

# John Stuart Mill: Between elitism and democracy

*By Ludmilla Lorrain*

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**In a book that is part history of ideas, part political essay, Camille Dejardin argues that John Stuart Mill's oeuvre is useful for understanding contemporary issues, notably the ecological crisis and related economic change. Yet she does so while advancing some half-truths.**

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Reviewed: Camille Dejardin, *John Stuart Mill, libéral utopique. Actualité d'une pensée visionnaire* (John Stuart Mill, Utopian Liberal: The Relevance of a Visionary Thinker), Paris, Gallimard, 2022, 400 p., 24 €.

What is the contemporary relevance of John Stuart Mill's thought, 150 years after his death? In her book, Camille Dejardin argues that his ideas might still be fruitful in the twenty-first century. Noting the failure of contemporary liberal thought to respond to the crises afflicting Western society, she argues that the *utopian* dimension of Mill's liberalism spares it from the fate of its contemporary variants. The latter take two main forms: "neoliberalism," which refuses to abandon the economic model of growth for a rational management of natural resources; and the "politics of difference" (p. 80), which emphasizes pluralistic identities and favors multiculturalism in a way that "can lead to communalism" (p. 148). Faced with a "liberalism that has become misguided and poorly understood" (p. 27), a return to Mill's positions makes it possible to conceptualize a "utopian liberalism" that could well be liberalism's future.

Hoping that this interpretation will "revive political debate" (p. 34), DeJardin situates her work at the intersection of the history of ideas and political intervention.

## Utopian liberalism?

The idea of "utopian liberalism" is surprising. It makes it possible to maintain Mill's connections to liberalism while acknowledging his thought's many sources. Though he was educated by utilitarian radicals, of which his godfather, Jeremy Bentham, was the leader, Mill claimed, in his *Autobiography*, to be a socialist, after having flirted for some time with the conservatism of the German romantics and the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The first part of DeJardin's book seeks to differentiate the influence of these sources. One sees the degree to which Mill's liberalism, far from being value neutral, embraces a conception of the good life that is broadly consistent with utilitarianism, which allows DeJardin to claim that Mill was not so much "shaped by utilitarianism" as he "influenced the way it was interpreted and contributed to its popularization" (p. 53).

The evaluation of conservatism's place in Mill's thought shows, moreover, that he primarily borrowed its concepts of order and stability. DeJardin's examination of socialism's influence on Mill is an occasion to consider rarely studied aspects of his economic thought. She emphasizes his bold taxation policies, including inheritance taxes, and the originality of the forms of work organization (modeled on labor cooperatives) that he imagined. Yet in DeJardin's view, these proposals were not rooted in a socialist vision of society, understood as one that gives primacy to a form of equality which abolishes hierarchical orders, but reveals, rather, the way his thought converged with certain socialist ideas, notably the fact that intolerable injustices exist.

She thus concludes that his thought's multiple sources are subordinated to a genuinely liberal problematic, that of the articulation of individual diversity with the pursuit of the common good. This primacy results, in the first place, in a conception of *substantive* liberty, which is located in Mill's understanding of "individuality." DeJardin describes the latter as "the liberty to *be authentically oneself* in the intellectual, affective, and moral order, and to *act as one wishes*, being able to explain one's actions in a way that does not necessarily constrain the course of one's impulses" (p. 168). It also results in a choice for representative government, of the kind favored by liberals, but to which Mill tries to attach the principle of democracy. Finally, Mill's liberal vision implies a

particular type of education, one that covers all realms of human learning while being made broadly accessible, so that everyone can develop their individuality.

At the end of part one, the idea of utopian liberalism is explained:

Mill's thought is utopian because it seeks to present the characteristics of a harmonious society with the goal of raising humanity to a state that is congruous with its nature and deep needs and that can thus last in undefined perpetuity. He remains a liberal because of the primacy that he constantly assigns individuals and because of his refusal of any fixed, authoritarian structure that is immune to innovation and originality (pp. 190-191).

