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Thea Pastras

Us Too? The #MeToo Movement and its Critics

We are living in the midst of a social reckoning, in which the powerless and abused are rising up to claim their rights, their autonomy, and their liberty. This “Me Too” movement, so named for a hashtag encouraging survivors to come forward with their stories, aims to address the issue of sexual assault so prevalent in our society. It has inspired a global discussion that intersects on several points with ideas outlined in John Stuart Mill’s essay *On Liberty*: particularly his notions of harm as it relates to personal liberty, the necessity of avoiding social tyranny, and the importance of free speech. When considering whose work to turn to as a guide for dealing with a 21st century feminist revolution, it seems surprising to settle on a mid-1800s male author. However, we can see his ideas being debated by modern authors in connection to the movement, even if unintentionally. There are obvious ties to be made between Mill’s essay and the arguments made in Michelle Goldberg’s article “Go Ahead, Criticize #MeToo,” written in response to another article questioning the validity of the movement and its supporters. Goldberg argues that although the dialogue created by the movement often grows unpleasant for critics, it is not actively silencing anyone. Through examination of Mill’s work, it is clear that he would agree with both the movement in general and Goldberg’s views specifically. The Me Too movement is facilitating a conversation that is difficult to have, but which is crucial to promoting liberty, not oppressing it.

There is ample evidence in his work to suggest that Mill would have supported the Me Too movement, or at least the intent behind it: that of dealing with and preventing further sexual assault against those most vulnerable to it. Before analyzing his potential stance on criticism of the movement (and thus his stance on Goldberg’s article), it is first essential to establish why he

would side with victims working to stop abusers. Critics might argue that Mill's stance on personal liberty would preclude him from supporting such a crusade. Indeed, Mill does believe that liberty is an essential right, and that everyone should have control over their own thoughts and actions. Crucially, though, this right extends only so far as it does not interfere with the liberty of others. He states, "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (Mill 8). Mill never details the exact parameters for "harm," but it is hardly an unfair extrapolation to place sexual assault—a violent, invasive act—within the scope of this term. The Me Too movement's mission is to stop these attacks, which do not fall under "that portion of a person's life and conduct which affects only himself," nor under that which, "if it also affects others, [does so] only with their free, voluntary, and undeceived consent and participation" (Mill 10). Sexual assault, which strips victims of their own liberty, is directly anathema to such requirements.

Because of his focus on protecting personal liberty, one of Mill's main concerns is avoiding social tyranny; however, based on the guidelines he lays out for doing so, the Me Too movement does not equal such tyranny. Some dissenters may agree that stopping assaults does fall under the purview of enabling liberty by preventing harm. But, they would argue, liberty is attacked by those who go further by, say, choosing not to work with or associate with accused rapists. Currently in Hollywood, men being named as abusers have suddenly found themselves dropped by studios, agencies, and public favor in general, as a result of their own repulsive actions. Critics might say that this goes beyond avoiding harm and enters a state of impinging on personal liberty. However, so long as the abuser is able to attain "liberty of thought and feeling," an internal right not destroyed by public ostracism; "liberty of tastes and pursuits," which

necessarily must only include actions not harmful to others; and “the freedom to unite,” his liberty remains intact (Mill 10). Additionally, in such a case, it *is* within the woman’s reasonable allowance of liberty to choose to avoid such a person for her own moral and physical well-being. Thus, it is clear that Mill would stand with the members of the Me Too movement in their struggle.

Mill believes strongly in free speech as a sign of a free society, and fears that when it disappears, so too does liberty. He argues that differing opinions are crucial to the progression of a culture, writing, “the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race...those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it” (Mill 14). This is both because the suppressed opinion may be true, in which case it must be heard for the betterment of society, or, if it is false, it should be debated so as to strengthen the opposing opinion. We cannot silence ideas different from our own because “all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility,” to which none of us can lay an honest claim (Mill 14). Mill enumerates great men, like Socrates, who have historically been silenced through death, despite possessing beliefs we now hold to be true. Here, however, he introduces the idea that death is not the only way to silence an unfavorable opinion. It is also possible to create tyranny through social stigma. He explains, “though we do not now inflict so much evil on those who think differently from us...it may be that we do ourselves as much evil as ever by our treatment of them” (Mill 26). This is because “our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion” (Mill 27). Essentially, silencing people with minority opinions through social pressure is, to Mill, equally as dangerous as silencing such people with violence. Therefore, we must be vigilant to allow free and open discussion so as to prevent such a social condition.

