847. doi: [10.1017/9781009395823](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823)

doi: [10.1017/S1053837224000257](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1053837224000257)

Do we need a new book on Mary Wollstonecraft? The question does not refer to the freedom to publish a new piece on Wollstonecraft—on that, no one would object in principle. The issue at stake is whether we need a new analysis of an author who, in the last decades, has received significant attention from scholars working in different disciplines (feminist studies, political science, political philosophy, literature, social critique, etc.). There are two possible routes to answer affirmatively. Either the new book addresses critically what has been written before, fostering the debate, or proposes a new angle to analyze what has already been discussed at length. *Mary Wollstonecraft and Political Economy* by Catherine Packham follows the second route. While it resembles other research on Wollstonecraft in focusing on her writings and lived experience, Packham's book's specific difference (*differentia specifica*) is interpreting Wollstonecraft's ideas through her engagement with debates and topics of the eighteenth-century political economy. The title reveals that Wollstonecraft was not a political economist, and neither did she write anything specifically related to economic issues. As Packham states in the Introduction, eighteenth-century political economists were interested in understanding commercial society, and “understanding commercial society also involved theorizing human nature, its desires, motivations, and patterns of behaviour, and their cumulative expression and effects” (p. 3). It is this the level on which Wollstonecraft engaged with political economy, going beyond the simple reference of what today we consider economic issues (credit, money, property, taxes, trade, etc.).

The book is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 depicts what political economy meant in the eighteenth century, while chapter 2 explores Wollstonecraft's reading and criticism of Edmund Burke's political economy. These first two chapters set the stage for the real conceptual center of the book, i.e., chapter 3 to chapter 6. There, Packham reads Wollstonecraft's major works—the two *Vindications*, the *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, the *Letters*, and the *Wrongs of Woman*—emphasizing her constant, yet not linear, engagement with issues related to political economy. Readers who expect to find a coherent and fully developed economic theory will be disappointed. Wollstonecraft, in fact, criticized commercial society not by offering an alternative political economy but rather by challenging the dominant systems of thought focused on all-encompassing theories. This challenge appears not only in the substance of Wollstonecraft's works but also in their form: “Our understanding of Wollstonecraft's take on political economy needs, then, to be informed by all this: by the particular situations which she experienced in her life and which conditioned her writing; and by attention to the consequent contexts, modes, styles and genres of the writing she produced” (p. 13).

The merit of Packham's book is, among others, to remain faithful to Wollstonecraft's life, where events, writing styles, encounters, affections, and topics intermingled so profoundly that they cannot be disjointed.

The book's subtitle, *The Feminist Critique of Commercial Modernity*, reveals that criticism is the core of Wollstonecraft's approach to political economy. Criticism of political economy meant criticism of those authors who more or less explicitly advanced theses related to economic, political, and social issues. It is not surprising to read Wollstonecraft's parries with Burke, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and many others. Within this group of opponents, Packham shows that Wollstonecraft also parries with herself, not afraid of showing the contradictions and tensions of her critique of commercial society. As her thoughts cannot be caged between the labels of Enlightenment or Romanticism, her view on issues related to political economy is articulated and scattered. The adjective "feminist" in Packham's title reveals what Wollstonecraft's readers already know very well. Her critique of the condition of women in commercial society is not related exclusively to improving women's condition but rather to creating a better future for humankind. And yet, women's condition and point of view are the key to analyzing the problems of commercial society and the unfulfilled promise of political economy, i.e., public happiness. In the remaining part of this review, I will consider two elements of Wollstonecraft's engagement with political economy central to Packham's book.

First, Wollstonecraft was critical of Burke's view on property, work, sentiments, and natural order. Burke reacted to the horrors of the French Revolution, particularly to the expropriation of monastic properties. On the one hand, he praised a political economy based on unequal distribution and private property. The idleness of great proprietors gave work to the poor peasants, whose economic freedom was bound to the few things they could buy. On the other hand, Burke appealed to the sentiments of the reader. We are asked to feel sorrow for the condition of peasants, whose work is a hard and draining activity, but also to see the great order of nature that keeps this social equilibrium (and that the French Revolution attempted to destroy). Wollstonecraft fought each of Burke's theses. Work is more than manual activity: "The mental and moral effort to which Wollstonecraft repeatedly exhorts her readers recasts labor in a different direction, to become an ongoing effort to develop reason, knowledge, and virtue" (p. 88). Consequently, the sentiments of the reader that Burke tried to entrap in his conservative view are rather agents of change. By mobilizing the reader's sentiments, Wollstonecraft showed that private property and unequal distribution are not connected to any natural order or project of nature and that idleness is contrary to work as self-development. We flourish through effort and work, and this is possible if private property is not related to miserable material conditions that conduct affective states of desperation and sorrow.

Second, Wollstonecraft had her own view on the natural order, which emerged from her engagement with Smith's political economy. The starting point is rejecting wealth and spectatorship as agents of (unintended) social progress. Wollstonecraft appreciated Smith's view of the deception of the poor man's son, i.e., his false belief that happiness consists in wealth. However, she rejects the second part of the story, where Smith accepts quasi-fatally this deception as something useful to put in motion human industry toward social benefit and convenience. Wollstonecraft does not consider conveniences (the wealth of nations) as the public happiness that should be promoted by political economy. Happiness "is achieved not through possessions and convenience, but through

improving our nature and performing our duties” (p. 99). If there is a plan of nature, happiness as improvement is the plan’s ultimate goal.

The deception of the consideration of wealth in commercial society is not something inevitable but rather a starting point from which passions and sentiments can be redirected toward real happiness. Wollstonecraft is also skeptical of social or impartial spectatorship to redirect our morals. Commercial society is a giant masquerade built upon false manners. Wealth corrupts society so much that it is all about reputation, others’ perceptions, etc. The condition of women, as described in the second *Vindication*, is a wide-angle lens to observe this situation. The revolution of manners and morals will not come as an unintended consequence (the *doux commerce* thesis) of commerce but rather as a reaction of particular individuals able to go beyond the appearances and falsities of commercial society.

The literary genres employed by Wollstonecraft mirror her alternatives to political economy and commercial society. Against systematic inquiries, such as Smith’s *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Wollstonecraft uses the lived, engaged, and partial experiences emerging from letters, correspondences, political invectives, situated essays, etc. Against the faults of commercial society, she looks for alternative forms of social relationship and community: “A community founded on sympathetic feeling, whether of readers or listeners, offers a different model of society from that founded on the rational exchanges of civil society’s public sphere, which constituted one eighteenth-century self-image” (p. 210). This is not simply a literary-sentimental escape from the rationality of commercial society. Wollstonecraft goes beyond the Romantic escape in a rural poetic world. Her view calls for a profound challenge to the basis of political economy. Writing styles are in themselves an attempt to resist commercial society, to liberate feelings and passions from the cages of property, money, and wealth to reach the “real affections” (p. 206) of human beings. As attractive as the goal may sound, Packham’s book shows that this attempt cannot, by its nature, provide any universal or systematic way of conduct and living. It is through the reader’s engagement with the stories of the protagonists of Wollstonecraft’s novels and with Wollstonecraft’s first-person voices, as expressed in many of her works, that resistance and alternatives can be found.

All these things considered, let me reformulate and answer the opening question: Do we need Packham’s book on Mary Wollstonecraft? If we are looking for a comprehensive eighteenth-century alternative political economy, we do not. If, as historians of economic thought, we seek biodiversity in methods and contents for our discipline and new ways to engage with economic and societal issues, then we do.

Paolo Santori 

Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg University

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.