

The Multifaceted Politics of John Stuart Mill

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Frederick Rosen, *Mill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xiii + 315 pp., \$99.00 cloth, \$33.00 paper.

As Frederick Rosen notes, most students of Mill's political philosophy have confined their efforts to reading and interpreting *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, and *Considerations on Representative Government* (1; cf. 133-34). This approach decontextualizes Mill's political thinking. There are two major contexts that we need to take into account. One of these is much emphasized by Rosen, namely Mill's more general philosophy, in particular his two early works, *System of Logic* and *Principles of Political Economy*. Many of Mill's later works were largely derived from these two grand oeuvres. For instance, the *Principles* contains many of the basic ideas later presented in *On Liberty*.

The other major context is the contemporary political discussion. Mill was sensitive to ongoing political debates, and much of what he wrote about politics has to be understood against that background. It is also essential to be aware that the meanings of some key political terms such as "democracy" and "socialism" have undergone far-reaching transformations since the nineteenth century. Inattention to those changes almost invariably leads to anachronism.

Rosen has done great work in placing Mill's political philosophy in the first of these contexts, but as I will show below, the book does not

always satisfy equally high standards in terms of the second. The book is divided into three parts. The first discusses themes from *System of Logic*, the second Mill's correspondence in 1841-1847 with Auguste Comte, and the third several themes from his *Principles of Political Economy*. The book ends with an excellent discussion of the *Subjection of Women*, in which Rosen shows that it can be read as "Mill's great work on despotism in society" (8) that sums up much of his political philosophy.

One of the strengths of Rosen's book is his treatment of Mill's "ethology." This was Mill's attempt at initiating a new discipline devoted to character and its formation, i.e., largely to how social conditions influence human personality and behavior. As Rosen says, ethology was "at the heart of Mill's approach" (3). Mill had plans to write a book or at least a series of essays on ethology. Although he did not manage to do this, his view on how social forms influence human behavior is an essential part of the background we need for understanding his political views. One example is his distinction between an active and a passive character, a distinction that, as Rosen shows, partly overlaps with that between being self-interested and caring about the welfare of the whole community. For example, Mill's preference for an open ballot has often been seen as a strange anomaly in his thought. Rosen shows that it is in fact consonant with his ideal that the forms of government should encourage an active character which includes taking responsibility for how one votes (89, 93). He also points out the importance of the ideal of an active character for Mill's view on liberty – a most interesting connection that should be the subject of further explorations.

The book puts an unusually strong emphasis on Mill's relationship with Comte, by whom he was deeply influenced in spite of large differences in opinion. Mill differed from Comte in recognizing (and promoting) political economy as a science apart from sociology, in promoting public education, in defending liberty as an overarching social goal, in strongly supporting the equality of women, and in rejecting the use of phrenology as a basis for social theorizing – in particular the argument that women's smaller average brain size justifies their inferior social position.¹

Tyranny of the majority

Rosen writes: "Nevertheless, there are only two brief references to Tocqueville in *On Liberty* (CW 18:219, 274). In the first Mill invoked the phrase, "tyranny of the majority," as an evil against which society needed to be "on its guard" (152).² However, the reference to Tocqueville is a footnote by the editors, not to be found in the original printed version of *On Liberty*.³ There is no indication in Mill's own text that he referred to Tocqueville when writing about a "tyranny of the majority." Ever since the French Revolution this phrase and others like it were commonplace in texts critical of democracy and an extended suffrage, not least in such texts written by liberals. Let me give a few examples.

In a letter to Thomas Mercer in February 1790, Edmund Burke disparaged what he called the "injustice and tyranny" that had been "practised in a few months by a French democracy." According to Burke, "The tyranny of a multitude is a multiplied tyranny" and much worse than despotisms by single persons (Burke, *Correspondence* 96-97). In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, written and published in the same year, he claimed that "in a democracy, the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppression upon the minority," and described democracy as having an "inevitable tendency to party tyranny" (Burke, *Reflections* 229). In 1833 the *Political Register*, published by Duff Green in Washington, referred to "the great conservative principle of our government, preventing the tyranny of the majority" (Anon., "The Inaugural" 746). The same year, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* carried an article deploring that after the Reform Act of 1832, the banners of "despotism and democracy" were carried by both France and England. "Thus every thing announces the extinction of freedom in modern Europe: pressed by democratic tyranny in the West, and Asiatic despotism in the East, it is fast disappearing from the earth" (Anon., "First Session" 798). In 1854, the President of the Manchester Commercial Association said in a public speech that "as Manchester had put down royal tyranny and

