‘All of “liberty, equality and fraternity”, which is capable of being realised’: John Stuart Mill on ‘legitimate socialism’ and the 1848 revolutions in Paris.

Abstract:

John Stuart Mill records in his *Autobiography* that, by the mid-to-late 1840s, his politics were ‘under the general designation of Socialist’. The 1848 revolutions increased his knowledge of types of socialism; and also made it – he felt – more-possible to speak seriously of socialism and receive a positive hearing. Thus, he made his position much plainer in the 1852 edition of *Principles of Political Economy* than in earlier editions.

Some read, in Mill’s posthumously-published *Chapters on Socialism*, a withdrawal from this position. But although Mill had many fears regarding what he terms ‘revolutionary socialism’, these were not rooted in an intrinsic opposition to either revolution or socialism. Instead, Mill continued to endorse what he called ‘legitimate socialism’ when describing 1848 – a socialism which was violent only in self-defence; which did not involve the wholesale forceful seizure of private property; which was based on producer cooperation rather than state-provision; and which involved ‘all of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” which is capable of being realised now, and…prepare[s] the way for all which can be realised hereafter’.

This article explores what Mill meant by ‘legitimate socialism’, and how understanding this deepens our understanding of his attitude to revolution; socialism; and ‘revolutionary socialism’.

In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill recalls that by the mid-to-late 1840s, his – and his future-wife’s – politics were ‘decidedly under the general designation of Socialist’ (Mill, 1873, 239). This claim has been subject to much dispute: Mill’s early biographer, Alexander Bain, for instance, sought to play it down by saying Mill saw socialism as ‘the outcome of a remote future’ (Bain, 1882, 90), and scholars in the 20th century made the point more forcefully, often denying that Mill was ever really a socialist[1]. (Friedrich Hayek, 1942, xxx) is a notable exception, seeing in Mill a dangerous infection of liberalism by socialism. See also Légé, 2006, 199-215.) Recent scholarship, however, has approached the topic with a more open mind, emphasising how Mill’s commitment to individuality, anti-paternalism and independence, and desire for economic justice led him to socialism.[2] Following Schumpeter, others take an historical view and link Mill to ‘utopian’ socialism[3], though some feel Mill’s ‘utopia’ did not necessitate the achievement of socialism[4].

As is often emphasised by those wishing to downplay Mill’s socialism – and as he himself owns – he was *not* a socialist before 1840, though he had several interactions with Owenism and Saint-Simonism. He moved towards socialism during the early 1840s, feeling this was

[1] See, for instance, Broadbent, 1968, 27-287; Davis, 1985, 345-58; Robbins, 1967, xxxix and 1952, 142; Schwartz, 1972, 190-92; Ekelund and Tollison, 1976, 213-231; Flew, 1975, 21; Schapiro, 1943 127-60; Hainds, 1946 103-12; Feuer, 1949 297-304; Fredman and Gordon, 1963, 3-7; Losman, 1971, 84-104; Hollander, 1985, 179; Thomas, 1985, 90; and Levy, 1981, 273-293.

[2] Baum, 2010, 98-123 and 1999, 494-530; Claeys, 2013, 123-72; Sarvasy, 1985, 312-33; Nathanson, 2012, 161-76.

[3] Schumpeter, 1954; Kurer, 1992, 222-32; Claeys, 1987, 122-147; Stafford, 1998, 325-45; Medearis, 2005, 135-149.

[4] Miller, 2003, 213-38; Riley, 1996, 39-71; Kurer, 1992, 229-32.

the right description for his politics by around 1845 (Mill, 1873, 239).[5] The events of 1848 in France both increased his knowledge of types of socialism[6], and made him feel it was politically more possible to speak seriously of socialism and receive a positive hearing (Mill, 1873, 239-241).[7] Thus, he made his socialist position much plainer in the 1852 edition of *Principles of Political Economy* than in earlier editions (see Levin, 2003, 69; Kurer, 1992, 223; and Sarvasy, 1985, 318-19).

