

John Stuart Mill: A Utopian Liberal

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Abstract: John Stuart Mill, a renowned British political economist, is often mistakenly labeled as a socialist due to his personal views and judgments. However, Mill's socialism differed significantly from the Marxist concept of class conflict. This article argues that Mill should be categorized as a "utopian liberal." He integrated ideas from early utopian socialists into his liberal framework. Mill's understanding of liberalism encompassed three key aspects: (a) the means of production and competition, (b) utilitarianism, wherein he viewed selfishness as central to class conflict and developed optimization principles for enhancing representative government, and (c) the adoption of order and partnership principles from utopian socialism, which he saw as essential to cooperation.

Key words: John Stuart Mill, Utopian Liberalism, Utopian Socialism

1. Introduction

John Stuart Mill, born in 1806 in London, emerged as a towering figure in Victorian England, often likened to Aristotle and regarded as the father of British liberalism. A prominent political economist, philosopher, ethicist, and political scientist, Mill's seminal work *On Liberty* stands as a cornerstone of liberal thought. Throughout his life, Mill was a fervent advocate for the concept of individual liberty. In his own words (as per Mill 2002), liberty spans from the personal to the societal, encompassing the inward domain of consciousness, liberty of tastes and pursuits, and of combination among individuals. Mill's notion of liberty was inclusive of social order, distinctly setting it apart from anarchism. Additionally,

extending his concept to the economic realm, Mill's view of liberty also embraced the legality and protection of private property.

In his era, John Stuart Mill was predominantly recognized as a liberal. However, Mill harbored a deep interest in socialism, frequently employing socialist perspectives to dissect social issues. He even identified himself as a socialist at times. In his "Autobiography" (Mill 1981; Miller 2003), Mill, alongside his wife Harriet Taylor, stated that, the ultimate model of reform should be much higher than democracy, who are all classified as socialists.

Posthumously, towards the end of the 19th century, Mill was often labeled a socialist. This categorization stemmed more from the era's ambiguous political party demarcations rather than Mill's true ideological stance. For instance, William Harcourt's 1894 proclamation of "We are all socialists now," exemplifies this blurred political landscape. While Mill's socialist-themed discourse was referenced by British socialists like Sidney Webb, to Fabian socialists, Mill was still primarily a proponent of what they perceived as "popular liberalism or conservatism" (Reeves 2007). Consequently, in an era with indistinct party lines, many scholars sought to incorporate "socialism" within their liberal frameworks to differentiate themselves from mainstream liberal theories.

In the 20th century, scholarly discourse on John Stuart Mill predominantly bifurcated into two perspectives regarding his ideological identity. One is the Hayekian view of Mill as a liberal. Friedrich Hayek, a staunch liberal himself, frequently referenced Mill in his writings and even mirrored some of Mill's life experiences, such as traveling to Italy and Greece (Caldwell 2008). Hayek viewed Mill as a true liberal who, under the influence of Harriet Taylor, became more receptive to socialist ideas. Hayek's 1942 preface for *The Spirit of the*

Age, a compilation of Mill's articles from *Examiner*, delved into the socialist elements in Mill's thought. In later works like *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek lauded Mill for his principles of tolerance, non-interventionism, and opposition to progressive taxation, reflecting the era's reassertion of constitutionalism. However, Hayek disagreed with Mill's economic hypotheses, such as *homo economicus* and other rational economic principles (Caldwell 2008). Economists like John Medearis (2005) analyzed Mill's views and criticisms regarding labor, democracy, utility, and private property. Helen McCabe (2020) even contested the notion of Mill as a "market socialist" based on these issues.

The other is Oskar Kurer's view of Mill as a socialist. Contrasting to Hayek, Kurer (1991) posited Mill as a socialist, interpreting Mill's doctrines as a coherent system with interconnected parts. Kurer explored Mill's progression from individual to societal perspectives, spanning economic to political fields, and from theory to practice. He also scrutinized how Mill influenced politics in England, presenting a different angle that aligns Mill more closely with socialist ideologies. These divergent interpretations highlight the multifaceted nature of Mill's thought, underscoring his complex position in the spectrum of political and economic theories.