aristocratic tyranny, so it would also deal with the tyranny of Democracy” (Anon., “Manchester School” 50). In 1878 Lord Acton wrote that “The one pervading evil of democracy is the tyranny of the majority” (Acton 64-65). In a letter written in 1886, the liberal judge James F. Stephen deplored that the “old Liberalism” in which he believed was replaced by a “tyrannical democracy” (qtd. in Roach 60). Possibly the last major expression of liberal criticism of democracy was W.E.H. Lecky’s *Democracy and Liberty* (1895) in which he said that “The tyranny of majorities is, of all forms of tyranny, that which, in the conditions of modern life, is most to be feared” (376).

Rosen speculates that “following Tocqueville’s account of American democracy,” Mill “could see dangers in democracy that an earlier generation could not have seen” (158). This is not a plausible analysis. The dangers of a tyranny of a majority were not a new insight by Tocqueville but the stock-in-trade of anti-democratic authors throughout the nineteenth century.

Was Mill a democrat?

According to Rosen, Mill “regarded Athens in this [Periclean] period as superior to all modern states, including modern democracies” (9). However, I am not able to find any such endorsement of ancient Athenian society in Mill’s texts, and neither do I find any reference by Mill to “modern democracies.”⁴ To the contrary, although praising the freedom of opinion in ancient Athens, Mill said, “A democracy in the full sense of the term it of course was not, since women, slaves, and a multitude of permanent residents of all ranks and classes who were not citizens, were ‘unknown to the constitution.’ But it had many important points in common with democracy” (CW 25:1161). Rosen’s usage of the term “modern democracy” is difficult to interpret. He says for instance that it is “well known that Mill was highly ambivalent about the virtues of modern democracy” (40). What is meant by “modern democracy” here? That which was called “democracy” in Mill’s time? Or what we mean by that term today? The difference is substantial.

Today, democracy is an almost universally accepted ideal, but in the nineteenth century adherence to democracy was mostly considered an extreme standpoint. In Britain democracy was promoted by working-class activists and a small minority of intellectual radicals. It was only in the 1930's that "democracy" became a term representing a constitutional consensus among liberals, reformist socialists, and gradually also conservatives (Christophersen). Even more importantly, in the nineteenth century the term "democracy" was much vaguer than today, and it underwent important shifts in meaning. At the beginning of the century it differed in at least three important respects from today's democratic consensus. First, it was not always clear that "democracy" could be indirect. In France in the 1790's, "democracy" usually meant what we today call direct democracy, and the term "representocracy" was used for what we now call indirect or representative democracy (Brunot 733). In an article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* James Mill still defined "democracy" as what we today call direct democracy. However, by the middle of the century the usage of "democracy" for representative forms of government seems to have been firmly established.

Second, democracy was not taken to include tolerance and the protection of minorities. As mentioned above, extensions of the suffrage to members of the lower classes were often criticized for implying a tyranny of the majority over minorities. Gradually, an ideal of liberty and toleration was incorporated in the notion of democracy, and in 1899 Eduard Bernstein wrote that "always everyone who uses the word democracy today" uses it in a meaning that excludes the oppression of a minority by the majority (Bernstein 122-23).

Third, "democracy" did not denote a system with universal suffrage (for women and men). Toward the end of the nineteenth century it usually denoted a system with universal male suffrage (e.g., Acton 61). It was only in the 1920's when universal suffrage had been introduced in large parts of Western Europe that it became an integral part of the notion of democracy. Thus, of the three major elements of the modern

concept of democracy that were missing in the early nineteenth century, universal suffrage was the last to be incorporated.

Due to the vagueness and the changes in meaning of the concept of “democracy” in the nineteenth century, the term “modern democracy” should be used with caution, if at all, in discussions of that period. When answering the question whether Mill was a democrat, we have to distinguish carefully between two versions of that question, namely whether he was a democrat in the sense of that term in his own time, or in our own time.