In particular, the events of 1848 brought to Mill's attention 'utopian socialists' such as Louis Blanc and Victor Considerant, connections to whose socialism have been under-explored (though see McCabe, 2018). Similarly, Mill's attitude to revolution, and concern regarding 'revolutionary' socialism, has been read as proof that he could not have been a socialist (Schapiro, 1943, 137-38; Schwartz, 1972, 187-88).[8] But Mill's attitude to revolution was nuanced, as is revealed by his complex reaction to 1848, and his opposition to 'revolutionary socialism' is not rooted merely in an opposition to revolution *per se*. That is, he did not oppose *any* radical change brought about by violent, extra-legal, sudden action *just because* it was this kind of action, and his opposition to 'revolutionary socialism' was not rooted in intrinsic opposition to its proposed means of achieving change, but rather to what he see as the unnecessary and currently unjustifiable resort to such means at the present time.

This article sheds new light on Mill's socialism through analysis of his reaction to the events of 1848. I challenge the idea that Mill's concern over 'revolutionary socialism' was rooted in intrinsic opposition to either revolution (understood as violent, immediate, wide-spread, extra-legal change) or socialism. In so doing, I also challenge the idea that Mill's reaction to the 'Years of Revolution' was an ultimate endorsement of gradual reform to capitalism, albeit informed by justifiable critiques of contemporary society by socialists (see Levin (2003) 68-82). I suggest that what we see in Mill's increasing involvement with socialism after 1848, right through to his death, is a continued endorsement of a socialism which was violent only in self-defence; did not involve wholescale forceful seizure of private property but rather gradualist, legal reform towards communal ownership; was based on decentralised producer cooperation rather than state provision; and involved 'all of "liberty, equality and fraternity" which is capable of being realised now, and…prepare[s] the way for all which can be realised hereafter' (Mill, 1848c, 739). That is, Mill's socialism was not only rooted in his commitment to liberty and equality but also in 'fraternity'; and Mill's socialism was gradualist, not because he was opposed to violent, immediate, extra-legal 'revolution' enacting fundamental and wide-sweeping change, or because he was unsure we would *need* to transition to full

[5] As noted, Mill also says his wife was 'under the general designation of Socialist', and her role in Mill's move to socialism is contested. The issue is complicated by imprecise knowledge of her precise role in authoring key texts, with some arguing she alone wrote the more 'socialist' elements of *Principles* (the most extreme version of this is in Winch, 2009, 50-54). I side-step this issue here, partly for reasons of space, but also because I draw on texts no one has argued are 'only' Taylor's, which, as a by-product, also strengthens the plausibility of not seeing the socialist elements of Mill's work as entirely 'hers'.

[6] For instance, Mill only seriously read Fourier after in 1849 – see Mill, 1849a, 9–10. Claeys dates Mill's more serious consideration to 1850, though the inclusion of Fourierism in the 1849 edition of Principles, as well as these letters, make 1849 a more plausible date. Claeys, 1987, 131; Mill, 1848b, 203.

[7] On reading Mill's expressions regarding socialism through the lens of his role as political actor, see Raimund Ottow, 1993, 479-83.

[8] Riley emphasises –rightly – that Mill did not support an immediate, violent, comprehensive socialist revolution in *Chapters* (as 'revolutionary' socialists did), and builds part of his more-general argument that Mill's gradualism left open a future in which socialism would not arrive on this. This may be true of Mill's *predictions* for future social reform, but is something rather different from whether Mill thought it would be normatively preferable for humanity to 'arrive' at socialism as the 'ultimate result of…progress' than for them to retain even a very reformed form of private property, a point which also applies to Kurer's reading of a 'retreat' from socialism by Mill in later years. Riley, 1996, 39-71; Kurer, 1992, 229-32; Mill, 1848b, xciii.

socialism, but because he believed 'pre-figuring' socialism (as Wendy Sarvasy, 1985, 313) puts it) was necessary to 'prepare the way' for future reform, which in its radical nature (though not in its genesis) and involvement of root-and-branch restructuring of society, could also be described as 'revolutionary'. Thus I add weight to the idea we should take Mill's socialism seriously, and recognise his attitude to 'revolution' is more-nuanced than usually thought. This, in turn, beyond Mill, contributes to a growing desire to rediscover pre-Marxian (or pre-Leninist) forms of socialism, which are concerned with liberty as well as equality and fraternity, as a means to solve some of contemporary society's problems and injustices.[9]

1. Mill and the French Revolutions.

In this section, I explore two elements of Mill's reaction to revolutions in France which have an important impact on understanding his view of socialism. Firstly, the content of what he calls 'legitimate socialism' in 1848, as this helps explicate his own view of socialism. Secondly, his views on revolution, and thus, more precisely, how his concern with 'revolutionary socialism' affects his own socialism.

