

Mill and Marx on Inequality

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1. Introduction

Once upon a time it was the case—and in some quarters perhaps still is—that when my title was raised it would be inferred that a basic contrast between liberalism and socialism, the free market and the command economy, social hierarchy versus enforced equality was intended.¹ This is by and large no longer true. We recognize today (minimally) that neither of these two great nineteenth-century thinkers are so easily contained within such binary categories, and also that it does little good to try to force the issue. Both Mill and Marx were indeed committed to defending both liberty and equality, and a fair and just rather than inhumane and exploitative future society. And so too, rather than—in the spirit of 1989-91—dismissing Marx as a failure and liberalism as an unqualified success, today we are much less sure about what constitutes “success” than even a decade ago. For not only have we not yet recovered from the last great capitalist crisis. Far worse, unrestrained capitalism, while possibly more efficient at producing goods than the command economy, nonetheless will equally likely destroy the planet through environmental degradation. Here I offer a brief account of how each writer dealt with the problem of (in)equality, and then compare their views. Finally, I will offer some observations pertinent to the present. In what follows I will chiefly be concerned with social or class inequality, though we will need briefly to consider formal political equality.² Both writers clearly sought equality of opportunity, though they differed on how it might be achieved. Both also treated equality of gender rather differently. We know now that they met, at least briefly, and probably more than once, sometime in late 1850 or early 1851, when Wilhelm Pieper reported they were friends.³ Tantalizing though the evidence is, no record exists of the results.

2. Mill on Inequality

John Stuart Mill is not usually known first and foremost as a theorist of equality: his great text *On Liberty* (1859) is often presumed to present his defining concept and is often (erroneously) read as libertarian.⁴ If anything, it is his plea for individuality and the need for an intellectual élite which has dominated much of the secondary literature relating to these issues.⁵ In six areas, however, Mill can be understood as promoting a more egalitarian agenda than *On Liberty* implies with respect to inheritance, co-operation, land reform, socialism, feminism, and the stationary state.⁶

Mill began reconsidering his views on inequality on encountering the Saint-Simonians at the end of the 1820s. Now he came to view a class uniquely devoted to pleasure as an injustice, and argued instead for the principle of “every individual being required to take a share of labour [...] all being classed according to their capacity, and remunerated according to their work.”⁷ In 1831 he insisted that “There must be a moral and social revolution, which shall, indeed, take away no men’s lives or property, but which shall leave to no man one fraction of unearned distinction or unearned importance.”⁸ This principle Mill would defend the rest of his life, while tinkering with his calculations as to how much inheritance might be deemed just. In his essay on Coleridge (1840) he noted the “demoralizing effect of great inequalities in wealth and social rank.”⁹ In 1848 Mill thought “large fortunes acquired by gift or inheritance” were “fit subjects for regulation on grounds of general expediency.” A “possible mode of restraining the accumulation of large fortunes in the hands of those who have not earned them by exertion” was “limiting the amount which any one person should be permitted to acquire by gift, bequest, or inheritance.”¹⁰ Mill argued that the community might “rightfully appropriate” any surplus for “general purposes” by a graduated inheritance tax, it being “eminently desirable” to “counteract the tendency of inherited property to collect in large masses.” Limiting bequests he regarded as the “most eligible” means of doing so.¹¹ This meant that wealth which was “no longer [...] employed

in over-enriching a few [...] would either be devoted to objects of public usefulness, or if bestowed on individuals, would be distributed among a larger number." Enormous fortunes, "which no one needs for any personal purpose but ostentation or improper power," would "become much less numerous," and there would be many more "persons in easy circumstances, with the advantages of leisure, and all the real enjoyments which wealth can give, except those of vanity." This class might then "in a much more beneficial manner than at present" be able to offer "the services which a nation having leisured classes is entitled to expect from them, either by their direct exertions or by the tone they give to the feelings and tastes of the public." Moreover, a "large portion also of the accumulations of successful industry would probably be devoted to public uses, either by direct bequests to the State, or by the endowment of institutions."¹² By 1847 Mill had ceased to think that "a leisured class, in the ordinary sense of the term, was an essential constituent of the best form of society": "What does seem to me essential is that society at large should not be overworked, nor over-anxious about the means of subsistence."¹³ In 1848, in the famous chapter on the "Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes," he argued that

when ideas of equality are daily spreading more widely among the poorer classes, and can no longer be checked by anything short of the entire suppression of printed discussion and even of freedom of speech, it is not to be expected that the division of the human race into two hereditary classes, employers and employed, can be permanently maintained.¹⁴