There is an abundance of textual evidence showing that Mill identified himself as a democrat (Hansson, “John Stuart Mill’s”). As one of many examples, in a speech in Parliament on the Reform Bill in July 1867 he spoke in the name of “us democrats,” and referred to “the eminently democratic opinions which I have held for a great number of years” (CW 28:207; cf. CW 1:276-78, 288). On some occasions he distanced himself to some extent from “democracy,” but of course what he then distanced himself from was not our modern democratic consensus (which was unknown to him) but the dominant ideas called “democratic” in his times. For instance, in 1865 when explaining why he did not join the newly formed Reform League (which was the major organization associated with democratic ideas) he referred to two differences in opinion: first, he was unwilling to let female suffrage wait until after male suffrage, whereas the Reform League only had manhood suffrage on its program. Second, he did not support their demand for a secret ballot (CW 17:2011-12). In the first and arguably most important of these differences he was closer to the modern democratic consensus than the mainstream “democrats” of his days.

As Rosen notes, Mill’s *Considerations* contain two elements that appear “eccentric” to the modern reader (69). One was the open ballot and the other was that although everyone should have a vote, members of the more educated classes could be given several votes (CW 19:323). Here again, Mill should not primarily be compared to the modern democratic consensus but rather to the dominant views among those of

his contemporaries who called themselves democrats. Most of them were satisfied with male suffrage, whereas Mill was uncompromisingly in favor of universal suffrage. Although this is a subjective matter, I would rather describe their "deviation" from the modern democratic consensus as larger than Mill's "deviation." I therefore tend to disagree with Rosen's claims that it is "well known that Mill was highly ambivalent about the virtues of modern democracy" (40) and that his views on democracy were "remarkably conservative in relation to the earlier radicalism of Bentham and many of his followers" (69). As I see it, Mill's views were closer to the modern democratic consensus than those of almost all of his contemporaries, including the leading "democrats."

Even more importantly, Mill was a major contributor to the formation of the modern democratic consensus. In times when democracy was still considered to be compatible with – or even leading to – a tyranny of the majority that would quench liberty, he explicitly described liberty as part of what democracy means. For instance, in his review of George Grote's *History of Greece* he described "boundless publicity and freedom of speech" as a "democratic characteristic, far more practically important than even the political franchise" (CW 11:324). Today this is the standard view, but it was not when he wrote this. Similarly, in a letter written in 1862 he referred to the constitution of the colony of Victoria as a "falsely called democracy in which manual labourers alone are really represented." What made the democracy "false" was an electoral system that did not ensure "a fair representation of minorities" and presumably also the exclusion of women from suffrage (CW 15:764-65).

In summary, Mill was a forerunner of the modern democratic consensus and an important contributor to its formation. Describing him as deviating from it is anachronistic and arguably unfair.

Was Mill a socialist?

There has been considerable controversy on whether Mill was a socialist as he himself said that he was. Some have taken his word for

it, whereas others have discounted these statements, sometimes claiming that they resulted from undue influence by Harriet Taylor (Hayek; Packe 312-15.) Rosen takes a middle position, saying, "It is difficult to say clearly and definitely that Mill either was or was not a socialist" (198). To this, I answer: No, it is not difficult. It is either impossible or easy: impossible if you do not specify what you mean by socialism, but easy if you do that clearly enough. There are at least three meaningful specifications of the question "Was Mill a socialist?": (1) as that term was generally used in his days, (2) as he himself defined it, and (3) as it is understood today. I will say no more about the third variant of the question but provide some material for answering the first two variants.

Just like "democracy," "socialism" was a rather vague term in the early nineteenth century. The word seems to have been first used among the Owenites in the early 1820s. In the decades that followed, it was used in a much wider sense than now (Gans; Grünberg; Hansson, "Socialism"). In his influential 1850 book on French socialism, Lorenz von Stein focused on Saint-Simon and Fourier, neither of whom were socialists in the modern sense of advocating communal ownership or control of the means of production. In Louis Reybaud's *Études sur les réformateurs contemporains ou socialistes modernes*, published in 1843, Jeremy Bentham was counted among the socialists. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels called Simonde de Sismondi a socialist, which he was not in the modern sense of the word. Mill himself described Auguste Comte as a socialist and agreed with him "quâ socialist, that is, calling for an entire renovation of social institutions and doctrines, in which respect I am entirely at one with him" (CW 13:739; cf. CW 14:53).

