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JOHN STUART MILL AND THE OPEN SOCIETY."

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It's a safe bet that John Stuart Mill would have wanted the centenary of his death - he died at Avignon on May 1873 - to pass unremarked. His dislike of what he called 'personal demonstrations' was extreme and unreasoning. When he left the East India Company in 1858, his colleagues tried to present him with a silver inkstand as a mark of affection. He had been a remarkably kind head of his office: at one point he took on for a year the work of his assistant W.P. Thornton who was suffering a prolonged nervous breakdown, though his own health was fragile. But on this occasion he was implacable in his outrage: on no account would he accept this inkstand, and all the friendship in the world did not justify this sort of ceremonial. His colleagues were reduced to smuggling the wretched present into his home by stealth, and it was never referred to again.

Social graces were one of the things that Mill's remarkable education had not given him. In an early draft of the Autobiography he recalls his extreme clumsiness as a child and his inability to tie his shoelaces years after he had mastered Thucydides. Not that his father wanted a maladroit son: rather, he could not see what the problem was and made it worse by his sneering contempt for the boy's ineptness. Forty years later, Mill was no less diffident about practical matters. His letters to his wife are full of rather absurd requests for help: he does not know what to say to a neighbour complaining of an influx of rats from Mill's garden he does not know what to do about repairs to the house, he does not even know what he needs in the way of new underwear. As several critics have remarked, it is a very odd correspondence, seeing that one party to it was the most eminent thinker of the day and that, in his view, his wife was more gifted than he.

The image of a somewhat strained and awkward figure is heightened by the fact that Mill lost his youth quickly. He was frequently ill, not only with consumption but with what look like recurrent strokes. The worst of these occurred shortly after the death of his father, and it left Mill at the age of 30 with a ruined complexion, almost bald, and with a permanent nervous twitch in his left eye.

His supposed friend Carlyle, well on the road to regarding thuggishness as the greatest of virtues, gloated in his usual fashion: "His eyes go twinkling and jerking with wild lights and twitches; his head is bald, his face brown and dry." Carlyle thought he would not last long.

But the personal difficulties of many of the great Victorians often show them in a ludicrous light, as Lytton Strachey gleefully discovered long ago. What lasts is their ideas; and the questions mostly last better than the solutions. It is not the Victorian prophets but the Victorian sceptics who speak most convincingly. Yet Mill's reputation over the past century has suffered for a variety of odd reasons, many of them creditable rather than otherwise. For one thing, he wrote clearly, and thus exposed his mistakes and confusions to any competent critic — indeed to anyone who merely had the advantage of seeing the future which Mill could only guess at. More importantly, he set out to be a public thinker, a one-man Open University, and he had a very clear sense of the educative task he set himself: but his success was self-destructive. Successful he certainly was: the System of Logic went through eight editions in his lifetime and it was a university textbook for 50 years; the Principles of Political Economy went through seven editions and remained the textbook until Alfred Marshall's Principles supplanted it in the 1890s. But this made him all the more irresistible as a target for the new generation of philosophers, economists and social theorists. Since all intellectual movements emphasise their differences from their predecessors, leaving it till later to notice the similarities, progress demanded the destruction of Mill's reputation. It is only in the last decade or so that a more sympathetic reassessment has taken place.

Mill brought this criticism on his own head. He learned from the French historians and sociologists to whom he turned in his twenties that the philosophy of Hume and Bentham was "negative", "critical" and "destructive"; he saw his own age as an age of "transition", in which there were as yet no settled views, no coherent framework of ideas which could legitimate the social order and shape the individual life. He did not — on the whole — believe that Saint-Simon and Comte had, as they claimed, discovered the articles of belief for the forthcoming "organic" period; and he did not believe with Coleridge that a revived Christianity would serve the purpose either. He thought that Comte's ideal society would be much like a prison-camp; and he thought that the existing institutions of the English church and state were so corrupt that renewal of such a drastic kind was required that no sort of Tory would engage in it. Given this, he saw his own role as that of bringing together

the materials out of which some new synthesis might emerge. He played down his own contribution to what he brought together: he was, for instance, an extremely original contributor to pure economic theory, and made as many advances as most professional economists dream of making in a career, but he never insisted on this. What he pointed out instead was that social and economic theory could take advantage of what seemed to him the permanent advances in understanding economic behaviour that had accrued since Adam Smith and Ricardo, while extending their application to social situations of a far different kind from those which had first provoked the theories of Smith or Ricardo. Since he insisted so strongly on the synthetic character of his work, it is not surprising that he should have been taken at his own estimate by his critics, and accused of what Marx called a "shallow syncretism".