In 1861 Mill noted that it was "fair and reasonable that the general policy of the State should favour the diffusion rather than the concentration of wealth."¹⁵ But how much taxation was right or just? Mill thought that his proposals were, in Fred Berger's phrasing, "*radically* redistributive,"¹⁶ and might even (Alexander Bain recorded) "pull down all large fortunes in two generations."¹⁷ But by 1865 Mill thought that there were "strong grounds" for leaving "to one person the whole of the funds actually

engaged in a single enterprise” where the owner’s capital was actually used “in carrying on any of the operations of industry.” Maintaining an “ancestral mansion” fell into the same category.¹⁸ A maximum thus might be fixed on inheritance which would thus allow each to ensure that none of their offspring burdened the state, and yet “not to lavish it in enriching some one individual, beyond a certain maximum, which should be fixed sufficiently high to afford the means of comfortable independence.” Without a definition of what “comfortable independence” implies, however, we cannot know precisely what limits Mill thought were reasonable. But these proposals clearly render it clear that Mill possessed a much more egalitarian agenda than he is usually credited with. The key problem was how to reconcile the need for greater equality with the need for meritocracy (another Saint-Simonian principle), and the gross inequalities of the existing system of property.

A second area in which Mill’s views became distinctively egalitarian and even anti-capitalist, was co-operation. As is now well known, in his 1845 review of W.T. Thornton’s *On Labour*, Mill announced that “on a subject on which almost every thinker has his Utopia, we might be permitted to have ours.” He now asserted that “at some distant date” it might be possible to envision “healing the widening breach between those who toil and those who live on the produce of former toil,” by “raising the labourer from a receiver of hire—a mere bought instrument in the work of production, having no residuary interest in the work itself—to the position of being, in some sort, a partner in it.” By 1848 Mill offered a commitment to profit-sharing, and insisted that “if public spirit, generous sentiments, or true justice and equality are desired, association, not isolation, of interests is the school in which these excellences are nurtured.”¹⁹ By 1852 he now defined this as ideally an “association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves.”²⁰ Though he did not spell it out in great detail, this clearly implied restricting the exploitation of labor and the inflation of managerial salaries.

Here we might well challenge Duncan's judgment that "Mill's programme left the pillars of the capitalist class structure standing" and that Mill "rejected those theories which placed the blame for existing social evils on capitalism or industrialism or industrialisation."²¹ While Mill intended these developments to occur within a system which retained economic competition, it is not capitalism in the usual sense of the word, despite attempts to portray it as an "entrepreneurial" ideal.²² Admittedly, however, Mill did concede that whatever the future might bring,

the object to be principally aimed at in the present stage of human improvement, is not the subversion of the system of individual property, but the improvement of it, and the full participation of every member of the community in its benefits.²³

What was needed, Mill wrote in 1849, were "rational principles on which to construct an order of society which, retaining the institution of private property (but facilitating all possible experiments for dispensing with it by means of association) shall studiously hurl all inequalities out necessarily inherent in that institution."²⁴ The existing system did not uphold the main principle of private property ownership itself, "the guarantee to individuals of the fruits of their own labour and abstinence."²⁵ To the contrary, "the reward, instead of being proportional to the labour and abstinence of the individual, is almost in an inverse ratio to it; those who receive the least, labour and abstain the most."²⁶

This view of worker co-ownership and management of enterprises indicates a distinct shift in Mill's views toward a commitment to much greater equality in principle. Thus, around 1847 Mill wrote to Arthur Helps that he regarded "inequality as *in itself* always an evil," and did "not agree with any one who would use the machinery of society for the purpose of promoting it." "As much inequality as necessarily arises from protecting all persons in the free use of their faculties of body & mind & in the enjoyment of what these can obtain for them, must be submitted to for the sake of a greater good," he conceded, "but I certainly see no necessity for artificially adding to it, while I see much for tempering it,

impressing both on the laws & on the usages of mankind as far as possible the contrary tendency.”²⁷

How far did Mill’s commitment to co-operation extend toward what was at the time or would today be termed socialism? And did he think that considerable equality was really possible? At one point he wrote that “It is only the high-minded to whom equality is really agreeable [...] they are the only persons who are capable of strong and durable attachments to their equals; while strong and durable attachments to superiors and inferiors are far more common and are possible to the vulgarest natures.”²⁸ It is well-known that between 1848-52 Mill removed many of the objections to socialism outlined in the first edition of the *Principles*, where, as he wrote in the *Autobiography*, the “difficulties of Socialism were so strongly stated, that the tone was on the whole that of opposition to it.”²⁹ In 1851 he wrote that

