Suffragettes: women in public

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Introduction

I am going to take a generational approach to understanding what the suffragettes were fighting for and why. This involves looking at how the problem of women's equality appeared at the time, and how it intersected with women's experience. Also involves looking at how gaining the vote intersected with other, wider changes that changed subtly the meaning attached to the public and private spheres over course of the 20th century.

Key argument: principled arguments for women's suffrage were expansive:

- They wanted **more** from both public and private life

Yet when women were finally enfranchised, it was in a context where **both** public and private spheres had been somewhat diminished. This was not a consequence of women's equality, but bound up with wider developments at the time.

In discussions about the public and private spheres, there is often an assumption that public expands and private contracts. In fact they are interdependent. History of campaign for women's suffrage illustrates this point.

This history also indicates the need to differentiate between the 'separate spheres' as a model of social organisation in Victorian and Edwardian times, which actively provided a barrier to women's participation in public life, and shaped their concerns solely around the everyday; and the extent to which the private realm – as a place of intimacy – supported the development and expression of individuality.

John Stuart Mill grasped these subtleties, and brought them into his seminal argument for women's equality: published in 1869 as *The Subjection of Women.* This famously begins with the statement:

> That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect

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equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

Mill's argument against the subjection of women is principled, utilitarian, and logical. He makes an impassioned critique of the private sphere in the extent to which it naturalises differences between men and women – differences which he sees as socially constructed, in the proper sense of the term. He argues that the subjection of women is a loss both to the public, and the private, spheres.

Begin by briefly noting 5 of Mill's key arguments. Then outline how these related to the later campaign for women's suffrage, and how the public / private tensions became resolved – or not.

Mill's 5 key arguments

1) The subjection of women runs counter to the principles that define modern capitalist society.

Mill sees the subjection of women as a form of slavery, and equally objectionable to the new order.

For Mill, the good society – and the social and moral norm of the times – relied on individual freedom and equality. There was no need for the law to prevent individuals from participating in certain areas of life or work, as the market would regulate this.

In this respect, the legal subjection of women was both unnecessary and offensive – in the sense that if offended against the general social order.

2) Differences between men and women are socially constructed.

Social constructionism has become one of those terms that can mean a variety of different things – and Mill was certainly not making the case for androgyny. He didn't see that there were no differences between men and women, nor that biology was irrelevant.

His argument was about the extent to which participation as equal citizens was determined by natural characteristics, or by social/legal conventions. He argued that 'unnatural generally means only uncustomary, and that everything which is usual appears natural. The subjection of women to men being a universal custom, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural.' (pp23-4)

In other words – it is common sense, at the time, that men's domination over women is 'natural'. But logically, this cannot be true – it only appears that way because of the strength of custom.

One powerful example from that time shows both how male domination is not natural, and also how it quickly ceases to appear that way when a different way of doing things becomes institutionalised. This is that England is ruled by a queen – which seems 'astonishing' to people elsewhere in the world, but 'To Englishmen this does not seem in the least degree unnatural, because they are used to it; but they do feel it unnatural that women should be soldiers or members of parliament.'

3) Role of private sphere in naturalising differences

Part of Mill's critique of women's entrapment within the private, domestic sphere was the role that this played in naturalising these socially-constructed differences between the sexes. Women, he says, are in a different position to 'all other subject classes' in that 'their masters require something more from them than actual service' – they want 'willing slaves', who do not perceive their situation as slavery.

This, he says, has a major impact on the formation of the female character – prizing submission and affection only for their husband and children above all else.

The domestication of women is perceived by Mill as a deliberate, social process that is used to make their oppression appear as something natural. This, in turn, constitutes a two-fold loss to public life.

It is a loss in the extent to which talented women are prevented from playing a full role in public life. And it is a loss in the way that it shapes women's concerns and opinions, so that the role they do play in public life narrows and constrains it.

4) Loss to public life

Mill emphasises the way that systems already exist to weed out those fit to hold office from those who are not. Barring women because of their sex restricts the field of choice, and as such it deprives humanity of a potential pool of talent. One effect of women's freedom would be 'doubling the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity'. [Pg 154]

Mill recognises that the mental power of women 'is not totally lost' under their oppression: Much of it is employed 'in domestic management' and the 'indirect benefit' of 'the personal influence of individual women over individual men.' But this is limited.

