BOOK REVIEW

By Eric Wilkinson

Helen McCabe. *John Stuart Mill, Socialist.* McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 368 pp. $39.95 CND (Paperback). $130.00 CND (Hardcover). ISBN 9780228005742.

In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill claims that his views fall "under the general designation of Socialist" (239). This assertion has been variously ignored, denied, and puzzled over in subsequent Mill scholarship given his status as a paradigmatic liberal thinker. Helen McCabe takes Mill at his word, and attempts to explain why he saw himself as a socialist and what his socialism looked like. Her work weaves together threads from Mill's normative theory, economic writings, and political thought to reconstruct his vision. The result is a distinct model of a socialist society that is designed to preserve and enhance individual liberty, promote communal fraternity, and eliminate inequality.

The idea that Mill was a socialist can seem odd to those familiar with his status as a seminal figure in liberal political philosophy. McCabe addresses the common arguments against this notion in the first chapter of her book, and revisits the debate in the conclusion. Mill's first encounter with socialism was with Owenism, which he dismissed as economically impractical. However, he later corresponded with the Saint-Simonians, whose ideas he found more compelling. In particular, Mill was drawn to their philosophy of history, which saw history as oscillating between "organic ages" characterized by stability and adherence to a dominant ideology, and "critical ages" where people criticized existing institutions while transitioning to news ones. For Mill, this raised the possibility that the best institutions for his own transitional "critical age" might not be the best for the coming "organic age." Even if society was not prepared for socialism, it might be at a later stage in history. Second, the Saint-Simonians claimed that the laws governing distribution were not fixed, as some classical economists argued, but instead depended on how a society is organized. Mill agreed with them, and this opened up the possibility of social arrangements amenable to socialist distribution.

The Saint-Simonian connection helps to explain the shift in Mill's views towards a positive appraisal of socialism. Yet, some commentators attribute this shift to another of Mill's influences. Critics of the view that Mill was a socialist have alleged that Harriet Taylor Mill used her feminine wiles to trick the lovesick philosopher into endorsing socialist ideas! McCabe patiently replies that there is no evidence that Mill was slavishly deferential to his wife. There is nothing in her writings to indicate she was "more" of a socialist than Mill, and the letters typically pointed to as revealing Taylor's complete control over Mill are better understood as depicting normal intellectual sparring.

McCabe does not state it explicitly, but I have always found this argument to stink with the scent of misogyny. Take Michael Packe's bold claim that "Harriet's astounding, almost hypnotic control of Mill's mind was not confined to reversing the direction of his economic theory."[1] Packe and other commentators like him infantilize both Mill and Taylor by insisting that Mill was unable to objectively assess his wife's arguments, and that Taylor was incapable of advancing arguments that might persuade someone to change their mind. There is a long tradition in Mill scholarship of disparaging Taylor for everything that the author dislikes in Mill, especially regarding socialism.[2] McCabe deftly responds to this nonsense by sticking to the evidence. Mill's interest in socialism preceded meeting Taylor, and their relationship was a mutually beneficial intellectual partnership.

After explaining what occasioned Mill's reassessment of socialism, chapters two and three of McCabe's book discuss Mill's critiques of capitalism and socialism, respectively. Mill criticized capitalism for being inefficient, restricting liberty, distributing wealth in a way disconnected from merit or hard work, pursuing self-destructive endless growth, and promoting a selfish social ethic. In *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill examined whether a perfected version of capitalism could address these problems, and decided it could not. Instead, he thought some form of socialism could. By socialism, Mill had in mind communal ownership of both capital and the means of production.

Yet, Mill does not uncritically endorse socialism. He opposed revolutionary socialism that sought to transform society through violence, believing it would herald in a new authoritarianism. Instead, Mill thought that socialism should emerge from gradual reform and social evolution, since much progress in people's sentiments and ethical disposition were necessary to make it practicable. His greatest disagreement with other socialists was on the value of market competition, which they argued lowered wages. Mill disagreed, and his ideal model of socialism sought to preserve market competition between worker cooperatives to secure both higher wages and lower prices for goods.

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[1] Michael Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954), 315.

[2] Jo Ellen Jacobs, "'The Lot of Gifted Ladies Is Hard': A Study of Harriet Taylor Mill Criticism," *Hypatia* 9(3): 149.

In chapter four, McCabe describes how Mill's normative principles relate to his socialism. Mill was a utilitarian, and held that five secondary principles were necessary for the promotion of utility: progress, security, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Each of these are covered in relation to Mill's socialism, but the most intriguing discussion belongs to his conception of fraternity. Mill's fraternity is a kind of fellow-feeling where our sympathies extend to others in a way that facilitates social coordination and pursuit of the common good. It is often a prerequisite to pursuing progress. McCabe cautions that describing Mill's concept of fraternity as "communitarian" is anachronistic, but it is easy to see the parallels between Mill and contemporary liberal philosophers. In particular, Mill's thoughts on fraternity appear to anticipate liberal nationalism. Liberal nationalists argue for cultivating a national identity that embodies certain ethical principles, with this identity becoming the basis for collective action. Fraternity—and the "Religion of Humanity" tasked with promoting it and other values—has a similar role in Mill's "utopia," without privileging the role of the nation.

Prophesizing about the future was something Mill avoided. The institutions that were most suited to one era did not necessarily suit another, thus Mill hesitated to describe his "ideal" society. Nonetheless, McCabe tries to outline the institutions of Mill's "utopia" by drawing on his writings. The economy of Mill's utopia is dominated by worker cooperatives that compete to provide goods and services. Industries and utilities that naturally tend towards monopoly would be nationalized. Regarding the political system, Mill favoured representative democracy, but more controversially opposed the secret ballot and promoted plural voting. McCabe usefully offers a charitable account of how a public ballot and plural voting could be compatible with Mill's egalitarian commitments. Finally, Mill adopted the Saint-Simonian idea of a "Religion of Humanity." An ideal society would have a secular religion based on the principle of utility that lacked any formal institutions. Led by artists and ethicists, this "religion" would provide an ethical education and ensure social cohesion.

Mill hoped that a transition to socialism would occur naturally through the proliferation of worker cooperatives. Since cooperatives would pay workers more and give them control over their working conditions, the better, more skilled workers could be expected to gravitate to cooperatives. As a result, traditional capitalist firms would become inefficient and be squeezed out of the market. This method of reform avoids the pitfalls of violent revolution, which Mill warns is more likely to birth a new authoritarianism than improve people's lot in life—a view that history has vindicated. It also retains the benefits of market competition and prevents the state from consolidating power. But despite these considerable advantages, worker cooperatives have not taken the world by storm. There are factors discouraging their widespread adoption that Mill did not anticipate. For instance, they function best on a small scale. In practice, this means they cannot enjoy the same economies of scale as large corporations, and are more likely to be squeezed out of the market than the reverse.

McCabe cannot be faulted for failing to address this challenge to Mill's program of reform, as her project is mainly expository, but given her enthusiasm about Mill's view it merits discussion. That there is so much more that could be said about Mill's socialism goes to show that McCabe is right to argue that it is deserving of more attention and still has something to teach us. At the outset, she observes that the apparent tension between his status as a liberal and socialist can be attributed to how more attention is given to political labels than to the ideas and arguments that inform them. Mill argued that ethical transformation at the individual level is necessary for social progress, and the change he imagined can only occur if ideas and arguments prevail over labels and buzzwords.

Appropriately, the greatest accomplishment of *John Stuart Mill, Socialist* is doing his ideas justice.

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References

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