It appears to us that nothing valid can be said against socialism in principle; and that the attempts to assail it, or to defend private property, on the ground of justice, must inevitably fail. The distinction between rich and poor, so slightly connected as it is with merit and demerit, or even with exertion and want of exertion in the individual, is obviously unjust; such a feature could not be put into the rudest imaginings of a perfectly just state of society; the present capricious distribution of the means of life and enjoyment, could only be defended as an admitted imperfection, submitted to as an effect of causes in other respects beneficial.³⁰

By the 1852 edition of the *Principles*, however, Mill wrote that

The only objection [to Socialism] to which any great importance will be found to be attached in the present edition, is the unprepared state of mankind in general, and of the labouring classes in particular; their extreme unfitness at present for any order of things, which would make any considerable demand on either their intellect

or their virtue. It appears to me that the great end of social improvement should be to fit mankind by cultivation, for a state of society combining the greatest personal freedom with that just distribution of the fruits of labour, which the present laws of property do not profess to aim at. Whether, when this state of mental and moral cultivation shall be attained, individual property in some form (though a form very remote from the present) or community of ownership in the instruments of production and a regulated division of the produce, will afford the circumstances most favourable to happiness, and best calculated to bring human nature to its greatest perfection, is a question which must be left, as it safely may, to the people of that time to decide. Those of the present are not competent to decide it.³¹

Three other areas of Mill's thought also require some introduction here. We should briefly touch upon Mill's most famous assault on the aristocracy, his plea for land nationalization. By 1870 he thought that "the land ought to belong to the nation at large," though he conceded that it might be several generations before this could be achieved, and still maintained that a substantial indemnity should be paid to existing landowners.³²

Second, Mill's feminist principles are of course well-established. By 1850 he regarded the cause of women's equality as "of all practical subjects the most important."³³ This alarmed some contemporaries, like Alexander Bain, who thought Mill had exaggerated the issue of the "mental equality of the sexes" and "postulates a degree of equality that does not chime in with the experience of the least biassed observers." (But then Bain dissented firmly from what he termed Mill's belief in "the natural equality of men.")³⁴ But today we take a different view, and indeed many discussions of equality in his thought tend to focus solely on this issue.³⁵ There is no doubt that by the 1860s Mill had come to focus on feminism, both as a value in itself and as a crucial means of

addressing the population problem. He wrote in 1869 that the “emancipation of women, & co-operative production, are [...] the two great changes that will regenerate society.”³⁶

Finally, we need to consider why Mill considered a “stationary state” as the ideal social condition in which equality would be achieved and maintained. By his maturity Mill had become convinced that the “most serious danger to the future prospects of mankind is in the unbalanced influence of the commercial spirit.”³⁷ The intense spirit of competition which the most unbridled forms of commercial society seemed to release did not correspond with what Mill regarded as humanity’s ideal. This represents a very substantial break from classical political economy, and one moreover not matched by anything Marx proposed.

Mill’s approach to the idea of the stationary state was greatly at variance from what Ricardo and others had feared it might be, a condition of the decline of profit, production, economic activity, and population. Instead, Mill thought, it might be a very considerable improvement on our present condition, writing that

I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other’s heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress.³⁸

Continuing, Mill wrote, “the best state for human nature is that in which, while no one is poor, no one desires to be richer, nor has any reason to fear being thrust back, by the efforts of others to push themselves forward.” Why, he asked, was it “matter of congratulation that persons who are already richer than any one needs to be, should have doubled their means of consuming things which give little or no pleasure except as representative of wealth; or that numbers of individuals should pass over, every year, from the middle classes into a richer class, or from the

class of the occupied rich to that of the unoccupied." Instead, under a better distribution of property, where inheritance in particular was limited "to the amount sufficient to constitute a moderate independence," a liberal utopia was possible:

society would exhibit these leading features: a well paid and affluent body of labourers; no enormous fortunes, except what were earned and accumulated during a single lifetime; but a much larger body of persons than at present, not only exempt from the coarser toils, but with sufficient leisure, both physical and mental, from mechanical details, to cultivate freely the graces of life, and afford examples of them to the classes less favourably circumstanced for their growth. This state of things, which seems, economically considered, to be the most desirable condition of society, is not only perfectly compatible with the stationary state, but, it would seem, more naturally allied with that state than with any other.³⁹