Other scholarly works have offered diverse interpretations of John Stuart Mill's ideas.

Hansson (2013) provided an in-depth analysis of Mill's political identity, offering valuable insights into his political philosophies. Grollios (2011), explored Mill's post-1848 views on democracy and encapsulated his thoughts on democratic principles. Clark and Elliott (2001), engaged extensively in the topics of fairness and justice in relation to Mill's theories.

Anderson (1999), in her work *On Mill*, delved into the collectivist ideological aspects within

Mill's writings. Furthermore, Stephen's (1991) *Freedom, Equality, Fraternity: John Stuart Mill, a jurist on the Critical* examined the limitations of applying Mill's harm principle to human behavior and questioned the efficacy of free thought in uncovering truth. Additionally, Stephen critiqued the notion that Mill's concept of liberty necessitated a compromise of social morality.

Mill's theories have been frequently juxtaposed with those of other scholars, highlighting a gap between his actual stance and changing scholarly perceptions of him. This disparity partly stems from Mill's focus on the economic aspects of socialism, as opposed to the broader ideological, party-based interpretations prevalent today. Schumpeter (1954) was among the few to link Mill with Robert Owen and other utopian socialists, suggesting that Mill advocated for a transformative socialism within an associationist state (Kurer 1992). Schapiro, in his review of Lewis S. Feuer's article, pointed out that during Mill's time, socialism was closely associated with French utopianism and Louis Blanc's practices in 1848 (Feuer 1949). Sarvasy (1985) posited that Mill's thought was shaped by his existence in the era of emerging capitalism and socialism. Claeys (1987) argued from a historical perspective, noting that the socialist component of Mill's thought embraced concepts of justice, independence, and industrial democracy.

In more recent studies, Stafford (1998) explored why Mill, an apparent liberal, made socialist claims. De Mattos (2000) delved into Mill's concept of utopian liberalism. Levin (2003) examined the Utopian socialist movement between 1848 and 1849 in the context of Mill as a liberal. Baum (2003, 2012) studied the tensions between liberal democracy and egalitarianism in the thoughts of both Mill and R. H. Tawney, suggesting that their ideas on

democratic equality anticipated modern liberalism's state. Betts (2006) analyzed Mill's "Victorian liberalism" and critiqued his support for cooperative production and partnership spirit as ultimately unsuccessful. Finally, Gillig (2016) discussed specific differences between Mill's philosophy and Marxism, adding further depth to the understanding of Mill's position in the spectrum of political thought.

2. Mill's Life

John Stuart Mill (Mill) was the son of James Mill (Mill Senior). Mill's godfather was the famous utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who together with Senior Mill nurtured Mill as the experimental object of rational utilitarianism. Reeves (2007) pointed out, "The child's schedule allowed no friends, games, toys or time to play." Under the rigorous education of his father, Mill was involved in classical language, history and culture; in his youth, he became a logician; under the influence of David Ricardo, he became a political economist.

When Mill was twenty years old, he experienced a "mental crisis" and began to reflect on rational utilitarianism, inspired by poems written by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Since then, Mill's utilitarianism had been no longer indifferent and ruthless, but an idea influenced by romanticism. He defined utilitarianism a moral theory (Mill 1998).

However, his contradictory thoughts in the later period also came from this. He always wandered between Bentham and Coleridge, enlightenment and romance, and other contradictory fields (Stafford, 1998).

3. Mill and His Utopian Liberalism

Mill's early wandering allowed him to create a space between liberalism and socialism.

Following Mill's heritage, David Miliband called himself a "liberal socialist" and David Cameron called himself a "liberal conservative" (Reeves 2007).