1.1. The impact of 1848 on the content of Mill's socialism.

Mill dates his move towards socialism from roughly 1845, though the 'Utopia' he sketches in that year's *The Claims of Labour* is not particularly socialist – Mill recommends raising the labourer from 'being a receiver of hire' to being a 'partner' with their employer, thus healing the current 'rift' between the classes (Mill, 1845, 382). As Mill notes, his socialist 'opinions were promulgated, less clearly and fully in the first edition, rather more so in the second, and quite unequivocally in the third' of *Principles* (Mill, 1848b, 775). His early consideration of socialism in *Principles* comprises a discussion of Owenism and Saint-Simonism, plus an exposition and endorsement of profit-sharing: it is only in 1852 that Fourierism and Blanc are added, with a detailed assessment of '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' (Mill, 1848b, 775).

Thus, in 1845 we might see Mill being a 'socialist' for the reason he described Comte as one in 1848 – because he was 'calling for an entire renovation of social institutions and doctrines' (Mill, 1848c, 739), and specifically (as Ottow argues) because he challenged 'the consensus of the ruling classes concerning the highly sensitive and seemingly decisive question of private property' (Ottow, 1993, 482) even in so small a way as endorsing profit-sharing. But this is not a plausible view of Mill's position in 1852, where the 'nearest approach to social justice' he outlines is one of full-blown cooperative socialism (Mill, 1845, 382; Mill, 1848b, 793-4). The 1848 revolutions, then, are a key part of the development of Mill's socialism, for three reasons. Firstly, it was events there which led to his greater knowledge of new forms of socialism, including producer cooperation and Fourierism. Secondly, the practical experiments in communal property made in Paris (including via the National Workshops) proved that socialism was not – as Riley describes it being for Mill – 'an historical curiosity', but instead feasible institutions which might be the right next steps for progress, and not only in France (Riley, 1996, 44).[10] Finally, Mill felt the events of 1848 meant that more socialist

[9] See, for instance, Persky, *The Political Economy of Progress: John Stuart Mill and Modern Radicalism*, or contemporary political discussions of minimum basic income, as currently being trailed in Finland.

[10] Riley is not wrong that Mill saw individual property as the 'primary and fundamental institution, on which, unless in some exceptional and very limited cases, the economical arrangements of society have always rested' (Mill, 1848b, 200). But expressing this as 'an historical curiosity' undermines the salience Mill felt the question of individual or communal property had in contemporary politics.

positions than he had endorsed in *Claims* could now get a fair hearing, as people were more open to taking socialist ideas seriously (Mill, 1873, 241).

Something key note here is what Mill writes of the context of the 1831 Revolution, when he had lost faith in the radical utilitarian project of his father and Jeremy Bentham. Part of this meant he:

> '[N]ow looked upon the choice of political institutions as a moral and educational question more than one of material interests, thinking that it ought to be decided mainly by the consideration, what great improvement in life and culture stands next in order for the people concerned, as the condition of their future progress, and what institutions are most likely to promote that' (*Ibid*., 177).

He recalls, 'this change in the premises of my political philosophy did not alter my practical political creed as to the requirements of my own time and country. I was as much as ever a radical and democrat, for Europe, and especially for England' (*ibid*.). But he now saw them *only* suitable to his 'own time and country', and some other modern, Western nations – that is, not a universal panacea for bad government applicable at any time.

Mill's new view of institutions, quoted above, is rooted in Saint-Simonian, and Comtean, ideas about an order of progress through which humanity has to pass in stages, and how it cannot 'skip' a stage (*ibid*., 171-73). Thus, Mill wrote, it is as wrong to criticise the Normans for not having democracy as it is for not having steam-engines (Mill, 1831a, 255).

Though he took these ideas from people he considered 'socialists', Mill did not also adopt their plans for future social improvement, though he did say in the early 1830s that we should view Saint-Simonism as the 'North Star' by which to navigate social reform (Mill, 1834, 678). We might never 'arrive' at their ideal, but they were the right light to follow in seeking social improvement, just as, if – in Mill's metaphor – we want to sail from London to Hull, we ought to use the North Star as a navigational aid (Mill, 1859, 321-22). That is, Saint-Simonian institutions were not currently suited to the stage of progression in which France and England found themselves, but they were useful guides in showing where human progress ought to be aiming, and therefore should help us construct the kinds of institutions which both suited the current stage of improvement, and best-fitted humanity for further improvement. Instead, regarding contemporary reform, Mill remained a 'democrat' and vehement anti-aristocrat (Mill, 1873, 179). Thus, 'the French Revolution of July…roused [his] utmost enthusiasm, and gave [him]…a new existence' (*ibid*.).