Moreover, women's influence 'over the general tone of opinion' is *limiting*, in the extent to which their narrow education and domestic role draws them into narrow concerns such as religious proselytism and charity, which he sees as deleterious to the public good. in terms of the harm they pose for the common good; and blames the education of women in the narrow, domestic role as preventing them from seeing these bigger problems.

Mill sees better women – better educated, more broad-minded, emancipated women – as a good thing themselves, and an important spur to the cultivation of better men. He thought women's quality would push men to drag themselves above the lowest common denominator, the standard 'public opinion'.

He also believed that women's equality would enrich life within the private sphere.

5) Problem for private sphere

While Mill was very critical of the role played by the dual spheres in naturalising women's oppression and diminishing or perverting women's talents, he didn't dismiss or diminish the importance of the private realm.

He didn't argue that everything should be made public, or that the personal was political. Rather, he regarded the private realm as vitally important for the rearing of children, and the cultivation of the human existence.

Emancipating women was not justified only in terms of its positive impact on the cultivation of public virtues. Mill's passages on marriage show the passion with which he insisted on the importance of emancipation for the private domain. He declares that he would not even 'attempt to describe' what marriage could be:

> 'in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them— so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can

have alternately the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development'

– as this is already obvious to 'those who can conceive it', and appears a utopian dream to others.

Women's suffrage at the turn of the century

The strength, and the weakness, of Mill's approach was its grounding in the bourgeois conception of formal equality. To him, the oppression of women was a form of slavery, and as such did violence to the core principles of a modern, democratic society. Women's equality was essential for the public good – for making public life as vibrant, intelligent, and moral as it could be.

Mill saw the division between the public and private domains as problematic in legitimising women's oppression, and exerting a negative influence on the formation of women's character and their broader influence – on their husbands, and on society.

He believed that if all adults were equal, this would lead to greater flourishing of human talent – a more virtuous morality, a more effective political administration, and a greater wealth of intelligence. He also believed it would enrich private life – in the sense of the privacy and intimacy that accompanies and indeed allows for the cultivation of the individual.

His critique of the private realm was in terms of its role as a socially-constructed form of 'bondage' for women, which deprived public life of women's talents and lent the private realm a limited character. This is distinct from the privacy and intimacy that form a part of the private realm – which he believed would be enriched when the subjection of women was ended.

Of course, there were limitations to Mill's conception of the good life. Primarily, these derive from his assumption that the operation of the market, with the bourgeois conceptions of equal citizenship, would be sufficient to address the problems of society.

These were the limitations picked up by socialist thinkers, who challenged the idea that the market was, fundamentally, compatible with equality. Critical theories of capitalism challenged the idea that a market society could deliver even the formal equality envisioned by Mill – let alone address the social inequalities inherent within capitalism.

In the early twentieth century, these challenges to capitalism's promise of equality were becoming more prominent. So were the social inequalities and contradictions within the market – a situation that was to lead to the two imperialist world wars, first in 1914-18 and again in 1939-1945. These events provided a stark warning about the unstable and barbarous side of capitalism, and led many to challenge the utilitarian ideals associated with Mill and other bourgeois thinkers.

The suffragettes

And this is where we come to the suffragettes. I want to focus on the 'militant suffragettes', the campaign in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century – the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.

Note that there is a wealth of literature about the suffragettes; many different phases of the campaign for women's suffrage; and differences within the accounts of what happened when and why. Worldwrite film of Sylvia Pankhurst best on history – here not give an historical account, but a sociological perspective on some major themes.

Also note international dimensions of campaign for female suffrage, esp in the US – no space to talk about this here, so recognise that international context was important, but focus on developments in Britain.

Suggest that the rhetoric and activity of the militant suffragettes were important, in shaping both the argument for women's suffrage, and the reaction against it. However, context in general is very significant. Millicent Fawcett observed in 1886:

> women's suffrage will not come… as an isolated phenomenon, it will come as a necessary corollary of the other changes which have been gradually and steadily modifying, this century, the social history of our country. It will be a political change, not of a very great or extensive character in itself, based upon social, educational and economic changes which have already taken place. (cited in Pugh 2000, p63)

The victory of campaign for women's suffrage should be seen as a balance between the power of the arguments about the rightness of women's equality, and the ability of society at the beginning of the twentieth century to maintain the rigid distinction between the public and private spheres.

This is all bound up with the tensions discussed by Furedi in *First World War: Still no end in sight* – essentially, a growing inability for capitalism to find a positive narrative about itself, in a context of economic crisis, imperialist tensions, and growing class conflict.