3.1 Absorption of "Utopian Socialism"

Mill started with economics to express his opinions, and introduced his social identity from the identity of an economist. This is also the commonality of other scholars of his time. In 1845, the Irish Potato Famine took place. Bacteria caused the rot of potatoes, which was the food source that Ireland depended on. But the British government did not show efficiency in saving people from this famine. In 1846, Mill wrote 52 newspaper articles on the Irish problem (Reeves 2007). He believed that the only solution to the Irish problem was to redistribute public land. Such arguments did not actually have an impact in the liberalism-led Britain at the time, especially in parliamentary discussions. In 1848, Mill completed "Principles of Political Economy" (hereinafter referred to as "Principles"). Because Mill was influenced by Ricardo's economic thoughts in his youth, in this book, he re-narrated some of the Ricardian theories. In particular, he pointed out the long-term risks of economic competition. In the third edition of the book reprinted in 1852, he reiterated his economic ideas. In the time when Mill wrote "Principles", the French Revolution broke out in February 1848. His friend Alexis de Tocqueville also regarded socialism as an important feature of the February Revolution (Levin 2003).

The redistribution of public land and some ideas were related to the socialists at that time. He absorbed the thinking of utopian socialists and perfected his political and economic propositions and social propositions. Mill summarized "socialism" as a system that required land and production tools to be owned by the public but not the private (Miller 2003). This

system was not viewed from the perspective of the whole society, but is divided into several levels: the state, villages or groups, and private manufacturers. The national system is a one in which the government played the central role of planning the means of production. The system of villages, towns or groups was a “utopian” state, such as those advocated and practiced by Louis Blanc, Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier. In their practices, masses in a group jointly managed a piece of land and worked together. At the private manufactural level, all workers jointly owned the factory.

Mill’s social philosophy was of a mixed nature. His most mature view was formed in 1852, that is, “capitalist economies should at some point undergo a process ‘spontaneous’ and incremental process of socialization, involving the formation of worker-controlled ‘socialistic’ enterprises through either the transformation of ‘capitalistic’ enterprises or creation *de novo*.” (Miller 2003). He believed that this process of transformation will not completely deviate from the core libertarian principles. Capitalism’s attention to property rights is continuous. Capitalist enterprises are private, and national laws should allow private ownership and protect private rights. This is different from the commonly understood communist socialist thinking. The process to arrive a “patchwork” economy, in his views, was the outcome that capitalistic and socialistic enterprises exist side by side.

On the one hand, although he did not discuss much, Mill criticized the mode of capitalism. The term “capitalism” in Mill’s articles was mainly used as an economic concept of private possession, and the existence of capitalists in this system was recognized (Riley 1996; Miller 2003). He believed that the biggest shortcoming of Victorian capitalism is that the legislators

did not adhere to the principles of fair distribution of wealth.¹ He lived in the period of Victorian capitalism. On the other hand, Mill's "socialism" was totally different from the one mentioned by the communists. It was not only completely different from Marxism, but also integrated analyses on selfishness in class analysis. Mill's understanding of the socialist system included an element of education of human beings, and on this basis, he put forward a rule of optimization of parliamentary government. In essence, Mill's socialist component was a fusion of utopian socialism in the nineteenth-century liberalism (Mill 2005). He appeared as a socialist rather than being a socialist himself.

3.2 Distance from Marx

The first edition of Mill's monograph "Principles of Political Economy" was published in 1848. Books as components of Marxism were mainly "The Communist Manifesto" published in 1848, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" published in 1859, and the first chapter of "Das Kapital" published in 1867. All three books were in Mill's time. Not only overlap in time did Mill and Marx had, but also overlap in space, for Marx had lived in London for twenty years. Published in the year. In addition to the fact that Mill's proposition had elements of socialism, it was difficult not to connect the two (Kurer 1992).