Mill added that "industrial improvements would produce their legitimate effect, that of abridging labour." Hitherto, he asserted, "it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being." (And this of course remains strikingly true in the 21st century.) In an extraordinary passage Mill then made the case for restraining population on the grounds that an overly dense population removed much of what was valuable in human life:

A population may be too crowded, though all be amply supplied with food and raiment. It is not good for man to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species. A world from which solitude is extirpated, is a very poor ideal. Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character; and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do

without. Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture. If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or a happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.⁴⁰

Mill was thus acutely aware of the need to balance both liberty and equality in the ideal society. Whether co-operation of the sort Mill preferred meant an end to capitalism depends on how we define the term.⁴¹ He clearly did not view private property as such as resulting in inevitably great inequality:

That all should indeed start on perfectly equal terms, is inconsistent with any law of private property: but if as much pains as has been taken to aggravate the inequality of chances arising from the natural working of the principle, had been taken to temper that inequality by every means not subversive of the principle itself; if the tendency of legislation had been to favour the diffusion, instead of the concentration of wealth [...] the principle of private property would have been found to have no necessary connexion with the physical and social evils which almost all Socialist writers assume to be inseparable from it.⁴²

Doubtless, however, he did envision a happy meeting ground between the two extremes of libertarian capitalism and statist communism. A key question here is clearly whether capitalism and the stationary state were compatible if "growth" was only conceived in a purely qualitative sense. C.B. Macpherson, however, certainly errs in claiming that Mill contradicted himself in aspiring to create "a society striving to ensure that all its members are equally free to realize their capabilities" while still maintaining capitalist institutions which allowed the "freedom of the stronger to do down the weaker by following market rules."⁴³ Nor is Capaldi correct in assuming that for Mill "Equality stands in opposition to individuality, where individuality is understood both intensionally as a self-disciplined life and extensionally as variety. The demand for equality (homogeneity) is the demand to live a life where one is protected from accepting the consequences of one's choices."⁴⁴ Nonetheless Mill's remains one of the most viable or realistic of the utopian alternatives which the twentieth century inherited from the nineteenth. Let us now see what Marx's alternative was.

3. Marx on Inequality

The case of Marx is at least seemingly a bit more straightforward, not least because of the enormous secondary literature devoted to his life and ideas.⁴⁵ As is well-known, Marx began his active career as a radical political democrat, but converted to communism in 1843-44. Thereafter he prioritized equality and fraternity over liberty, at least formally. But his system stressed a type of liberation of humanity's potential which went much further than freedom from oppression by the state, monarchs, and the nobility. Marx aimed initially at a form of "human emancipation" which involved overcoming the narrow division of labor in work, and achieving an "all-round development" of the individual's potential. "Mere" political reform was contemptible by comparison with this type of liberation, which focused on freedom from exploitation in work above all, but included the suggestion that alienation from nature, from other workers, and from the work process might also be superseded.

Throughout his life after 1844 Marx remained committed to the principle of the public ownership of the means of production as the chief means of overcoming exploitation. As the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) in particular emphasized, this was likely to be brought about by a revolution in which the victorious proletariat would abolish private property. The chief measures involved here were:

1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
3. Abolition of all right of inheritance.
4. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
5. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of wastelands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
6. Equal liability of all to labor. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.

This program, then, was designed to bring about the end of capitalism and a much greater social equality. As the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) put it, during the “political transition period” which would occur between capitalism and communism, a period defined by the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat,” the principle of labor and exchange that would predominate would be that “a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labour in another form.” This implied, however, a continuation of “bourgeois right,” where work would be paid on the principle of “to each according to his contribution,” such that “The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another.” In the final “higher” stage of “communist society,” however, this principle would be replaced by a new principle, defined in a famous passage:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour,