In fact, a great deal survives quite intact from all this criticism. Mill's discussion of socialism is as alive now as in the 19th century. He saw instantaneously that the great weakness of revolutionary socialism of a Marxian kind was that it could only bring socialism about in the worst possible circumstances - in more or less total chaos. If the 20th century has not been kind to Mill's hopes for a reformist movement towards co-operative production in which the workers owned the firms they worked for, it has not been kinder towards the alternative he ruled out. Indeeds, every time one is offered "socialism with a Human face", it turns out to be a socialism of a kind which Mill might have approved: the more optimistic accounts of Yugoslav self-management, for example, always sound a good deal more like Mill than Marx.

Again, Mill's hostility to growth and his anxiety about the environment strike a very contemporary note. "It is not good for men to be always in crowds", he wrote, and suggested the creation of national parks where we could hope to restore ourselves with solitude. Although he was concerned to see that everyone earned what he deserved, and was hostile to a levelling-down kind of egalitarianism he was perceptive about the paradox of productivity: that the amount of wealth produced was immensely greater than ever before, yet people worked harder than ever. The more leisure men could actually afford, the less they seemed to get. Like all the classical economists, Mill mistakenly thought that growth was in any case a short-lived phenomenon, and that a declining profit rate would bring growth to a halt in the not very distant future. Unlike them, he was happy about the fact: a stationary state would be one in which the struggle for existence

could be played down, and the benefits of increased leisure and greater expenditure on unproductive culture could be widely shared.

Like our own age, Mill was in more than one mind about the role of the state in economic affairs. He was no dogmatic believer in laissez-faire - indeed, no Utilitarian could be - though he was sceptical of government efficiency, anxious about the concentration of power and talent in a few hands, and eager to spread the experience of self-government as widely as possible. He saw that many things will not be provided by the market, even though there is a need and a demand for them; and he saw that the market will often benefit the majority at a quite unfair cost to minorities. For instance - and contrary to the usual account - Mill saw that the effect of technological changes might easily be to benefit the majority by increasing output, but to put particular groups out of work in the process. Since there was an overall benefit from the change, it should not be stopped, but it certainly ought to be controlled, and, he thought, it was a legitimate act of government to make sure that those who were thrown out of work were compensated for their losses and helped to get work again.

Where Mill was even more enthusiastic about government activity than subsequent governments have proved to be was in the area of redistributing wealth. He saw that the disparities of ownership of property are much greater than the disparities in income, and that the grossest disparities in income stem from disparities in the ownership of property. Mill did not want death duties: what he wanted were inheritance duties, such that there was no limit to what a man could leave to his heirs, but a limit to what any individual could inherit. Exceptions would be made for various kinds of property, especially, for instance, property in parkland or recreational land, where what was being left was as much a duty to the public as a right to the property. But the upper limit of inheritance would be what would secure a reasonable independence and no more. This is a typical Mill proposal in the way it uses governmental intervention as little as possible. The laws certainly require governments to make and enforce them; but the redistribution of property as a result is achieved by giving individuals an incentive to spread their property about, not by the Government's active intervention in taking it and redistributing it. There are, of course, innumerable technical problems about making such a system work, but they do not seem to be worse than those of making the present system of death duties work, and it is not surprising that Mill's proposals should have re-emerged both from

that branch of the Right which wants to make a purer form of individual enterprise possible and from that section of the Left which wants greater equality without a massive increase in state ownership.

But what is most distinctive about Mill's position in these matters is the subordination of all economic and political considerations to his overriding goal of maintaining an open society, a society in which might be realised Von Humboldt's goal of the flowering of human individuality in all its diversity. More than any other of Mill's views, it is this which keeps his work alive.

Mill saw the arrival of democracy as a threat and an opportunity: it was an opportunity to give the advantages of civilised society to everyone, and not merely to the rich, the privileged by birth, or even the respectable middle classes. It was a threat to individuality and to personal freedom. Mill's fears were those of postwar American sociologist like David Riesman, who saw American society as full of "other-directed men". Their condition had been diagnosed by Mill 100 years before. Such men were not despotic by temperament or illiberal by conviction: it was simply that their only question was "what does everyone else think?"- not "what is right?", nor even "what do I feel like doing?" If despotic politics did arrive, they were likely to be the politics of peaceable, quiet and kindly despotism. The more sceptical of Mill's readers 100 years later may feel that the 20th century would not have been too bad if it had suffered from nothing worse than a stifling and boring conformism rather than world war, revolution and genocide. Mill would no doubt have agreed, had he been offered that choice. But in relatively calm and more or less democratic societies like our own, this is hardly the choice we are offered. And here it seems worth standing up for Mill's open society against a variety of current forms of conservatism.

