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INTRODUCTION

I. Mill, Representative Government, and Nineteenth-Century Politics

John Stuart Mill, one might be forgiven for thinking, hardly needs another introduction. Shelves of monographs and thousands of articles have been written about him, and he remains a constant presence in university curricula and a wide range of public debates.

And yet, it is precisely for this reason that a new edition is in order. Thinkers of this stature need periodically to be reintroduced, lest familiarity breed, if not exactly contempt, then a complacency about our grasp of their meaning, which is sure to lead to misunderstanding. We have actively to stave off, by semi-regular reframing of their oeuvres, an unwary assimilation of their ideas to our own, which, while appearing to render them more "relevant" to some ephemeral hot topic, ultimately leaves their writings less challenging for us. They become like a monument in a city park: always there, forming part of our environment, but seldom looked at closely and with fresh eyes.

Mill is best known as the embodiment of liberalism. To this day, he is the most famous liberal that the philosophy canon has produced, found in every anthology of liberal thought. This centrality is due not only to his intellectual merits, but also to his place in history. Mill's life spanned the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, the century that the philosopher Eric Voegelin declared liberalism's "field of optimal clarity";[1] he was the most renowned philosopher in England, which was the liberal light of this liberal age. Thus, Mill's views attract attention not solely for their intrinsic interest, but also for their supposed representativeness of liberalism during a formative stage for that ideology. *On Liberty* is a sacred text for liberal views on the freedoms of speech and of private conduct; scholars who plumb the relations between liberalism and feminism still find recourse to Mill's early championing of women's rights. Since he was a dedicated imperialist and servant of the East India Company, he is often taken to epitomize a strand of liberalism supportive of empire; he is central to ongoing debates about whether utilitarianism is ultimately compatible with liberal ideals. In comparison to these subjects, Mill's writings on representative government have garnered less interest.

1. Voegelin, "Liberalism and Its History," *Review of Politics* 26 (1974): 504–20.

Most philosophers rarely contend with his copious treatments of political representation and parliamentary reform "directly, and in the first instance" (to repurpose a phrase of Mill's)[2], but instead only glance at them on the way to some other theme; one cannot say that a consensus has emerged on how to interpret Mill's thought in this domain.

* * * *

We tend to return to past political thinkers with one of two motivations in mind; though not incompatible, they likely lead us to emphasize different features of their work. First, and probably more commonly, as sources of permanent wisdom on rather abstract questions; second, as points of entry into the "intellectual switchboard" of a particular political system,[3] offering access to the spirit of a regime or constitution as seen by the articulate men and women who lived under it. Mill has typically been read in the former way, as an avatar of "political philosophy undefiled."[4] But the fact is that he was a deeply political, and even partisan, animal, and practical recommendations were never far from his mind. One hope for this edition is that it will enable us to see Mill in this latter light with regard to constitutional and electoral controversies that not only preoccupied Victorians, but that also continue to vex us to this day.

A fuller understanding of Mill's thought on *representative government* has been elusive in part because this category has lost its centrality in political discourse. Since Victorian times, *democracy* has come to be the master-norm of Western politics, and so it is only natural that when we look to the past, we wish to find founders of democratic theory, a search in which Mill has often featured. These pursuits, predictably, engender an opposite reaction; those who bristle at what they consider the too-ready affiliation of Mill with today's ideals have gone so far as to align him with an "aristocratic" tradition in liberalism.[5] Of course, it is legitimate to ask if we should consider Mill a democrat according to our present notions—but there is a risk that, in haste to deliver these judgments, we overlook what is distinctive about his thinking. This was, in truth, defiantly *not* aristocratic: opposition to the landed aristocracy as a class and to hereditary privilege as a principle was a mainstay throughout the sinuous course of his political commentary. Whether

2. Mill, *On Liberty*, *CW* 18:225. All citations to works of Mill not included in this edition are taken from *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 vols., ed. J. M. Robson (University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991). Parenthetical in-text citations are to the pages of this edition.

3. Alex Middleton, "William Rathbone Greg, Scientific Liberalism, and the Second Empire," *Modern Intellectual History* 19 (2022): 681–707.