and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!⁴⁶

Just how the transition from the post-revolutionary to the final stage of communism was to be achieved was left for "history" to decide. The latter principle of reward, based on "needs," is moreover by no means straightforward. For Marx was no Spartan, and recognised at least abstractly the possibility that as needs were constantly evolving in capitalism, with luxuries becoming comforts and comforts necessities, there was no reason to presume that this process would halt under communism. He also acknowledged that "one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, etc., etc. Thus, given an equal amount of work done, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, etc."⁴⁷ In the "Paris Manuscripts" of 1844 Marx already turned away from any form of crude communism based on envy and a "levelling down proceeding from a *preconceived* minimum" that implied equality of wages, with all employed by the state, the "*community* as the universal capitalist."⁴⁸ The vision of the *Communist Manifesto* was one of universal and expanding industry and opulence. "Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge," the *Manifesto* proclaimed, adding that "the writings of Babeuf in particular had inculcated universal asceticism and social levelling in its crudest form."⁴⁹ Instead, Marx observed, "In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes."⁵⁰ The *Grundrisse* observed in passing that "what earlier appeared as luxury is now necessary, and [...] so-called luxury needs appear e.g. as a necessity for the most

natural industry rooted in the most basic natural need.”⁵¹ There was no reason to presume this pattern would alter under socialism. Indeed, this objection completely invalidates the utility of this principle, since the frugal and profligate alike might dip often or rarely into the public purse as they pleased. Turning against the more primitive and Spartan communism of the Babouvistes, Marx equated the higher phase of communism with a universalization of the achievements of capitalism, thus furnishing the possibility of an “all-round development” of the entire population. What distinguished humanity from other animals was its capacity to produce new needs. Why should this process come to a halt under communism? Thus the idea of limited wants that defined most of the True Socialists—Weitling and their predecessors the communitarian Fourierists and Owenites as well as Cabetists—held no appeal to Marx, any more than the variants on Christian love which seemed to underpin their ideals of solidarity.

Beyond this neither Marx nor Engels made any particular dogmatic pronouncements about how egalitarian the future society was likely to be. They were wary about becoming obsessed with the concept of equality itself, which they identified as Proudhon’s *idée fixe*.⁵² Engels wrote to August Bebel in March 1875 respecting the draft programme of the German Social Democrats that “The elimination of all social and political inequality,” rather than “the abolition of all class distinctions,” is similarly a most dubious expression. As between one country, one province and even one place and another, living conditions will always evince a *certain* inequality which may be reduced to a minimum but never wholly eliminated. The living conditions of Alpine dwellers will always be different from those of the plainsmen. The concept of a socialist society as a realm of *equality* is a one-sided French concept deriving from the old “liberty, equality, fraternity,” a concept that was justified in that, in its own time and place, it signified a *phase of development*, but which, like all the one-sided ideas of earlier socialist schools, ought now to be superseded, since they produce nothing but mental confusion, and more accurate ways of presenting the matter have been discovered.⁵³

In the most extended discussion of the concept of equality, in *Anti-Dühring* (1878), Engels stressed that the French Revolution’s definition of

"equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law [...] Amongst the eighteenth century communists, however, demand for equality was no longer limited to political rights; it was extended also to the social conditions of individuals. It was not simply class privileges that were to be abolished, but class distinctions themselves. A communism, ascetic, Spartan, was the first form of the new teaching."⁵⁴ Proudhon too had preached an equality of wages, but this, wrote Marx in 1844, "only transforms the relationship of the present-day worker to his labour into the relationship of all men to labour. Society is then conceived as an abstract capitalist."⁵⁵ Now, however, for Engels in 1878, "the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the *abolition of classes*."⁵⁶ Beyond this it was seemingly impossible to speculate further.

The "more accurate ways" yet to be discovered in 1875, however, refer as much to the idea of eliminating class as to that of abolishing "inequality" as such. The solution is owning and managing the means of production communally, rather than "equality" in the abstract. Later commentators have usually presumed (here is G.D.H. Cole) that Marx and Engels' proposal did "not necessarily involve absolute equality of incomes among all the members of Society; for it may allow scope for differences corresponding to recognised differences of social service. But it does involve that these differences shall not be so great, or so permanent, as to form a basis for the survival or reintroduction of a class system."⁵⁷ So everything hinges on what we mean by the "abolition of classes." But as we are well aware from the Soviet experience, groups defined by considerable wage inequalities and special privileges can indeed easily come to form a "new class" (in Djilas' well-known description of the *nomenklatura*), even where the means of production are notionally owned by the public.⁵⁸