In this context, votes for women was not a victory for Liberal thinking, of the kind epitomised by Mill. Rather, it is better seen as the product of a compromise, between liberal principles, conservative sensibilities, and the emerging welfare state.

3 of the suffragettes' arguments

So let's look at some of the militant suffragettes' key arguments and positions.

1) **Votes for women above all else**

In her autobiography Emmeline Pankhurst explained the difference between the WSPU and 'all other suffrage associations' like this:

> Our members are absolutely single minded; they concentrate all their forces on one object, political equality with men. No member of the WSPU divides her attention between suffrage and other social reforms. We hold that both reason and justice dictate that women shall have a share in reforming the evils that afflict society, especially those evils bearing directly on women themselves. Therefore, we demand, before any other legislation whatever, the elementary justice of votes for women. (Pankhurst p58)

This quote sums up the importance attached to women's formal equality: as expressed through their participation in the public sphere. Unlike some others in the movement – most notably, Sylvia Pankhurst – the WSPU did not cast votes for women as part of a wider raft of social, or socialist, changes.

Not only did the WSPU focus on votes for women to the exclusion of all other causes; it actively campaigned against universal suffrage, demanding votes for middle-class women.

This was partly due to a suspicion that bills aimed at enfranchising all adults were being tabled to derail the women's suffrage cause, as these were less likely to gain support; and there's probably some truth to that in the game of parliamentary politics. But there was also a clear sense that the WSPU wanted votes for women like themselves – in this respect, they were an elite organisation.

The militant suffragettes fought a tireless and fearless campaign. They are famous for their tactics – window breaking, heckling public meetings, breaking into Parliament. This was a deliberate militancy, encapsulated in the phrase 'Deeds not words'. Again, we might be critical of these tactics; and of the idea that violence should be used instead of argument. But this was also part of the spirit of the times – as Furedi explains, a broader sense that action, not argument, was the only way to change things.

Overall, there can be little doubt about the bravery of the Suffragettes, and their determination to gain access to and enfranchisement in the public sphere. This says something important about the extent to which, in the pre-war period, democratic participation still counted for a lot – and exclusion from the public sphere was seen, not just as unfair or inconvenient, but a major barrier to human progress and emancipation.

Nor can there be any doubt that the reaction against the Suffragettes was vicious – way beyond a polite political disagreement. The militants were portrayed in cartoons as lesbians, man-haters, destroyers of the family. The brutality to which demonstrators were subjected by the police, and the contempt by the judiciary, showed that they paid a heavy price for refusing to play their ascribed role of the fair sex.

2) Sexual double standards

One notorious slogan of the militant suffragettes was, 'Votes for women, chastity for men.' The suffragettes placed a great deal of emphasis on the problem of male sexual behaviour – and particularly, the double moral standards expected of men and women in the Victorian era.

The problem of sexual double standards was the focus of Christabel Pankhurst's 'Great Scourge' articles in the *Suffragette* in 1913 – warning of dangers of marriage for women because 75-80% of men in England suffered from some form of venereal disease. Emmeline Pankhurst describes these articles as 'a fearless and authoritative exposé of the evils of sexual immoralities and their blasting effect on innocent wives and children'.

It is tempting to see this as a precursor to the shrill puritanism of today's so-called 'fourth wave' feminist movement – and indeed, matters such as temperance and sexual restraint have historically formed a strong element of women's movements. Martin Pugh (2000, p29) notes that '[T]he moral tradition within feminism was a long-standing one stretching back to

evangelical influences earlier in the century' – and as discussed above, Mill was not of the view that this influence was a positive one.

But when it comes to the suffragettes' attacks on sexual double standards, we need to be careful to ground out understanding in the times.