In Marx's opinions, he believed that Mill was the best representative of perfecting classical

¹ Mill, J.S. "Principles of Political Economy." "Collected Works of J.S. Mill." University of Toronto Press, 1965, pp. 207-8: *The laws of property have never yet conformed to the principles on which the justification of private property rests. They have made property of things which never ought to be property, and absolute property where only a qualified property ought to exist. They have not held the balance fairly between human beings, but have heaped impediments upon some, to give advantage to others; they have purposely fostered inequalities, and prevented all from starting fair in the race. 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—to encourage the subdivision of the large masses, instead of striving to keep them together; the principle of individual 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.*

political economy, while also admitted that Mill's ideas were different from traditional economic norms (Feuer 1949). Mill did have a certain distance from Marx's advocacy of socialism. "Never at any time did he visualize a class struggle between 'bourgeoisie' and 'proletariat,' resulting in a revolutionary reconstitution of the social order (Shapiro 1943; Feuer 1949)."

The main academic reason of their gaps of understanding on socialism, was that Mill did not understand German. The English or French version of "Das Kapital" had not been published before Mill's death, so he did not know much about Marx's political economy theory. In addition, he had never mentioned Marx in his articles, nor did he talk about any Marxist propositions. He had no access to the primary materials, and at most he could only understand Marxism through others. On a rare occasion when he wrote to his friend Georg Brandes, it can be seen that Mill had read the propositions of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA). What IWA mentioned might also be a general picture of Marx's argument. Mill criticized the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat: on the one hand, communists rely excessively on state-level intervention, on the other hand, Marx did not analyze the specific principles of how socialism replaced the capitalist order (Shapiro 1943).

In fact, Marx had already made a very clear statement in the "The Communist Manifesto": for example, "The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them." "Thus the 'fetters' of the feudal system had to be 'burst asunder,' and they were. Free competition replaced the old system, and the bourgeoisie rose to power." "But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called... men who are to wield those weapons — the modern working class — the proletarians." "Its fall

and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”

What Marx advocated was varied from early communists’ “distribution according to need”.

Under Marx’s structure of “distribution according to work,” there is undoubtedly the concept of “competition.” Discussing within the framework of economic democracy, Mill believed that economic competition was of great significance to the operation of the socialist economy, but in a decentralized form. This was conducive to diversification and market vitality.

Because a centralized administration of socialism would weaken competition, ignore talents and disregard liberty. Socialism would promote citizenship and become a social model that would be implemented through continuous reforms in the distant future (Feuer 1949). The core of Mill’s political economy was democracy, that is, the conditions and manifestations of competition, in line with liberalism.

At the same time, Mill’s definition of “revolution” was not on the foundation of the economic field. He declared that revolution was a government changed under the influence of coercive force, while Marx and the IWA defined it as a change in the foundation of socio-economic relations. Mill would like to connect changes in economical classes with changes in political power. He emphasized the state on the surface and the expression in politics, while Marxism emphasized the inner essence of the economic structure of the society, the foundation (Feuer 1949).

In addition, they had completely different visions after the realization of communism. Marx believed that everyone should have the opportunity to fully develop their individuality, but Mill was skeptical of this. He did not think that people might still maintain their individuality. This was also the point which Mill’s liberalism “struggled” with when he accepted utopian

socialism.

3.3 The Core of Mill's Class Analysis: Selfishness

In Mill's concept, class was the source of political power. Although the middle class was in a dominant position in his times, he declared that the working class would eventually replace the middle class and become the dominant force in society. Mill (1963) thought that class was a group of people with the same evil interests. Under the influence of Bentham's utilitarianism, Mill's arguments centered on interests. Extending from interests, society could be divided into two groups: the working class and the employer (middle) class.

In "Principles", Mill made the following conclusions. In all countries, the working class was the majority, while the middle class was the minority. There was a conflict of interest between the two, and to some extent, their interests were opposite. Corresponding to class should be the amount of wealth, that is, the number of rich people was small and the number of poor people was large. Both had desires. For employers, they wanted more wealth; for hired workers, they wanted more wages. Both groups had a desire to grab more resources. No matter which party had gained political power, they would only pay attention to their own interests, not the interests of the opposing class.

The same thing as the socialists was that Mill admitted that private property rights were the sources of conflict. But Mill's analysis was closer to human nature, which may be related to his ethical achievements. He emphasized the endless desire of people was the capitalist economic system encouraged people to form a selfish character. Such a selfish principle was a system that triggered wars between people (Mill 1963).