4. Mill and Marx Compared

Let us now turn finally to briefly compare Mill's and Marx's approaches to inequality. We have seen that Mill was in fact considerably closer to Marx than is usually assumed. Mill was opposed to capitalism in its existing form; but neither did he want to relinquish

the benefits of incentives to labor, or private property as such, or competitive markets, which he believed might be lost under some forms of communism. Marx, on the other hand, did not worry about either of these problems, and he believed that planning could obviate the obvious problems of waste and mal-distribution that capitalism fostered. In his theory of surplus value Marx attempted to provide an account of exploitation as the original source of inequality, a path Mill did not follow, though Mill's suggestion that elected managers would replace capitalists certainly implies a much-decreased wage-differential within the workplace. Mill focused intensively on overpopulation, not in itself, but as a substantial cause of low wages and social inequality. Marx was a resolute opponent of Malthus, viewing overpopulation as a "myth," and he had nothing to say on population control.⁵⁹ Mill was a strong feminist while Marx was relatively weak on the subject of women's rights. Mill's idea of the stationary state indicated a concern both for nature as such and for preserving the environment; these were never prominent themes for Marx and Engels. (But in 1844 Marx hinted at a reconciliation between humans and nature in his theory of alienation.) Mill focused crucially on restricting the right of inheritance, while Marx concluded that "*The disappearance of the right of inheritance* will be the natural result of a social change superseding private property in the means of production; but the *abolition of the right of inheritance* can never be the *starting-point* of such a social transformation," adding that "In treating of the laws of inheritance, we necessarily suppose that *private property* in the means of production continues to exist."⁶⁰ Mill was also much less concerned with the division of labor and effects of narrow specialization than Marx, for whom this was of course *the* critical starting point in the "Paris Manuscripts" of 1844, and a central if diminished focal point in the later writings. Both writers hint at the value of individuality, but this is of course much more developed in Mill, who was also much more concerned with the potential threat of social conformity to liberty, while Marx shows a somewhat greater appreciation for the value of solidarity. It was Mill who famously commented on Comte that

May it not be the fact that mankind, who after all are made up of single human beings, obtain a greater sum of happiness when each pursues his own, under the rules and conditions required by the good of the rest, than when each makes the good of the rest his only subject, and allows himself no personal pleasures not indispensable to the preservation of his faculties? The regimen of a blockaded town should be cheerfully submitted to when high purposes require it, but is it the ideal perfection of human existence?⁶¹

And we would struggle to find a passage in Marx that echoes this formulation, from *On Liberty*:

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to.⁶²

Marx of course remained committed to communism after 1844, while at his most optimistic Mill thought common ownership might prove successful but had to be approached experimentally rather than dogmatically. But Marx happily viewed co-operation as an essential half-way house toward abolishing capitalism, giving this substantial stress in his later writings.⁶³ Here Mill and Marx were closest in their estimates of the most just scheme of economic organisation that also promoted the greatest social equality. For Marx, however, co-operation was never anything other than a halfway house on the road toward communism. Consumer co-operation was not even that far, and even producer co-

operation did not necessarily imply the transformation of the entire economic system.

These similarities indicate a greater proximity between the ideas of Marx and Mill than is usually conceded. Neither believed that capitalism was the highest or best stage of human development. Neither favored great social inequality. Both saw the end of life as the fulfillment of one's capacities, defined in terms of both a rich sociability and a refined individuality. Doubtless, however, Mill remained much more skeptical about the tendency of the mass in democracies to oppress the individual. Mill's apprehensions about the dangers of collectivism remain the central dividing point between his concept of the ideal society and Marx's. There is simply no parallel in Marx for Mill's "harm" principle, which provides a vital barrier to the interference of both society and the state in the purely private sphere of individual life. The problem here does not lie in a disagreement about the malleability of human nature and humanity's capacity for improvement, only about the relationship between (in my view) the group and the individual.⁶⁴ Yet this point should not be exaggerated, for Mill claimed at one point that "the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, [is] happily one of those which tend to become stronger, even without express inculcation, from the advancing civilisations."⁶⁵ Both Marx and Mill ultimately believed that people were largely the product of their environment, and that when that environment was improved so too would individuals improve. (This was the crux of Owen's attractiveness to Marx, but Mill remained bedevilled from his "mental crisis" of 1826 onwards by the need to find an element of free will in this sensationalist environmentalism.)⁶⁶ Marx of course found himself in the same conundrum in the "Theses on Feuerbach," and never really answered the question posed in the Third Thesis in the assertion that "the educator must himself be educated."⁶⁷ Mill nonetheless had a richer conception of how individuality should be conceived than Marx, which is perhaps one reason he valued solitude more.