4. Thomas Humberstone, *University Representation* (Hutchinson, 1951), 65.

5. E.g., Alan Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

or not one winds up classing Mill as *democratic*, however, is likely to tell us more about one's own assumptions regarding the nature of democracy than about the substance of Mill's oeuvre. While Mill did use the term, it was not his dominant rubric for thinking through the organization of basic political institutions. Instead, as the titles of the pieces in this volume suggest,[6] the primary idiom in which Mill worked was one shared by his contemporaries. If the leading English-language nomenclature for a good political system in the eighteenth century was *mixed government* or *the mixed constitution*, and for most of the twentieth and twenty-first it has been *democracy*, in the nineteenth century it was *parliamentary* or *representative* government that held the floor; and Mill, for all his (largely justified) sense that his mind was at once more radical and more cosmopolitan than the typical patriotic Englishman's, worked with the grain here. If we are too eager to skip past this political-cultural background and enlist the "patron saint of liberalism" in our ongoing spats, we are likely to mistake even what Mill's own inclination to democracy consisted in: namely, a demand to amend or inflect an existing system, rather than a foundational normative premise or basis for designing a polity from scratch.

In the end, Mill's central constitutional commitments were to *parliamentary liberalism*, a system that he believed had an overwhelming consensus of his countrymen behind it but that he hoped to reform in three directions: to make it more inclusive, more popular, and administratively stronger and more adept. These were not synonyms, not even the first two. So, perhaps appropriately for a thinker who stressed the "many-sidedness" of truth,[7] Mill was in search of a settlement that would strike a balance between contending imperatives. Mill's political philosophy is characterized by the aspiration toward reconciliation and synthesis: between Radical and Conservative notions, between the Enlightenment "philosophy of the eighteenth century" and the nineteenth-century "reaction" against it, between "critical" and "organic" periods of history, *und so weiter*.[8] The partial truths of one-sided theories could, in practice, be incorporated into and transcended by a well-reformed political dispensation. His thinking on the dominant political issue of his lifetime—how could the British model of parliamentary government, whose durability and good performance had so overshadowed its continental counterparts, be adapted to modern conditions?—reflected this disposition of liberal eclecticism.

6. It is a telling fact that none of Mill's significant texts include the word "democracy" apart from his essays on Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which took their title simply from that of the books under review.

7. *On Liberty*, 252.

8. Mill, *Autobiography*, *CW* 1:133, 173.

* * * *

Without sustained study of Mill's voluminous productions on electoral-representative reform, moreover, we will have only an incomplete picture of liberalism itself in its most formative period. This body of writing, more than any other, connects Mill to the polity in which he in fact lived and to the way in which it was understood by literate contemporaries. Representative government was, as he would write in his capstone work, "the ideally best form of government" (p. 357). But what this ideal looked like *in concreto* varied across his career. In Mill's lifetime, his country witnessed as much change in its basic political structure as was possible absent revolution and in a culture that revered continuity. When he entered the fray on the subject in the 1820s as an energetic teen, Britain was still in full possession of its "immemorial constitution." This system, which came to be referred to as the "unreformed Parliament" once it had disappeared (much like the *ancien régime* was so christened by the French revolutionaries as they overthrew it), was aristocratic and, as importantly, utterly *un*systematic. Roughly one in eight adult men in England had the vote, but this figure concealed great discrepancies that had grown up over time in a traditional and piecemeal fashion. In some constituencies, a relatively generous suffrage prevailed; in others, property thresholds or corporation membership requirements confined the vote to a small clique; in yet others, there was no political competition whatsoever, and aristocratic patrons or "owners" named the MPs. The Representation of the People Act 1832, better known as the Great Reform Act, passed amid mass popular protest and only by over-awing the House of Lords (which then still possessed an absolute veto) with the Crown's threat to create hundreds of reforming peers, increased the total voting population merely by a modest few percentage points. But it nonetheless was seen as a "pacific . . . revolution," for it established the principle of consciously pursued *organic* (a word Mill used interchangeably with *constitutional*) change, against the abiding veneration for changelessness and prescription.[9] It took steps for the first time to replace the maze of local electoral rules that had arisen haphazardly with a more standard set of regulations; increased the overall number of citizens eligible to vote (to roughly one in five adult males); revised the map of electoral districts to make the system more reflective of changes in population (especially the rise of northern industrial centers); and implemented measures to curtail corruption, such as drastically reducing the number of "pocket" or "rotten" boroughs, which had tiny electorates and were openly controlled by landholders and wealthy "proprietors." Its most famous provision was the creation of a single "middle-class" franchise across all borough districts, which gave the vote to householders who