First of all, the double standards attached to sexual morality were bound up with the restrictions on women's behaviour more generally – which were in turn a product of their exclusion from public life, and used to legitimate that exclusion, through ideas about women's 'natural' role. Thus, as Emmeline Pankhurst stated:

> Why is it that men's blood-shedding militancy is applauded and women's symbolic militancy punished with a prison cell and the forcible feeding horror? It means simply this, that men's double standard of sex morals, whereby the victims of their lust are counted as outcasts, while the men themselves escape all social censure, really applies to morals in all departments of life. Men make the moral code and they expect women to accept it. They have decided that it is entirely right and proper for men to fight for their liberties and their rights, but that it is not right and proper for women to fight for theirs. (Pankhust p269)

In attacking double standards around sexual morality, the suffragettes were challenging more deep-rooted ideas about sexual nature and roles. Susan Kent (1987) argues, in her account of *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914:*

> An important key to understanding the persistence of feminist agitation lies in analysing not only the social and economic developments of the nineteenth century but the ideological developments as well. The domestic ideology proclaimed in this period associated women not only with the household but also with biological characteristics that objectified them as "The Sex". The feminist movement, especially the campaign for suffrage, aimed to alter that perception so that women would no longer be objectified or defined essentially in terms of their biology and would no longer be victims of what they deemed to be male sexual tyranny. (pp4-5)

Through their own militant behaviour, the Suffragettes self-consciously rejected expectations of submission and ladylike behaviour. The impact of this can be seen by the force of reaction against them – as I indicated earlier, the

brutal treatment of the militants, and their portrayal as 'wild women' - lesbians, man-haters, destroyers of the family.

In reality, though, despite their radical tactics, there were strong elements of Conservatism within the Suffragette movement. It is worth noting that Olive Banks has concluded that 'far from rejecting contemporary attitudes, the first wave feminists "lived within the sexual conventions of their time"' (Pugh 2000, p30) – and Pugh notes how support came from Conservative as well as Liberal elements at various points in time.

We have noted that the WSPU was very far from being a social revolutionary organisation. Though its argument for votes for women was a radical one, it clearly stopped at that. And when the First World War broke out, the cause of women's suffrage was quickly subsumed into nationalist support for the war effort.

Despite the radicalism of their tactics, in attacking the sexual double standard, suffragettes weren't arguing for the same level of sexual freedom for women as men. They were arguing for women to be given more power to restrain men. And their ideas about women's role in public life were bound up quite closely with ideas about sexual roles, and responsibility for the family.

3) Maternalism / salvationism

Susan Kent states that:

> Nineteenth-century feminists argued… that the public and the private were not distinct spheres but were inseparable from one another; the public was private, the personal was political. Suffragists perceived their campaign as the best way to end a "sex war" brought about by separate sphere ideology – an ideology that finally reduced women's identity to a sexual one, encouraged the view of women as sexual objects, and perpetrated women's powerlessness in both spheres.' (pp4-5)

This account has been challenged by Martin Pugh, in his (what he terms) a 'revisionist analysis of the campaign for women's suffrage'. Pugh points out that the Suffragettes' approach to the public/private divide was actually far less stark than this. It is certainly a real stretch to argue that the idea that the 'personal is political' – a sentiment associated with the 1960s – formed part of the ideas of nineteenth-century feminists, or even those campaigning for the vote in the early twentieth century.

What you can see in the arguments put forward by the militant suffragettes is a sense of maternalism, or salvationism, born out of an idea that women's role in the private sphere uniquely equips them to play an important role in public life. In an impassioned statement of why the militant suffragettes were engaging in destructive acts, Emmeline Pankhurst said that these women:

> … seriously believe that this hard path that they are treading is the only path to their enfranchisement. They seriously believe that the welfare of humanity demands this sacrifice; they believe that the horrible evils which are ravaging our civilisation will never be removed until women get the vote. They know that the very fount of life is being poisoned; they know that homes are being destroyed; that because of bad education, because of the unequal standard of morals, even the mothers and children are destroyed by one of the vilest and most horrible diseases that ravage humanity. (Pankhurst p295)

She talks about the mission of 'the women… fighting in the Suffragette army' as: 'the greatest mission the world has ever known—the freeing of one-half the human race, and through that freedom the saving of the other half.' (Pankhurst p266)

While Mill saw the formation of the subjected female character as limiting, which in turn led to women's influence having a limiting effect on public life so long as they remained oppressed, some of the Suffragettes' rhetoric came closer to romanticising women's role, and arguing for its extension.

Mill wanted to free women from the tyranny of oppression, to liberate their minds from domestic, parochial concerns. The Suffragettes – while also at times arguing for this liberation – often made the argument that women's concerns should become more the concerns of public life. In this regard, up to a point, they got their wish.

What happened

It seems incredible to think that before 1918, only 58% of the adult male population was eligible to vote. In addition, because of residency rules, this effectively disenfranchised a large number of troops who had been serving overseas in the war.