If "utopia" here refers to the humanistic ideal that Mill pursues, it is a shame that this redefinition omits the subversive meaning associated with it in the nineteenth century, which Mill discusses in his *Autobiography*. Utopian socialists did not content themselves with promoting a certain human ideal that one should try to achieve. Using their model as a critical lever against the social order, they made a serious effort to shape, through the invention of alternative ways of living, the norms regulating existing society.

Dejardin's study of Mill's "liberal utopia" first distinguishes its economic and demographic dimension, revealing his "proto-ecological sensibility." She calls particular attention to Mill's originality as an economist and his acute awareness that growth must be limited, which he acknowledged through his concept of a "stationary state" (*Principles of Political Economy*, II, 6). Indeed, where classical political economists conceived of growth as an essential element of progress and a sign of vitality of the society in question, Mill, a closer reader of Malthus, saw the desire for ever-increasing wealth and expanding populations as evidence that most people were blind to the limited character of natural resources. He also conceived of a social state that, while progressing on the social, moral, and political fronts, maintains wealth and population at a stable level. To give a name to this stabilization, he redefined the concept of stationary state, which classical political economy used to refer to the dreaded moment when growth declines. For Mill, to the contrary, material growth only makes sense only if it exists to improve living conditions, particularly those of poor. To pursue it indefinitely is vain.

Other aspects of the liberal utopia that Dejardin identifies pertain to the social, moral, and political aspects of Mill's thought. She examines his unwavering support for the political, social, and moral emancipation of women. Indeed, Mill did not simply defend the principle of the legal equality of the sexes, but analyzed the ways in which

unequal relationships structured the bourgeois family, notably the bourgeois marriage contract, which made women slaves of their husbands, preventing, in practice, genuine emancipation. She also discusses his posthumous writings on religion, which reveal an original form of secularism, as well as his defense of aesthetic education through exposure to such works as those of nature, in the pursuit of intellectual and moral elevation.

The reconstruction of Mill's liberal utopia allows DeJardin to examine his thought from the standpoint of several contemporary crises. Once the common origin of these crises has been identified--i.e., neoliberalism--she considers the solutions found in Mill's thought. In doing so, she relies primarily on the concept of the stationary state, as well as on a reconfiguration of the concept of progress--a substantive understanding that transcends traditional political cleavages and that could found a politics attuned to contemporary concerns.

## **A tension-ridden philosophy**

DeJardin's argument allows her to claim that Mill's thought is relevant and to advocate coherently for ecological awareness, as her book is steeped in the idea that we must urgently recognize the inevitability of an ecological crisis with major social and political consequences. By endowing Mill's thought with new significance and complexity, her book clearly seeks to compensate for the somewhat failed encounter between the French public and the English philosopher. Yet attention to the coherence of Mill's oeuvre should not lead one to play down its tensions and asperities, which must be acknowledged, even when they cannot be explained. It is thus a shame that she leaves the problematic character and ambivalence of some of Mill's positions unmentioned. This is the case of his remarks on the existence "of a national character" (p. 62) or of a hierarchy among peoples based on their "aptitude for liberty" (p. 286), which justifies, according to Mill, denying them independence. That no mention is made of these views is all the more surprising, given that they have been analyzed by many recent works in English and French.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, notably, Aurélie Knüfer, *Intervention et libération d'Edmund Burke à John Stuart Mill*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2017; Inder S. Marwah, *Liberalism, Diversity and Domination, Kant, Mill and the Government of Difference*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise to Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005; Georgios Varouxakis, *Mill on Nationality*, London, Routledge, 2002.

Similarly, whereas Dejardin discusses in detail the dialogue between Mill and Comte, she says nothing about what led Mill to break up the relationship, namely, his refusal to see women as *biologically* inferior.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this omission is tied to the fact that she also says nothing about the question of the connection between biological sex and the social construction of gender in Mill's thought. This difficult question requires, however, a particularly rigorous analysis as Mill, while rejecting the idea that personality is biologically determined by sex, nonetheless reintroduces, in *The Subjection of Women*, essentialist claims that depend on a notion of feminine nature.

