

The Role of Progress in Mill's Argument in 'On Liberty'?

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LUKE CORDEN, OCT 8 2012

What is the Role of Progress in Mill's Argument in 'On Liberty'?

It is the assertion of this essay that Mill's conception of *liberty* and his application of it as an infeasible driver of *progress*, both human and historical, creates an un-resolvable problem for Mill which has negative implications for his overall argument and for liberal ideology in general.

By focusing predominantly on Mill's treatment of China in Chapter III of *On Liberty* this essay sets out to re-examine the phenomenon of progress as formulated by Mill. Close analysis of the text highlights key aspects of Mill's argument in which liberty and progress combine to usher humanity forwards through history. Mill's positioning of liberty and progress on a historical timeline allows for direct comparison with Marx's conceptions of liberty and progress, and it is through this comparison that it becomes apparent that Mill's belief in man as a progressive being has led him into an ideological trap.

On Liberty

Mill's definition of liberty is complex as he approaches it from many different angles throughout the text. Mill's *Liberty Principle*[1] and the main thread of his argument is concerned with protecting the individual from the intrusion of society. Mill maintains that the individual has *absolute right* over his independence and that freedom to express this independence must be protected. It is Mill's belief that only through the liberty of thought and discussion that error can be overthrown, the truth can be reached and progress can be achieved (Hampsher-Monk, 1992: 370). It is in this sense that liberty is used throughout this essay. In regards to Marx, the term *liberty* is used interchangeably with the term *freedom* signifying Marx's conception of emancipation in which the values Mill associates with liberty are taken to be present.

On Utility

Classical interpretations of Mill's *On Liberty* have often focused on the issue of whether or not Mill manages to reconcile his professed highest ideal of Utility with his concept of liberty (Rees, 1960, Friedman, 1966, Strasser, 1984). A strong defence for Mill as an Indirect Utilitarian has been put forward by Gray (1996), in which he reconciles Mill's apparent contradiction by situating utility as an axiological principle, leaving progress as Mill's ultimate goal[2].

This essay proceeds from the assumption that Gray has reconciled the oft-alleged contradiction between utility and liberty in *On Liberty*[3]. This is a necessary assumption as without the numerous arguments regarding utility that surround *On Liberty* a path is cleared for an unencumbered examination of the role of progress, which is our theme.

On China

It was Mill's belief that without liberty mankind as a civilisation would stagnate. For Mill, stagnation was a clear and present danger. As we shall see, Mill feared his own society to be moving in the wrong direction, encouraging 'collective mediocrity' (Mill, 1985:131) and a lack of diversity under the 'tyrannical pressures of the majority'[4] (ibid: 63). In a sweeping generalisation Mill confides to us his fears that European civilisation is running the risk of

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becoming 'another China' (ibid:138). It is worth quoting at length as the following passage holds many of the key elements that feature in the rest of this essay.

"We have a warning example in China – a nation of much talent, and in some respects, even wisdom, owing to the rare good fortune of having been provided at an early period with a good set of customs, the work, in some measure, of men to whom even the most enlightened European must accord, under certain limitations, the title of sages and philosophers [...] Surely the people who did this must have discovered the secret of human progressiveness and must have kept themselves steadily at the head of the movement of the world. On the contrary they have become stationary and have remained so for thousands of years; and if they are ever to be improved it must be by foreigners. They have succeeded beyond all hope in what the English Philanthropists are so industriously working at – in making all people alike" (ibid: 137).

In this extract we can see the primacy of Mill's view of how progressive man ought to be moving steadily through history. His admonition of China's halting progress serves as a warning to the 'enlightened' European civilisation of the dangers that will befall it should the yoke of public opinion take hold. It is notable that *custom* is mentioned in this passage as for Mill custom plays a key role in the social tyranny Mill is warning against. In another, less overt warning, Mill claims, "the despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called [...] the spirit of liberty, or that of progress" (ibid:136).

Warnings delivered, Mill suggests that Europe has avoided the fate of China so far due to its 'remarkable diversity of character and culture' (ibid: 138). For Mill this diversity of character and culture, of which the larger embodiment is Western civilisation, is initially found within the individual. To be more precise the key to progress is found in the individual *at liberty*, for according to Mill: "the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty since by it there as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals" (ibid:136).

For Mill then, individuals *at liberty* are the key drivers in the progression of man. Counter to this is the 'despotism of custom' in its many forms. Having identified these two aspects of human society Mill sets them up in opposition to one another and asserts that: "The contest between the two constitutes the chief interests of the history of mankind" (ibid:136). Should custom hold sway then society will stagnate, should liberty be allowed to flourish then progression is assured.

On the Role of Progress

It is difficult to assign progress an active role in Mill's argument for liberty. Progress appears as an end unto itself. One may desire it and strive towards it but one can never arrive at it, except perhaps retrospectively. One can however succumb to a lack of it and lose the self-determination to (retrospectively) arrive at it – as is the case for Mill, with regards, a stagnant China. If progress can be said thus far to be playing any role in Mill's argument it is that of an ideological platform on which Mill's argument for liberty rests.[5]

It is liberty, not progress that is playing the active role in *On Liberty*. Liberty has become the sole driver of progressive society (Levine, 1999: 154). Moreover, this conception of human development sets up progress as an open-ended individual *and* social goal in which humankind's role is to perpetually express its individuality (Gray, 1996:86). This is in stark contrast to what Mill asserts is happening in Victorian society (Mill, 1985:139, Levine, 1999:155).