The impact of the war, the Russian revolutions of 1917, and growing socialist unrest at home, meant that disenfranchisement of working class men became untenable. The 1918 Representation of the People Act extended the vote to all

men over the age of 21, and to women over the age of 30 who met a property qualification to vote.

The extension of the franchise was a progressive move. It did extend democracy, and brought the masses into the political domain, which had previously been largely restricted to property-owners. We shouldn't underestimate the importance of this shift.

Mass society and bureaucratisation

However, the extension of the franchise – bringing the masses into politics – happened alongside a gradual shift where the character of the public sphere was also changing. Arendt describes this in terms of 'the rise of the social', where bureaucratisation and processes of social administration have displaced the role of the public sphere as a site for the striving of public virtue – the 'good life', in Aristotle's terms.

Arendt (1958) argues:

> The rise of mass society... indicates that the various social groups have suffered the same absorption into one society that the family units had suffered earlier; with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally, and with equal strength. But society equalises under all circumstances, and the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual. (p41)

In other words – the process by which the masses became included into the public realm involved a change in the character of the public realm. It became more highly bureaucratised, a sphere geared around inclusion and conformity rather than contestation and difference.

Once the franchise was gained by all, participation in the public sphere lost much of its importance, as a site for defining and shaping public virtues – or in Mill's words, acting for the 'highest service of humanity'.

I am not suggesting – and nor was Arendt – that this shift happened overnight, or that it was solely or inevitably to do with the extension of the franchise. As I noted at the beginning of this talk, the developments that led to women's

suffrage – and in this case, the franchise for all adult men – took place gradually, over some time.

They were the product of a number of factors – and by 1918, the problems of the British Empire, the traumatic first world war, the pressures of class conflict and the deep-seated economic and cultural contradictions within capitalism were looming large. The bureaucratisation of public life can be seen as a response to all these problems, and a need to contain a range of serious challenges to the social and economic system.

But it is worth noting the extent to which the promise of the public sphere had contracted, compared not only to the idealised public sphere of Ancient Greece talked about by Arendt, by also compared to the way it was envisioned by Mill about 50 years previously. Public life was not the centre of democracy, diversity and debate: it had been eclipsed by the demands of social administration.

This had profound implications for those wanting to act in the public sphere. Illustrate this with by way of an argument made the sociologist S N Eisenstadt, writing in the early 1960s in relation to youth groups.

Eisenstadt was talking about the effect of bureaucratisation upon younger generations growing up in the time after the second world war. But the general point stands also in relation to the generation of newly-enfranchised women in the interwar period.

As modernisation progresses and 'broad masses' are absorbed within the framework of society, he writes, the aims and values of youth movements are 'institutionalized', as 'part of a wider process of institutionalizing various collective values'. These processes have 'several important results', the first of which is that:

> The possibility of linking personal transition both to social groups and cultural values … has become greatly weakened. The social and even sometimes the cultural dimension of the future may thus become flattened and emptied. The various collective values have been transformed. Instead of being remote goals resplendent with romantic dreams, they have become mundane objectives of the present, with its shabby details of daily politics and administration. (Eisenstadt, 1963, pp. 39–40)

These 'mutations', argues Eisenstadt, are not distinct to youth; they are associated with a decline in ideology 'among many groups and strata in modern societies, with a general flattening of political-ideological motives and a growing apathy to them'.

This is in turn connected to the 'spiritual or cultural shallowness' of the social and economic benefits administered by the welfare state, as a result of which 'we observe the emptiness and meaninglessness of social relations, so often described by critics of the age of consumption and mass society'.

Eisenstadt continues:

> In general, these developments have brought about the flattening of the image of the societal future and have deprived it of its allure. Between present and future there is no ideological discontinuity. The present has become the more important, if not the more meaningful, because the future has lost its characteristic as a dimension different from the present. Out of these conditions has grown what Riesman [*Lonely Crowd*] has called the cult of immediacy. (Eisenstadt, 1963, pp. 40–41)

These processes, which were becoming apparent in the 1950s, had their antecedents in the interwar period. The 'flattening out' of the future, the administrative quality of social life, was already happening around the time that the franchise was extended – first of all to 'the masses', then to all women.

In this respect, women gained the right to vote, and formally gained the right to participate in public life, but for whom the meaning of this is rather different – flatter, less transformative – than envisioned by Mill, or later by the militant suffragettes. By the time the second world war ended and the welfare state proper came into being, the shift from public life to social administration was firmly institutionalised.