More generally, in her discussion of the thinker's feminism, the contributions of feminist theory, which seized upon Mill's ideas early on, are simply ignored, as when Dejardin ties thinking about domestic work to the writings of Bertrand de Jouvenel and asserts that this issue has, "since the late 1990s ... emerged out of predominantly Catholic and conservative milieus .... and reached a number of 'progressive' currents" (p. 254-255)--thus erasing several decades of reflection in the social sciences and the humanities. It is also surprising that she prefaces her dialogue with de Jouvenel with no precautionary remarks and neither explicitly nor implicitly distances herself from his political commitments.

It would then seem that the "present" that Dejardin seeks to validate is less the scholarly relevance of Mill's thought, which might have led her to discuss several recent interpretations of his work, but first and foremost present-day politics and a desire to intervene in contemporary debates. This no doubt explains why Dejardin often advances political opinions that she makes no attempt to ground in scholarly arguments, as when she rejects the concept of "femicide," since "criminals [are not 'women hunters' striving to eradicate them!]" and because, according to "LGBT associations themselves," one must deplore the fact that same-sex couples display a "rate of violence that is at least as equal and up to twice as great" as in heterosexual couples (p. 242). She provides no information as to which associations she is referring to, nor does she mention the type of violence in question or the circumstances in which this information was recorded. This polemical approach does not lend itself to a rigorous discussion of the concept of femicide.

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<sup>2</sup> This question lies at the heart of Vincent Guillin's work. See, in particular "La question de l'égalité des sexes dans la correspondance Comte-Mill, *Archives de Philosophie*, 2007, Tome 70, no. 1, p. 57-75, as well as *Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill on Sexual Equality*, Boston, Brill, 2009.

## Mill as aristocrat

The reconstruction of Mill's liberalism proposed by Dejardin ultimately rests on an aristocratic reading of his philosophy. A scholarly interpretation of this kind should have been made explicit. The fact that Mill defends competence, particularly in representative institutions, does not, in our view, imply that he prefers aristocracy to democracy. Dejardin's discussion of "plural voting" illustrates the position implied by her interpretation. In *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill recommends the adoption of this procedure, which gives *multiple votes* to society's most enlightened individuals in elections for representatives. While plural voting clearly seeks to create a kind of elite, why not also mention his ambivalence, notably the fact that he refrains from saying that it should be implemented, given the difficulty of reconciling it with the principle of democracy? Disregarding these considerations, Dejardin simply regrets that Mill did not explain how exactly plural voting might have resulted in a "voting permit" (p. 290) that would "purify" the electorate in the same way that it purified representative bodies of "dishonest and ill-intentioned representatives" (p. 305). Yet Mill never envisaged "purifying" the electorate, which, to the contrary, he sought to expand as much as possible. And while he did believe that restrictions were needed on the right to vote--notably, one had to be able to read, write, and be free of public support--he thought they should be temporary and, rather than limiting access to the electorate, should ensure its competence and guarantee its members' incorruptibility.

Ultimately, the interpretation of Mill's philosophy that Dejardin proposes seeks to consider the appropriate place in democratic society of certain forms of meritocratic elitism. Exalting transcendence "conceived as that which releases humans from the prose of an excessively conformist or rationalist existence" (p. 18), the judgment of educated taste, and the ability to free oneself of common pleasures, Mill's thought, it would seem, consists in encouraging distinction by any means necessary, resulting in an educated and competent elite whose members are recognized for their excellence, which would "trickle down" to other members of society, particularly in political matters (p. 82, 89-90). Such a reading of Mill is not wrong, but it is partial and partisan. It turns into a value an idea that, in Mill, lies in the unresolved tension between his deep attachment to democracy and his irrefutable desire to allow everyone to develop, to the best of their ability, their intellectual and moral faculties.

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