Mill's defence of an open society was both a negative and a positive one. Negatively, he stood by the view that unless we are genuinely harmed by other people we have no right to try to constrain them to behave in any particular way. The fact that we don't like the way they behave is neither here nor there: unless we can show that what they do causes us real harm, and unless that harm is so great that their loss of liberty is outweighed by the need to prevent the harm they do, we have no right to coerce them into doing what we want. We have, of course, every right to try to persuade them; we have every right to tell them what we think of them; what we have no right to do

is coerce them, either by getting everyone to gang up against them socially or by imposing legal penalties on them.

The vague terrors of a Lord Devlin or a Lord Longford would not have meant much to Mill: unless it could be shown what damage was done by, say, the reading of pornography in the quiet of one's home, how it was done, and to whom it was done, there were no grounds for legal interference or even moral condemnation. Of course, the liberty to do as we like extends to the liberty of our critics to tell us that they are disgusted, revolted and otherwise offended--but not injured--by our tastes. Mill looked forward to the day when the ordinary sense of politeness had altered, and men no longer thought it impertinent to comment on each other's tastes and inclinations. And the liberty to do as one likes extended only to the point where other people's interests are genuinely harmed: at that point, like all Utilitarians, Mill thought society wholly warranted in laying down moral and legal rules to control its members.

But behind this negative defence of individual liberty in what did not concern others, there lay a positive view of individuality which Mill did not derive from his Utilitarian teachers-- Bentham and his own father-- but from those French and German liberals whom he knew better than any Englishman of his day. Mill wavered between thinking that in due course all views about human nature and human happiness might be reconciled and thinking that diversity and variety were irreducible-- that there was no truth to be discovered about human nature, only truths. On either view, the open society was the only society in which progressive beings could choose to live: if there was some sort of final truth to be found, we certainly did not yet possess it; finding it demanded what a 20th-century defender of the open society has called "the method of conjecture refutation". Mill's view of science was not wholly like Professor Popper's, but they agree on the essential point, that the search for truth demands a willingness to subject every received idea to independent scrutiny, to nourish controversy and to encourage dissenting voices. If there was no final truth to be had, then men must maximise freedom of choice as indispensable to happiness: a man, said Mill, will hardly find a suit that fits him unless he has a warehouse full to choose from. How much less likely is he to find a way of life that suits him unless he can choose among the widest possible variety of possible existences.

Oddly, Mill's defence of a liberal society owes nothing to an enthusiasm

for sexual liberation. I say "oddly" because, of all Mill's views, it was his opinions on the place of women in society, and his revolutionary enthusiasm- as it seemed at the time- for a drastic revision of the laws of matrimony, that most outraged his contemporaries. Fitzjames Stephen, Mill's toughest critic, could hardly bring himself to write about Mill's essay on The Subjection of Women : the whole subject, he thought, "verged on the indecent", Yet Mill thought the sexual impulse unimportant, and that it was probably weakening in an age of moral progress. He was not exactly censorious, but he couldn't avoid referring to sex as an "animal function". For all that, he demanded equal rights for women inside and outside marriage- equal voting rights, identical education, equal access to employment, fair shares in the family income and property, and the right of a wife to keep her own property inside marriage; he believed in ready divorce and remarriage, though he forbore to say so in what was in any case the least popular book he ever wrote. But he stood out for women's rights in very 20th-century terms, too. He thought that what people pointed to as "the female character" was hardly at all the product of whatever innate differences there might be between the sexes: it was nine-tenths the results of social training, and as such the product of organised injustice, not a justification for it. But when defending equality of the sexes, Mill did not put all the weight on the benefits to be derived by women. Just as On Liberty begins to suggest that by making women their social, political, economic and intellectual equals, men, too, will gain: their world will contain that many more examples of an interesting diversity. Of all the elements of Mill's liberalism which most need defending, the call to regard diversity as a promise of progress, not a threat of disaster, comes high on the list.