One important part of this shift was the appropriation of some aspects of the private realm by the state.

The enfranchisement of women

Women didn't gain the right to vote on equal terms to men until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928. Again, we shouldn't decry this development: it was a progressive step, and hard fought for. But it happened within a context whereby the public life into which they became absorbed was not the vibrant

public sphere envisioned by Mill – it was the realm of social administration. And this realm of social administration incorporated many of the features and functions previously associated with the private sphere.

We have noted the importance of the 'separate spheres' in maintaining and naturalising women's oppression. We have also noted that while feminists drew attention to the problem of the separate spheres in this regard, there was an element among some sections of the women's suffrage movement that promoted maternalism as a *justification* for women's suffrage.

The campaign waged by the Suffragettes, and the experience of the First World War, certainly had an impact on naturalised cultural assumptions about male and female difference. And part of the spur for the enfranchisement of women was, as with the enfranchisement of working-class men, capitalism's inability to maintain such a stark inequality.

But it was also made possible by the nascent welfare state. From the early 20th century, the government had begun to take on board functions that had previously been seen as restricted to the private sphere. Pugh explains:

> [A]lthough the Victorians regarded social welfare as the proper preserve of local authorities, by the 1890s pressure had grown for a national government to assume a much larger measure of responsibility. As a result, the post-1906 Liberal government intervened over free school meals, school medical services, old age pensions, health and unemployment insurance, labour exchanges, and minimum wages. In the process they went a long way to turning national politics into local politics and, as a crucial if unintended by-product, they materially diminished the distinction between the male and female spheres. (Pugh 2000, p76)

Pugh goes on to explain that 'social reform became the bridge between local and national politics across which women could advance without posing a fundamental threat to conventional thinking about gender.' (Pugh 2000, p136)

What we see here is a gradual transformation of the character of political life – as argued above, into becoming more about social administration. As well as changing the character of public life, this appropriated some of the functions of the private sphere – making issues that had previously been seen as the responsibility of the family into those that were now seen as issues for the state to take an interest in, and make public policy about.

This appropriation allowed for the enfranchisement of women. In this respect, it liberated them from the 'bondage' – to use Mill's phrase – of marriage and the conventions and responsibilities of the private sphere. But it also resulted in a reduction in the strength and the authority of the private realm.

Conclusion

In a sense, you could say that the incorporation of women into public life via the extension of the franchise, in these circumstances, represented a triumph of maternalist thinking. In appropriating some of the concerns and functions of the private sphere, the emerging welfare state brought the private right into the public domain.

Just as the shift to social administration in effect narrowed and flattened the character of public life, the welfare state narrowed and made more partial the authority and scope of the private realm. Thus, Arendt argues in her critique of the dominance of the 'social':

> The fact that the modern age emancipated the working classes and the women at nearly the same historical moment must certainly be counted among the characteristics of an age which no longer believes that bodily functions and material concerns should be hidden. (p73)

It is interesting that in the 1920s, not only certain functions previously seen to be performed by the family – eg education, the feeding and medical care of children – had become 'socialised', in the sense of being firmly under the purview of the state.

Control of reproduction itself, through birth control, was becoming increasingly opened up to medical intervention and political interest. This was when Marie Stopes was setting up her birth control clinics in London, and eugenic thinking was mainstream among the elite.

In this respect, one could say that politics and policy had become 'feminised'; and that patriarchal authority was being challenged by the bureaucratic authority of the state.

However, it would be one-sided to see this process as a win for 'maternalism' – simply because maternalism, too, relied for its authority on the separate spheres. The Suffragettes' salvationist claims relied – as Mill so clearly perceived – on the ways that women's influence was formed and constrained by the private sphere.

At the same time as women were brought into the public, their authority as representatives of the private sphere was contested. Authority over domestic arrangements, matters of everyday life, was increasingly appropriated by the state. At the same time, the freedom of the public realm became narrowed: and in concert with this, private life – in terms of the intimacy championed by Mill – lost much of its promise too.

When women gained the franchise on the same terms as men, they became – in most important respects – like men, within the body politic. But this was not 'like men' in the way envisioned by Mill: individuals freely able to exercise their talents in the public realm, with a private life enriched by broader minds, experiences, and equality between husband and wife.

Women and men alike became enfranchised on an enfeebled standing: as citizens engaged in a wider process of bureaucratic administration, jealously guarding their domestic concerns as a haven in a heartless and, increasingly, soulless world.