But in Mill's lifetime the word underwent a significant narrowing-down in meaning. Mill himself usually used it in a more restricted sense. There are at least three definitions of "socialism" in his writings:

The word Socialism [...] is now [...] applied to any system which requires that the land and the instruments

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of production should be the property, not of individuals, but of communities or associations, or of the government. (*Principles of Political Economy*, 1848, CW 2:203)

Socialism is the modern form of the protest, which has been raised, more or less, in all ages of any mental activity, against the unjust distribution of social advantages. (*Vindication of the French Revolution of February 1848*, 1849, CW 20:351)

What is characteristic of Socialism is the joint ownership by all the members of the community of the instruments and means of production. [...] The distinctive feature of Socialism is not that all things are in common, but that production is only carried on upon the common account, and that the instruments of production are held as common property. (*Chapters on Socialism*, 1879, CW 5:738-39)

These are all fairly broad definitions that cover different views. Importantly, they all cover his own version of socialism as expressed in the first edition of the *Principles of Political Economy* (CW 3:794) and later works. He was in favor of a cautious and gradual transition to a system that would combine joint ownership of the means of production with a competitive market economy. The combination of favoring joint ownership and a competitive market economy was admittedly uncommon in his times (but it is common in modern social democratic parties). He described it in his autobiography as "a qualified Socialism" (CW 1:199). There can be no doubt that the answers to the first two versions of the question about his socialism are both affirmative.

Mill's views on socialism and liberty have often been seen as being in tension, perhaps even in contradiction, with each other. Rosen

expresses this view when observing that Mill was the author both of *On Liberty* and of “a theory of industrial and political organization that culminated in socialism. That he was able to do so did not make Mill an ideological socialist as opposed to an ideological liberal, but reflected his philosophical and rhetorical skills in reconciling the two positions on a different level” (151-52). Rosen does not explain the nature of the contradiction. As far as I can see it arises with a modern interpretation of the terms “socialism” and “liberalism,” but not with Mill’s own interpretations of them. First we should note that, perhaps surprisingly to a modern reader, he did not call himself a “liberal” simpliciter but rather a “radical” or an “advanced liberal” (Hansson, “Socialism”). Obviously, his reluctance to identify himself as a liberal was not directed at liberalism as we know it today but at the mainstream liberals of his time who did not support a radical extension of suffrage. (Arguably, today’s liberalism is much more Milleian than that of his contemporaries.) Interestingly, Mill included socialist working class leaders among the “advanced liberals” of his time (CW 16:1514; cf. CW 16:1488).

But apart from liberalism, it is a reasonable question how *On Liberty* and socialism can be combined. The answer seems to lie in the “qualified” nature of Mill’s socialism. He “repudiated with the greatest energy that tyranny of society over the individual which most Socialistic systems are supposed to involve” and sought ways “to unite the greatest individual liberty of action, with a common ownership in the raw material of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour” (CW 1:239). If his hopes for such a combination were unrealistic, then that does not make him either a non-liberal or a non-socialist, but a person whose views were unrealistic for reasons that he could not know.

Rosen also sees a conflict between Mill’s socialism and democracy: “Instead of a journey culminating in representative democracy Mill chose another journey through co-operation that culminated in a form of socialism” (152). As I hope to have shown above, it is misleading to say

that Mill chose not to make a "journey culminating in representative democracy." Furthermore, the conflict between democracy and socialism presumed by Rosen is in a sense anachronistic since in Mill's time, socialism and democracy were largely promoted by the same people, and their views were not seen as internally inconsistent for that reason. Mill himself saw no contradiction, but described co-operative associations as "the best aspirations of the democratic spirit" (CW 3:793). He also said that his and Harriet Taylor's "ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists" (CW 1:239), thus seeing their socialism as an extension rather than a deviation from their democratic ideas.

Dictatorship of the proletariat

In his book on Mill's social and political ideas John M. Robson wrote, "[Mill] sees no need for, or true evidence of, a class war, and the dictatorship of the proletariat, in the workers' present condition, would be to him puerile nonsense" (276). Although there is no evidence that Mill ever commented on the "dictatorship of the proletariat," we have strong reasons to believe that Robson's statement is correct. Mill was strongly in favor of minority representation, and he was against giving the whole power to the manual laborers (CW 15:764-65).⁵ However, he would not have interpreted the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" in the way it is interpreted today. In his time "dictatorship" still referred primarily to a temporary emergency power within a constitutional framework (Spencer). Mill himself made a clear distinction between dictatorship and despotism (CW 19:403).