9. Mill, "State of Politics in 1836," *CW* 6:321.

paid a yearly rental of at least £10. The cumulative effect was to diminish royal and (though the landed aristocracy remained very powerful) aristocratic influence, with the new settlement perceived to have installed a "middle class" electorate.[10]

It was under the dispensation created by the Great Reform Act that Mill spent nearly the rest of his life. During this time, democracy arrived elsewhere—removal of the property qualifications for the suffrage that had existed in colonial and Post-Revolutionary America had been completed by the mid-century, and the 1848 Revolution brought universal suffrage to France—but not in Mill's homeland. Instead, Mill's most intellectually fertile decades coincided with the classical age of parliamentary government, which doubled as the zenith of the British Constitution's prestige. The concept of parliamentary government captured "both a practice and an ideal" corresponding to

> the constitutional dispensation which pertained between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867: the handful of decades during which the power of the Crown over the making and breaking of governments was largely curtailed, but before tightly organised national parties asserted a firm grip on the levers of power. In this period . . . the British Parliament fleetingly enjoyed a kind of autonomous sovereignty, and it was primarily in Parliament that administrations were formed, contested, and dissolved. This state of affairs was accompanied . . . by an imposing mass of political theory and elaborated rationalisation, which helped to inform politicians' behaviour.[11]

This constitutional system was the soil in which nineteenth-century liberalism bloomed. Notwithstanding the syncretic character of Mill's thought and his fondness for presenting himself as idiosyncratic and independent, the great antiliberal Carl Schmitt was more right than not in portraying Mill as a representative philosophic defender of the concrete order of liberal parliamentarism.[12] Mill was, for all his distinctive elements, typical of and at home in the left-liberalism of his day, among those who were then called the "advanced liberals."[13] But he was also a critic—usually an *internal* critic—of liberal parliamentary government, and he even played a role in its demise. For it was during his one term in the Commons

10. John Phillips and Charles Wetherell, "The Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Political Modernization of England," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 411–36.

11. Alex Middleton, preface to *Modernity and the Victorians*, by Angus Hawkins (Oxford University Press, 2022), vii–xxi.

12. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (MIT Press, 1988).

13. Rosario López, "'Advanced Liberalism' and the Politics of Reform in Victorian Parliamentary Debates of the 1860s," in *Parliamentarism and Democratic Theory*, ed. Kari Palonen and José María Rosales (Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2015), 73–96.

(1865–1868) that a modest reform bill was unsuccessfully put forward by a Liberal administration, only for a more radical bill of the succeeding short-lived Conservative government to become, almost by accident, the Second Reform Act.[14] In its actual provisions, this Act was more radical than its predecessor, among other things doubling the franchise and ushering in working-class majorities in urban constituencies. As a parliamentarian, Mill supported expanding the franchise, and as a partisan, he sought to claim credit for his Liberal comrades, even if the act had been passed with their opponents in office. The final half-decade of Mill's life was spent under this new electoral order, but he barely discussed it and was not around to see its full effects, such as prompting the creation of modern mass party organizations. His political corpus is thus largely a record of how a political system of constitutional monarchy, limited suffrage, and parliamentary supremacy, paired with a society and culture in transition from aristocratic traditionalism to industrialism and individualism, looked to an intelligent observer and participant.