Finally, we ought briefly to consider politics. Politically there was one substantial difference between Mill and Marx: their attitude toward

the franchise. Marx started his political life as a radical democrat and never abandoned his commitment to universal suffrage. Mill only gradually edged toward what was then regarded as a radical programme, and famously in his *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) proposed a series of restrictions on the franchise, mostly educational, which might have reduced its exercise by as much as 50%. These were not of course intended to be permanent, but only to delay the full accession to the franchise of the less well-educated working classes. Nonetheless this is a notable difference between both thinkers. Partly through his close study of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835-40), Mill felt apprehensive about the advent of American-style democracy in Britain, and whether equality might "be equal freedom, or equal servitude."⁶⁸ He worried, in particular, about a working class electorate's tendency to seize and expropriate the property of the aristocracy and upper classes. He also placed special emphasis on the need for a guiding educated élite throughout the period of transition to a more democratic society, and indeed thereafter, playing a role akin to Carlyle's men of letters and Coleridge's clerisy. Marx of course was also a revolutionary, and his commitment to the dictatorship of the proletariat would have alarmed Mill exceedingly. Marx also thought "politics" as such would disappear when classes were eliminated, an assumption we cannot imagine Mill ever making, though clearly he envisioned co-operation superseding many existing conflicts between capital and labour. Marx does not seem to have considered (what for Lenin became essential) that a vanguard group would not only help to oversee the revolutionary process, but might perform an essential leading role thereafter. This failure to articulate a clear theory of leadership is one of the chief weaknesses of his political thought, and is allied with his inability to acknowledge the virtues of the separation of powers in any constitution, or to propose anything like the scheme of proportional representation that Mill describes in his *Considerations on Representative Government*. (Here, indeed, it is William Morris in *News from Nowhere* who proves to be the disciple of Mill and the most "liberal" of Marx's acolytes.)

5. Conclusion: The Problem of Inequality in the Twenty-First Century

I suggested at the outset that some application of this discussion to our own times was not only necessary, but vital. In face of environmental catastrophe it no longer suffices to provide a merely historical investigation of such central themes in the evolution of modernity. The relevance of the foregoing discussion, however, should be fairly obvious. Both Mill and Marx sought a society where just wages, relative affluence, sufficient free time and education, and political control were available to all members of society. Both sought to abolish capitalism, in the sense of the private ownership and control of the means of production. This has now become the central issue of our own times, but for the reason that capitalism as a system of unlimited growth, and the continuing expansion of production and consumption, now threaten our existence as a species. Here we can find inspiration in both of these great nineteenth century thinkers, but more in Mill's conception of the "stationary state" than in any of Marx's writings.

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Notes

The abbreviation CW refers to John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 Volumes, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-1991).

¹ The two key studies are Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill, Two Views of Social Conflict and Social Harmony* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), and Paul Smart, *Mill and Marx. Individual Liberty and the Roads to Freedom* (Manchester University Press, 1991). Very little of the substantial secondary literature on Marx mentions Mill. On the other side there is somewhat more.

² On equality generally see: R.H. Tawney, *Equality* (Unwin Books, 1931); Sanford A. Lakoff, *Equality in Political Philosophy* (Beacon Press, 1964); John Rees, *Equality* (Macmillan, 1971); Alex Callinicos, *Equality* (Polity Press, 2000); Stuart White, *Equality* (Polity Press, 2007); Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level. Why More*

Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better (Allen Lane, 2009); Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (W.W. Norton, 2012); and Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

³ Gregory Claeys, *Marx and Marxism* (Penguin Books, 2018), 481. Mill mentions meeting an unidentified German socialist in March 1854, noting that he has changed his address (CW 14:185).

⁴ I here draw on my *Mill and Paternalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). For a contrary view, see John Gray, *Mill On Liberty, A Defence* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); William Thomas's *Mill* (Oxford University Press, 1985) never even mentions the word. An exception is, e.g., Joseph Hamburger, *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 142, where Mill is described as seeing equality as "ethically compelling."

⁵ E.g., Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 18-19.

⁶ Here neither of the main comparative studies of Marx and Mill is much help. Duncan recognizes that "Mill fought to limit rights of inheritance and bequest" (*Marx and Mill*, 246), but does not offer sufficient detail as to how. Smart does not discuss the issue at all.

⁷ *Autobiography* (1873), CW 1:175.

⁸ CW 22:245.

⁹ CW 10:123.

¹⁰ CW 16:339.

¹¹ CW 5:491.

¹² I here follow my account in *Mill and Paternalism*, 72-73.

¹³ CW 13:713.

¹⁴ CW 3:767.

¹⁵ CW 5:569.