But by the mid-1840s, Mill no longer thought *this* radical project involved the institutions 'most likely to promote…future progress', nor was it the '*dernier mot* in social improvement' (*ibid*., 239). It was this which had moved him away from 'democracy' and towards socialism (*ibid*.).

Towards the end of 1848, Mill said it was 'wretched to see the cause of legitimate socialism thrown so far back' by the reaction to the June Days (Mill, 1848c, 739). He expresses his sympathy with the Provisional Government, and particularly with Lamartine, and 'Louis [Blanc], who seems to be sincere, enthusiastic, straightforward, and with a great foundation of good sense and feeling, though precipitate…in his practical views' (*ibid*., 739-40).[11] These men 'disinterestedly desired', he says, 'all of 'liberty, equality and fraternity', which is capable

[11] It is an interesting question as to why Mill refers to Blanc as 'Louis'.

of being realised now, and to prepare the way for all which can be realised hereafter' (*ibid.*). Because of this, he felt 'an entireness of sympathy with them' (*ibid.*).[12]

This socialism was 'legitimate' for two reasons. One I will come to in a moment – it was 'legitimate' because it had come to power in a justifiable, even though revolutionary, way. The other is what I am interested in here – this socialism was normatively 'legitimated' by its content, by *being* the set of institutions 'most likely to promote…future progress' and which 'st[ood] next in order for the people concerned' as they moved towards that progress (still, it seems, guided by a socialist star, even if Mill's faith in Saint-Simonism as that guiding light was on the wane). That these institutions were such, in Mill's opinion, is shown not only by the fact that they were those institutions adopted by people as 'next' for their progress in 1848, but by the praise Mill lavishes on the working people ('the intelligent and generous of the working classes of a great nation' (Mill, 1848b, 775)), and their leaders ('that glorious band' (Mill, 1848a, 354)), who set them up; and his endorsement of similar institutions as 'the nearest approach to social justice, and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee' (Mill, 1848b, 794).

By 'legitimate socialism', Mill had in mind, certainly, representative government elected by universal suffrage, and wide-reaching protections of freedom of speech, as well as provision of universal education, and 'republican' rather than monarchical or aristocratic rule[13]. But he also included the efforts at 'organising' labour (through both profit-sharing and worker-cooperatives) being conducted by Blanc and the assembly of Workers' Delegates in the Palais de Luxemburg (Mill, 1848d, 1100; Mill, 1848a, 353); the Fourierist ideas of Victor Considerant (a member of the Provisional Government) and Jules Chevalier[14]; and the demands of working-people that the Government had initially met, for instance limitations on working-hours.

In 1849, Mill published a lengthy *Vindication of the French Revolution of February 1848* in which he defines 'Socialism' and the 'legitimate socialism' of 1848. He describes it as recognising that, though 'it would be unjust to take from individual capitalists the fruits of their own labour and frugality', 'capital is useless without labour' which 'belongs, by at least as sacred a right, to the labourers', and that, by cooperating among themselves, labourers 'can do without capitalists' (Mill, 1848a, 351). Indeed, in words very reminiscent of the 1852 edition of *Principles*, Mill says socialists believe that 'because…no labourers of any worth…would labour for a master' if they could work for themselves', capitalists will eventually only be able to derive an income from investing in workers' cooperatives (*ibid.*, 351-2).

'This is Socialism', Mill says, 'and it is not obvious what there is in this system of thought to justify the frantic terror with which everything bearing that ominous name is usually received' (*ibid.*, 352). He even supports the French government 'in the present circumstances…aid[ing] with its funds' founding 'industrial communities on the Socialist principle' (*ibid.*).

[12] Mill elsewhere clears Blanc and the other socialist leaders he admired from any role in the 'June Days', even though he criticised the governments' response to them (Mill, 1848a, 330 and 353).

[13] In his support of which, of course, he had already moved away from his youthful admiration for the Girondin, whom he defends as always wanting a constitutional monarchy under the Duc D'Orleans until they were forced into adopted republicanism by the perfidy of both the king and their preferred successor to him (Mill, 1828, 78.