Reckoning with Mill's engagement with representative government also helps us to grasp the range of his contributions to political literature. The subject elicited from him a theoretical opus, the kind of book central to the history of political thought as conventionally presented: *Considerations on Representative Government*. Curiously, however, this work is given short shrift in modern presentations of Mill—there are no stand-alone recent editions of it, and anthologies/reprints overlook it in favor of *On Liberty*, *The Subjection of Women*, or *Utilitarianism*. This is unfortunate. Mill published it near the height of his fame, and he did so both to court constitutional controversy and distill years of his thought. It met its marks. *Considerations* had a "wide influence on the debates and discussions on parliamentary reform" of the 1860s; a French philosopher hailed the book as doing for "this regime" what Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* or Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had done for their subjects, filling the great "lacuna" on "representative government" with a "methodical and magisterial work."[15] Mill was pleased with it as a compendium of "the principles" and "practical suggestions" he had "been working up during the greater part of [his] life" (p. 328); it encompassed his "matured views of the principal questions which occupy the present age, within the province of purely organic institutions, and raise[d] by anticipation some other questions to which growing necessities will sooner or later compel the attention."[16]

14. Robert Saunders, "The Accidental Revolution: The Making of the Second Reform Act," in *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics*, *1848–1867* (Ashgate, 2011), 225–63.

15. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, introduction to *On Liberty, Representative Government, The Subjection of Women: Three Essays by John Stuart Mill* (Oxford University Press, 1912), xi; Dupont-White, introduction to *Le gouvernement représésentatif*, by Mill (Paris, 1862), v–vi.

16. Mill, *Autobiography*, 265.

Considerations was also the most *global* of Mill's cardinal works. It includes reflections on India, Prussia, Switzerland, America, and other locales; examines the difficulties faced by multinational states; and elaborates what we might now call a comparative-politics perspective on contending models of government. Notoriously, it also defends imperial despotism (pp. 350–51). *Considerations* confirmed that for Mill, development of a "practical political creed" involved reflection on other societies, above all France, where he passed a significant chunk of his life.[17]

Yet in this domain more than others, the sheer variety of genres in which Mill worked comes through far beyond the thick theoretical treatise. Mill was versatile and frighteningly prolific (a trait shared across the Victorian intelligentsia, for whom graphomania was a common pathology). Paradoxically, many of Mill's most trenchant insights into perennial questions around representation came in texts that were occasional, journalistic, and polemical. The French Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 prompted investigations of bicameralism, corruption, the ills of oligarchy, and other topics; in response to the former of these events, Mill acted for a time as a cross between a foreign correspondent and an apologist for "the popular party in France."[18] Mill's conceptions of representative government evolved across youthful debating material, newspaper articles, political speeches, and longer essays in "the great Victorian reviews of general culture."[19] As a matter of simple chronology, Mill was a party publicist and journalist *before* he was a philosopher; he was as much a "public moralist,"[20] reporter, politician, speechifier, and commentator as a theorist, or more accurately, his theory came out in good measure through those personae. In all this, Mill was more the successor to Burke than the predecessor of Rawls. Like Marx, Mill composed much of his finest work in the form of criticism, in what looks at first glance to be unobtrusive surveys of other thinkers. Reading a "great book" alone is rarely enough to permit one to grasp a major political thinker. In Mill's case, given the media system he lived in and the aims he set for himself, this inadequacy holds especially true.

By homing in further on the issues around representative government, we see how closely theory and practice were tied for Mill. From his own day forward, Mill has been chided for utopianism. While there are elements of his thought that arguably fit that appellation (one man's utopia is another's progress, after all), Mill was the furthest thing from an idle dreamer. He was from adolescence a political

17. Mill, *Autobiography*, 201.

18. Mill, "Prospects of France [1]," *CW* 22:130.

19. Jason Harding, "The Englishness of *The English Review*," *International Ford Madox Ford Studies* 5 (2006): 137–45.

20. Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

obsessive. He held "a very unusual position," as another Victorian literato-activist recalled, "head of a school of philosophy, and also a most active social reformer, a politician of mark, and the inspirer of many practical movements. . . . Hume, Adam Smith, Carlyle, Spencer, have each poured forth very pregnant ideas upon social problems: but they did not discuss Bills in Parliament or found Leagues."[21] On topics like the suffrage, the electoral system, the relation of executive to legislative, or the number of legislative houses, Mill felt compelled to relate ideals to possibilities and to judge among second- and third-best options. Mill distinguished between "compromis[ing] one's principles" and "compromis[ing] in the name of one's principles," between measures which contained "shortcomings" and those which introduced "positive evil[s]"; he generally did "not desire to destroy what we have got until we have replaced it by something better."[22] To understand a thinker well, it is not enough to know which values he espoused, nor to list the platforms, laws, or practices he championed; one must establish the conjunction between the two and show how the claims made at these different levels could be seen to fit together. This is especially true for *progressive* writers, as Mill avowedly was, for unlike genuine utopians, they must provide not only a picture of a better world but an account of how it is reachable from the status quo and which measures count as positive steps toward it. Only by attending to his concrete institutional-constitutional proposals can we comprehend what meaning the foremost liberal gave to the basic liberal tenet that "society and political institutions are, or ought to be, in a state of progressive advance."[23]