Citing Robson, Rosen says, "Mill found such ideas as a dictatorship of the proletariat 'puerile' and rejected any emphasis on class war" (278). The difference may be subtle, but whereas Robson was in all probability right, we have no evidence that Rosen is right in claiming that Mill "found" (in contradistinction to "would have found") the idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat puerile. As far as I know there is no evidence that Mill ever came across the phrase.

Monoculturalism

For the most part, Rosen avoids the common mistake of trying to involve Mill in current-day affairs that were unknown to him. There is, however, one exception, and a most unfortunate one:

Nevertheless, Mill's approach continues to have some relevance today. Consider, for example, the widely advocated doctrine of multiculturalism, which calls for the toleration of many customs and practices of different cultures in advanced, modern societies. Not only should there be toleration, say its advocates, but law and public opinion should be allowed to stamp out liberty, even where the practices (such as the treatment of women within Islam) were patently opposed, as Mill himself noted, to modernity. For Mill, the liberty of modern societies required opposition to such laws and practices that led to major inequality and injustice in society. The sort of toleration called for by some contemporary multiculturalists would have been considered by Mill to be false, because no woman in a modern Western society should be required to submit to the despotism of a forced marriage, live in fear of an 'honour' killing, or be required to live generally as an inferior to a man. (257)

The claim that the advocates of "toleration of many customs and practices of different cultures" are willing to let liberty be stamped out is obviously wrong; the vast majority of proponents of cultural diversity are against oppressive practices irrespective of their cultural origins. The term "honour killing" is misleading since it gives the impression that atrocious crimes committed in certain minority groups are part of that group's culture, whereas equally atrocious crimes within the majority culture are individual deviations from that culture. In almost all cultures (including traditionally Christian ones), allegations of pre- or extramarital sexual activities constitute the commonest motive for deadly violence against women. In Europe, the perpetrators of such violence are mostly husbands, partners, or ex-partners,

whereas in the Middle East these crimes are mostly committed by male relatives. Wounded male honor is an important motive in both cases, and there is no reason to treat one of these two categories of crimes as a part of the culture and the other as an individual aberration. The selective use of terms like "honour culture" and "honour-related crimes" for killings taking place in immigrant minorities but not for equally abominable killings in the majority culture is unjustified and discriminatory (Abu-Odeh; Dustin and Phillips; Fischbach and Herbert; Nasrullah *et al.*; Volpp). I see no reason to involve Mill in this terminological practice or, more generally speaking, in the defense of monoculturalism.

We do not know what Mill would have said on these and other issues in modern societies, but he provided us with a tool that I believe to be useful. We can call it "Mill's test of radicalism" or in short "Mill's test." It can be found in his 1833 article on Junius Redivivus:

Our author is a radical in the best sense of the term, that is, he is an enemy to all institutions and all usages which deliver over any portion of the species, unprotected, to the tender mercies of any other portion; whether the sacrifice be of blacks to whites, of Catholics to Protestants, of the community at large to lords and boroughmongers, of the middle and working classes to the higher, of the working classes to the middle, or (a surer test of genuine high-minded radicalism than all the rest) of women to men. (CW 1:383-84)

The test can be expressed as follows:

Mill's test: A true radical is someone who is an enemy to all institutions and all usages which deliver over *any* portion of the species, unprotected, to the tender mercies of any other portion.

(The suppression of women is still a most useful test case, at least for male candidates.) In order to pass Mill's test one must be able to oppose *both* male violence against women in all cultures *and* the suppression of religious and cultural minorities.

Apart from this monoculturalist outburst, Rosen's book is a well-reasoned and balanced scholarly contribution with many new insights on how Mill's political philosophy connects with his views on other philosophical issues. I hope it will inspire others to further investigate these connections.

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Notes

¹ Comte relied heavily on Franz-Joseph Gall's phrenology, although he put much more emphasis on Gall's speculative identifications of specific organs for various cerebral faculties than on the supposed correspondences between these organs and bumps on the skull (Vernon; Lewisohn).

² Later in the text Rosen refers again to "Tocqueville's notion of the 'tyranny of the majority'" (154).

³ Similarly, in *CW* 25: 1130, the editors claim that Grote picked up the phrase "tyranny of the majority" from Tocqueville. Hereafter, *CW* refers to *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson.

⁴ Grote held Periclean Athens higher than what he called the democratic governments "of modern times" (150).

⁵ On the common mistake to interpret Marx's use of the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" as the despotic government by a party that Lenin referred to with the same term, see Draper, Barany.

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