Marx regarded Mill's political activities as the back of the British proletariat, and Mill also believed that he was trying to pacify things that could not be eased. The interaction between Mill and working-class leaders was a representative part of his activities. In Mill's letter to Sir Randall Cremer, he recounted the reasons for withdrawal from the alliance: In a meeting, he heard the speaker instigate the use of revolutionary violence to achieve goals. He thought that the speaker supported "monstrous doctrine" (Feuer 1949). He used the influence between himself and the leaders of the British working class to avoid the emergence of revolutionary behavior, that is, the emergence of non-violent behavior, because the British constitutional system did not leave a legal basis for revolutionary violence.

Mill circumvented the conditions of class conflict, and even opposed violence to achieve revolutionary success. This is very different from the claims of communism. The core of Mill's view was "accountability", which included the ultimate goal of restricting government and building a social order without resistance (Rocha and Brihante 2010). There were coordinators as well as individual participants in the main body of accountability. There was no resistance but required different forms of thinking, not a centralized one.

Since the confrontation between the two classes was due to different interests, reform or revolution would inevitably occur in the process of confrontation, and it should be based on the economic aspect. However, Mill still avoided the discussion of economic reform, because his understanding of it included the concept of gradual and decentralized development, which was not achieved overnight. He mainly supported changes within government, hoping to improve the existing system to make people pay attention to public interests, to promote social development, and to enhance people's moral realm. And social reform should include

asset decentralization and social practices aimed at strengthening the spirit of partnership among members of society. The cooperation between individuals was conducive to the healthy development of society, especially the increase in cooperation and the merging of workers and employers into one class were important means to prevent hostility between the two (Rocha and Brihante 2010).

Mill agreed with Fourier and Owen's claims of gradual change in society, and that no central authority controls social change; he feared that centralized and revolutionary socialism will threaten liberty. The central authority controlled all states, thereby eliminating the individual consciousness of citizens. All economic resources were coordinated by the central government, which would weaken the enthusiasm of individuals, harmful to competition. The ideal society that Mill believed should be achieved through democratic debate, but competition was still a relevant aspect of economic life. In addition, the "harm principle" proposed by Mill also carried a sense of competition, which is undoubtedly a combination of philosophy and political liberalism (Andrews 2017).

3.4 Political Analysis: Changes in the Representative Government

Mill's definition of an ideal representative government should be a component of two classes with balances. This was inseparable from the British bipartisan view. Mill hoped to transfer class conflicts to the government or parliament through the adjustment of the political system, so as to ensure the realization of universal interests and maintain the trend of continuous progress in human society. In "Principles", the concept of class was defined as "an existing, but by no means a necessary or permanent, state of social relations." In the process of transforming capitalism to socialism, classes would gradually disappear. At the same time, he

hoped to reform the capitalist economic system and implement the socialist system to resolve class conflicts and promote people's moral status.

This was obviously very different from the socialist's opinions on revolution. Although what the socialists hoped was the resolution of class conflicts and the improvement of morals, the way to achieve was different. In the early days, workers used various external forces to force the government or parliament to promote reforms by destroying machines or protests.

One party in the government came from employees, and the other came from employers. The two parties should be balanced, so they had roughly the same number of votes in the parliament. In this way, when the majority of a certain class was over-considering its own interests, the minority of that class and another class would oppose such an approach. This would be conducive to reason, justice, and the welfare of the entire society. But Mill ignored that the constituents of the government were mainly derived from the employer class, and their interests were opposed to that of the working class. What he hypothesized was too optimistic:

“The reason why, in any tolerable constituted society, justice and the general interest mostly in the end carry their point, is that the separate and selfish interests of mankind are almost always divided; some are interested in what is wrong, but some, also, have their private interest on the side of what is right: and those who are governed by higher considerations, though too few and weak to prevail against the whole of the others, usually after sufficient discussion and agitation become strong enough to turn the balance in favour of the body of private interests which is on the same side with them (Mill 2001).”