This notion of using freedom of speech to avoid social tyranny relates directly to Goldberg's article and her assertion that the Me Too movement has not impinged on others' rights to opinions. Goldberg's article is a response to one written by Katie Roiphe, who argues that the movement has created a toxic environment which suppresses all voices not calling for radical action or outright misandry. As Goldberg explains, "[Roiphe] argues that if, in the past, women feared retribution for speaking out about sexual harassment, now those who doubt the #MeToo orthodoxy face a new sort of silencing" (Goldberg). This is the crux of the problem; Roiphe is claiming a shift in power imbalances that has not realistically occurred. In order for the critics of Me Too to be experiencing oppression sufficient to meet Mill's grounds for social tyranny or intolerance, they must be facing off against opponents powerful enough to effectively silence them. Without this, it is simply the public discussion Mill so strongly champions. Goldberg makes a similar point, stating, "faced with thousands of incensed Twitter users, you might feel it's dangerous to say that #MeToo has gone overboard, but in the real world the men who still run things will congratulate you for your courage" (Goldberg). Critics of the movement are not truly being silenced; they have free rein of social media, and occasionally even have access to television and other national platforms to spread their opinions. It is crucial to avoid "conflating criticism—even harsh, ugly criticism—with oppression," and to "distinguish *feeling* silenced from actually being silenced" (Goldberg). Feeling attacked does not necessarily equate to that reality, and Goldberg is right to assert that Me Too has not ventured into the territory of actively oppressing anyone, regardless of how certain critics may feel.

Critics may erroneously argue that Mill would have disagreed with Goldberg, believing instead that the movement's at-times harsh rhetoric disqualifies it from being a truly open discussion. It is true that he warns against the use of tactics such as "invective, sarcasm, [and]

personality,” believing that these weaken arguments (Mill 44). Additionally, he is legitimately concerned about toxic discussions becoming the norm, rather than rational, fact based arguments. However, he acknowledges that there is no clear way of deciding what is too far. This is because the group being countered will always take offence “whenever the attack is telling and powerful,” and “every opponent who pushes them hard, and whom they find it difficult to answer, appears to them...an intemperate opponent” (Mill 44). Whenever people challenge the status quo or question the privileged people who control our society with hopes of correcting a power imbalance, naysayers appear to defend those at the top. This happens again and again, with people lambasting Black Lives Matter activists, gun control advocates, and most recently, members of Me Too. These critics use ad hominem attacks like “tone policing,” which criticizes the way a message is being made, without having any counterargument for the validity of the original claim. Mill recognizes the illegitimacy of such complaints, and the fact that tone policing is typically used against the weaker side: in this case, the Me Too movement, fighting against more dominant forces (Mill 44). He writes, “opinions contrary to those commonly received can only obtain a hearing by...the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offence...while unmeasured vituperation employed on the side of the prevailing opinion, really does deter people from professing contrary opinions” (Mill 45). As much as Roiphe may wish to identify with the former group, Mill would recognize that she falls within the second. That is, she is part of an oppressive structure claiming offense so as to invalidate a minority opinion, while employing the same critical techniques itself without consequence. Thus, Mill would agree with Goldberg, due to his understanding that challenging rhetoric does not always equal oppression, especially when coming from the side of the historically oppressed.

In conclusion, Mill once stated that truth's power lies in the fact that "it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its reappearances falls on a time when from favorable circumstances it escapes persecution until it has made such head as to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it" (Mill 24). This power is now on the side of the survivors, who are finally finding themselves in a time when the world is open to hearing them. The movement as a whole is not suggesting we do away with due process or throw all men in jail. As Michelle Goldberg explains, it is not about silencing critics. Instead, it is about embracing truths long ignored, and setting in motion plans to reclaim liberty for the most vulnerable among us. There can be no more accurate application of John Stuart Mill's beliefs, nor a more important cause to pursue. Movements that change the world are often loud, uncomfortable, and oftentimes even violent. The Me Too movement, while decidedly loud and uncomfortable, has not entered into a state of violence, and has shown no indication of becoming such. Most of the men accused of assault will never even see the inside of a jail cell. The conversation might occasionally venture into being nasty and unpleasant, but of course it was going to be uncomfortable; dismantling repressive power systems always is. Certain people, like Roiphe, are content with complacency so long as conversation remains more or less civil, because they believe that when it ceases to be so, it becomes tyrannical. What they fail to realize is that silence, civility, and fear of upsetting the "peaceful" status quo is what allowed tyranny to fester and infect the farthest reaches of our society. The absence of conflict does not always mean peace; oftentimes it merely indicates the presence of silent oppression.

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