¹⁶ Fred Berger, *Happiness, Justice and Freedom, The Moral and Political Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (University of California Press, 1984), 174.

¹⁷ Alexander Bain, *John Stuart Mill, A criticism with personal recollections* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1882), 89.

¹⁸ *Mill and Paternalism*, 74.

¹⁹ CW 3:768.

²⁰ CW 3:775.

²¹ Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill*, 214, 295.

²² Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill, A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 212-14.

²³ CW 2: 214.

²⁴ CW 14:33.

²⁵ CW 2:208.

²⁶ CW 5:714.

²⁷ CW 17:2002.

²⁸ CW 27:664.

²⁹ CW 1:240.

³⁰ CW 5:444.

³¹ CW 2:cxiii.

³² CW 29:420.

³³ CW 14:49.

³⁴ Alexander Bain. *John Stuart Mill. A Criticism* (1881), 130-31 and 146.

³⁵ E.g., Bernard Semmel, *John Stuart Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Yale University Press, 1984), 3, 57, and 60.

³⁶ The main study here is Maria Morales, *Perfect Equality, John Stuart Mill on Well-Constituted Communities* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

³⁷ CW 18:198.

³⁸ *Principles of Political Economy*, CW 3:754.

³⁹ *Principles of Political Economy*, CW 3:754-55.

⁴⁰ *Principles of Political Economy*, CW 3:756.

⁴¹ On the meaning of “capitalism” in contemporary usage, see Keith Tribe. “Capitalism and Its Critics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century Thought*, ed. G. Claeys (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 123-40.

⁴² CW 2:208.

⁴³ C.B. Macpherson. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 1.

⁴⁴ Capaldi. *Mill*, 272.

⁴⁵ I here generally follow the argument of my *Marx and Marxism* (Penguin Books, 2018).

⁴⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (Progress Publishers 1975-2004), 24:95 and 86-87.

⁴⁷ CW 24:87.

⁴⁸ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 3:295.

⁴⁹ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 6:508 and 514.

⁵⁰ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 6:488.

⁵¹ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 28:451.

⁵² Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 38:100.

⁵³ Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, 24:71.

⁵⁴ Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, 25:19-20.

⁵⁵ Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, 3:241 and 280.

⁵⁶ Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, 25:19-20 and 99.

⁵⁷ G.D.H. Cole, *What Marx Really Meant* (Victor Gollancz, 1934), 259.

⁵⁸ Milovan Djilas, *The New Class* (Thames & Hudson, 1957).

⁵⁹ See *Marx and Engels on Malthus*, ed. Ronald Meek (Lawrence & Wishart, 1953).

⁶⁰ *Documents of the First International 1868-70* (Progress Publishers, n.d.), 323-24. Marx added that "These transitory measures, as to inheritance, can only be: 1. Extension of the inheritance duties already existing in many states, and the application of the funds hence derived to purposes of social emancipation. 2. Limitation of the testamentary right of inheritance, which—as distinguished from the *intestate* or *family right of inheritance*—appears an arbitrary and superstitious exaggeration even of the principles of private property themselves."

⁶¹ *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), CW 10:337.

⁶² *On Liberty* (1859), CW 18:266.

⁶³ See my *Marx and Marxism*. Smart ignores this common feature, while Duncan acknowledges Marx's emphasis (*Marx and Mill*, 92, 168-

169, 178) but curiously describes Mill's view of co-operation as "syndicalist" (246).

⁶⁴ See my *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), part one.

⁶⁵ *Utilitarianism* (1863) CW 10:231.

⁶⁶ NB: Mill's comment in his *Autobiography* that "the doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed on my existence like an incubus. I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our own power" (CW 1:175 and 177). The attempt to formulate a science of "Ethology" in the *System of Logic*, and attempting to map types of character with types of state and society, was one result of this line of thinking. Thus Mill argued that "When the circumstances of an individual or of a nation are in any considerable degree under our control, we may, by our knowledge of tendencies, be enabled to shape those circumstances in a manner much more favourable to the ends we desire, than the shape which they would of themselves assume" (CW 8:869-70).

⁶⁷ CW 5:4. Mill's resolution of this problem was that "His character is formed by his circumstances (including among these his particular organization); but his own desire to mould it in a particular way, is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential" (CW 8:840). Marx focused on the idea of revolutionary practice. But Marx was not at a great distance from Mill in suggesting that humanity made its own history, but not in circumstances of its choosing.

⁶⁸ CW 18:159.