Mill agreed that the working class would assist in the realization of the socialist system as the socialists. But he also proposed that it should be a gradual approach, with building a partnership with the middle class, e.g. equity ownership. To carry out the realization of the socialist system, in the “Principles”, Mill mentioned,

“The form of association, however, which if mankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is not that which can exist between a capitalist as chief, and work-people without a voice in the management, but the 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.”

The advantage of the socialist system, in his minds, lied in the disappearance of class and class conflicts, and there would be no confrontation at this time. The two sides could achieve friendly competition and pursue common interests. People’s moral standards would also improve and develop hardworking habits. All kinds of laziness, carelessness and waste would gradually disappear (Mattos and Valladão 2000).

On the issue of state intervention, Mill’s so-called “socialist ideology” did not arouse excessive criticism from traditional liberals. It could even be considered that Mill was the first person to advance the criticism of socialism, and later liberal theories also had similar discussions when criticizing socialism (Ottow 1993). Although Mill believed that the restriction of state power was not a necessary condition to maximize individual liberty, he still supported the laissez-faire principle to be discussed in a more relaxed environment.

Therefore, Mill did not want the state to intervene in all aspects. This democratic condition of

balance was inseparable from the country's economic life. In his opinions, if the intelligence and talent are maintained at a high level in the ruling organization, while the outside existed starvation and panic, then the risk of oligarchy would worsen. To guarantee the few educated was to enable the hired class to obtain a good education through public affairs management. As a class with a lower level of intelligence would balance the high-level class's way of holding power (Rocha and Brihante 2010).

Mill regarded the communists' socialism approach as a form of oligarchy and remained vigilant about it. But he did not realize that after the bipartisan representative government form he advocated was implemented, e.g. in the twentieth century Britain, the people who contended on behalf of the two classes were also elites, and the final composition of the government would still be elite-based. The structure of power could not really serve as a representative of the working class.

3.5 Mill as a Scholar

Socialists were mostly social activists and even advocates of revolution. But Mill was only in a radical state, without revolutionary thinking. His social activities are relatively inactive. Although he was elected to the House of Commons twice in 1865 and 1868, his political claims were mainly on the proportional representation system and women's election issues, and none of them were passed. Compared with his social activities and politics, his contributions to academic thoughts were especially significant, such as political economy and logic.

Mill's philosophical and ethical thinking further affected his status as a "utopian liberal". He

regarded selfishness as the source of class conflicts and was influenced by Bentham's utilitarian philosophy. What is more, he paid attention to the educational and moral improvement of the socialist system. For example, by proposing that in order to achieve a good moral standard in the whole society, in "Principles", Mill listed two basic conditions for the implementation of the socialist system: one was universal education, and the other was appropriate restriction on population. Adopting a restrained way to maintain the continuous improvement of living standards—this was affected by ethics.

4. Conclusions and Implications

Mill's life was in a state of wandering. Whether it was from the "mental crisis" during his youth, or his later combination with his wife Taylor, to the self-seeking of socialist and liberal identity, he had never been able to make clear understandings of himself.

Through a comprehensive consideration of the academic literature on Mill's thought, we can reach the following conclusion: Mill could be regarded as a liberal who has absorbed the ideas of "utopian socialism" and being a "utopian liberal". In Mill's concepts, liberty was different from anarchism. It here included the meaning of social order, and of the legitimacy of private property economically. And socialism was not the understanding of victory in class struggle advocated by communists. Whether it is from the economic aspect of distributing labor products, advocating competition, or from the perspective of how to carry out reforms and being vigilant against state intervention, what Mill advocates is freedom as the essence, absorbing socialist order principles and utopian principles of partnership. The form of cooperation is more moderate, which is different from the socialists.

There are still other findings in reading the literature. For example, Mill's thought contains the principle of Christian tolerance, especially the spirit of partnership advocated by the early utopian socialists, which can be explored in future writing.

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