The texts presented here are only a sample of Mill's output on representative government and parliamentary reform. They were chosen for their intrinsic merits but also for their representativeness, both chronological and generic. The goal is to offer an adequate cross-section of both the *type* of Mill's compositions and their *timing*. The latter is especially important because while there are continuities spanning from teenager to sexagenarian—such as support for women's suffrage and antipathy to hereditary power—there were also notable shifts. Though the exact boundaries are porous and contestable, it is best to think of Mill passing through three stages.[24] The first phase covered the beginning of Mill's

21. Frederic Harrison, "John Stuart Mill," *The Nineteenth Century* 40 (1894): 487–508.

22. Bruce Kinzer, introduction to *CW* 28: xxiii; Mill, Speech on the Education Bill, 25 March 1870, *CW* 29:383–84.

23. Mill, Speech on the Westminster Election of 1865 [2], *CW* 28:23.

24. There have been surprisingly few accounts of the evolution of Mill's parliamentary-representative thought. (Two of the most illuminating are still J. H. Burns, "J. S. Mill and Democracy, 1829–61 [I–II]," *Political Studies* 5 [1957]: 158–75, 281–94; and Alexander Brady, introduction to *CW* 19: ix–lxx. The periodization offered here differs from theirs in key respects, though there is

political consciousness through the early 1830s when the Reform Act passed, and disillusionment with the government installed by the 1830 Revolution abated his astonishing pace of commentary on French affairs. The second extended from the mid-1830s through approximately the next decade and a half; this period covered both an intense partisan polemic geared toward shaping the Reformed Parliament in its early years and extensive investigation of larger questions of history and political theory. (These were also the years during which his two stoutest tomes, the *Logic* and *Principles of Political Economy*, were written.) The final stage ran from the 1850s to Mill's death, when he wrote systematically about electoral reform and, standing for and serving in Parliament, delivered important public addresses on amending the representative system. At the risk of being over-schematic, we can classify the first of these periods as having been defined by democratic radicalism; the second, by a "neoradical" approach, which placed its hopes in the prospect of leadership by an enlightened middle class; and the third, by the search for an inclusive class settlement that would be both stable and progressive. If, in the words of a leading philosopher-historian, "nothing is weightier than convergences across a distance,"[25] then the fact that the main aspirations of each of Mill's epochs persist unabated in Western politics today tells us much about the fundamental character of irresolvable tensions within liberalism.

II. The Young Mill: Early Radicalism

The story of Mill's youth and education is so well-known that it does not need detailed retelling here. His father, James Mill, was a stern Scotsman who transferred the religious impulses of his harsh Calvinist upbringing into the causes of radical reform. He devoted himself not only to practical efforts at improving institutions

more than one way to skin this cat.) In general, diachronic studies of Mill take their cues from Mill's testimony about the "mental crisis" in his twenties that led him away from the orthodoxies of his utilitarian-Benthamite upbringing. While this framework is helpful, it only takes us so far: first, because it invites psychologization rather than close attention to the content of ideas; second, because, as Mill readily admitted, the level of metaethics and general philosophy did not correspond directly to the level of political outlook, where both "substantial changes of opinion" and less spectacular "modifications" occurred on a separate timetable (*Autobiography*, 199–201). Furthermore, like many authors, Mill's ideological development was not perfectly transparent to him; despite his effort to give a description of the "successive phases" of his ideas, like many politically active people, he leaned toward minimizing discontinuity in his pronouncements on public affairs.

25. Marcel Gauchet, *L'avènement de la démocratie, I: La révolution moderne* (Gallimard, 2007), my translation.