It is here in Mill's positioning of liberty (an innate and absolute right) as the driver of history that we encounter a central problem in Mill's argument. Can Mill maintain that liberty has always been, and will always continue to be, the sole driver of a) man as a progressive being and b) universal historical progress? If not then as Gray (1996:120) proposes "[Mill's doctrine of liberty would] depend on certain social and psychological conditions and hold good only in a cultural milieu where these conditions are satisfied." For Mill's argument to work this cultural milieu would have had to either exist from time immemorial or the concept of liberty would have to be amenable to the conditions of the milieu in question.

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Mill's approach to these problems is found early on in *On Liberty*. Mill appears to take the latter option. In the introduction to *On Liberty* he describes the changing role liberty plays in different epochal/political systems, whilst maintaining progress as a constant outcome. Mill proposes that "social liberty [and] the nature and limits to the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual [is a question that] has divided mankind, almost from the remotest ages, but in the stage of progress in which the more civilized portions of the species have now entered, it presents itself under new conditions, and requires a different and more fundamental treatment"(Mill, 1985:59).

Mill appears to be implying that the issue of liberty has always been the main concern of history. However it appears to be a malleable liberty expressed in different forms and tailored by the prevailing social conditions of the time. This attempt to frame historical progression as different expressions of liberty has a contemporary counterpoint in the theories of Karl Marx.

On Marx

Marx went further than Mill by first trying to understand the origins of 'unfreedom' or the absence of liberty. As Smart (1991:161) explains: "By eschewing any reliance on speculative *a priori*ism [...] Marx discovered for himself those origins in the productive activity of previous generations of individuals in social relations, he went on to examine the dynamics of the present society in a similar light believing that the antagonisms and contradictions that drove capitalism ever onwards would also be the presuppositions for a usurpation by the dispossessed." For Marx, freedom was to be the *result* of progress.

In Marx's formulation Mills' timeline is turned back to front; rather than liberty driving progress, progress becomes the driver of freedom. As Harris (1956:162) contends, "in Mill's meaning progress consists primarily in the improvement of man himself [...] Thus he regarded the advancement [...] in the material aspects of progress as a phenomenon expressing the development of man's intellectual and moral faculties." Consequently, Mill finds his theory uncomfortably couched within a larger structure better able to accommodate the vagrancies of time.

Marx captures the essence of Mill's problem in the preface to *A contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. According to Marx: "The mode of production of the material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1859:425).

Marx's insight here is informative, not because one should readily agree with the Marxist position in its entirety, but because it illuminates a central problem for Mill and Liberalism in general. The problem is to be found in the role of progress. As one of Mill's staunchest defenders Gray eventually confessed "The deeper reasons for the failure in Mill's project in *On Liberty* [...] relate to the features Mill's liberalism has in common with Liberalism in all its forms, of which the most important in this context is a Eurocentric conception of human history and progress" (Gray, 1983:xi).

Mill's belief in man as a progressive being and of history as the product of this inherent human attribute makes his position difficult to defend. Maintaining this line of argument would involve making empirical claims that are beyond Mills capability to do so. Such as that China was once a progressive liberal civilisation, that man will always choose to protect his liberty and that progress can only be attained through the expression of liberty. As Gray (1993: 120) elaborates these types of propositions can only be attained by inductive wagers and not empirical proofs.

In conclusion, it seems progress *does* have a role to play in *On Liberty*. It cannot be attributed an active role, like that of liberty driving human history forwards. The role of progress is subtle; it plays a passive role as the value-laden principle erected to justify the liberal ideology underpinning Mill's argument in *On Liberty*. The problems with positioning progress as the end point of human history have been addressed by making comparison with Marx's own ideas on liberty, progress and history, in which progress is a mechanism of change and not an ideal unto itself. However, this simple repositioning of progress was beyond Mill who is ultimately biased and trapped within his own Eurocentric liberal contradictions.

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[1] Mill (1985:68-69) states: "The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle, [...] that principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection [...] The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society is, is that which concerns others. In the part which concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute.

[2] Gray (1996:11) argues convincingly that Mill demonstrates his commitment to this form of Indirect Utilitarianism in his introduction of *On Liberty* where Mill asserts the following: "I regard Utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions, but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."

[3] Gray (1996) has since amended his position believing that Mill's overall position is untenable, the faults lying fundamentally in Mill's ideology. Gray however maintained his position on Mill's indirect utilitarianism.

[4] Mill wanted to set forth an argument in favour of radically limiting the influence of the state and society on the individual in the belief that individuality, eccentricity and diversity were essential to drive society forwards. The 'tyranny of the majority' refers to both the political and social pressures perceived by Mill to be limiting the chance for progress.

[5] Mill's elevation of progress arguably belies his liberalism and "his conviction that man and history are inherently progressive in character"(Gray, 1996:120).

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