[14] It was after Chevalier's trial *in absentia* in 1849, and the publication of his self-defence whilst in self-imposed exile in London, that Mill really lost hope in the Provisional Government – which now, of course, hardly contained any socialist members, with Blanc and Considerant also being in exile.

In 1849, Mill doubted such associations would ultimately be able to compete with capitalist concerns in the current stage of human progress (*ibid*., 354). This doubt was assuaged by how events played out in France. In *Principles* Mill goes into much detail regarding the on-going success of producer cooperatives in France, and sings a panegyric to the workers who founded associations, and who thereby showed how progressive they were, and what improved institutions they were capable of sustaining:

> '[f]or the first time it…seemed to the intelligent and generous of the working classes of a great nation, that they had obtained a government who sincerely desired the freedom and dignity of the many, and who did not look upon it as their natural and legitimate state to be instruments of production, worked for the benefit of the possessors of capital…Under this encouragement, the ideas sown by Socialist writers, of an emancipation of labour to be effected by means of association, throve and fructified, and many working people came to the resolution, not only that they would work for one another, instead of working for a master…but that they would also free themselves, at whatever cost of labour or privation, from the necessity of paying, out of the produce of their industry, a heavy tribute for the use of capital' (Mill, 1848b, 775).

The continued success of such associations made Mill sanguine regarding what he later called 'the new millennium' of cooperation (Mill, 1864, 8-9). Echoing what he identified as the Socialists' claim in 1849, he sketches 'perhaps a less remote future than may be supposed' in which associations would multiply in an organic, peaceful fashion, and 'realise the best aspirations of the democratic spirit, by putting an end to the division of society into the industrious and the idle, and effacing all social distinction but those fairly earned by personal services and exertions' (Mill, 1848b, 793). Existing 'accumulations of capital' might 'honestly' and 'spontaneous[ly]' end up the 'joint property of all who participate in their productive employment' through capitalists investing in associations, and eventually perhaps even trading in their capital for an annuity (*ibid*.). '[A]ssuming…that both sexes participate equally in the rights and in the government of the associations', Mill concludes, this 'would be the nearest approach to social justice, and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee' (*ibid*., 794). That is, people are ready for some socialist institutions, and these are best-fitted both for the current state of human progress, and for best helping society to progress in the future.[15]

The events in France in 1848, therefore, gave Mill a glimpse of a set of institutions beyond what he had previously publicly endorsed as a feasible 'Utopia', some of which he absorbed into his own view of the best institutions for the current stage of human progress in France and England. One way in which the socialism Mill refers to as 'legitimate' in 1848 was so, then, is that it *was* the set of institutions which were best-placed to further human progress, and which were the correct 'next-step' for society to make in its onward progression.

By this, Mill does not mean that society should immediately be transformed into a socialist 'utopia'. Instead, he means that for what he later called 'the elite of mankind' (Mill, 1879, 748), socialist institutions such as producer and consumer cooperatives, or Fourierist intentional communities were right for their stage of progress. Others were not yet ready for this, but for them profit-sharing was increasingly the 'right' institution, and it prefigured, for both workers and employers, more socialist institutions to which they might, in the end,

[15] Whether that future *is* the society of decentralised associations sketched in *Principles* (plus other necessary social and political institutions – Mill is clear he is only talking about 'industry' here) or whether these, in the end, turn out to only be one step towards something else: Kurer suggests, for instance, that Mill sees the eventual choice as being between Fourierism and more full-blown communism. Kurer, 1992, 224.

transform (Mill, 1848b, 793-4. See also Sarvasy, 1985, 312-33). Similarly, some were not even ready for profit-sharing: for them, wage-relations were the only fit institutions, but this would be a feature of a transitionary phase – the children of such people, for instance, might well be ready for something more progressive. The transition of all of society might well take an extremely long time, which is why Mill says 'the political economy, for a considerable time to come, will chiefly be concerned with…not the subversion of the system of individual property, but the improvement of it': we are not going to (sustainably) move to communal property overnight (Mill, 1848b, 214). But is clear from Mill's description of such a socialist future as 'the nearest approach to social justice that it is possible at present to foresee' that he thought it involved the institutions which were best-fitted for future society, and 'the ultimate end of human society'(*ibid*. 794 and 208).

Mill had always had a strong commitment to the values of the French Revolution, and it is telling that he calls the form of socialism being implemented in France as 'all of "liberty, equality and fraternity" which is capable of being realised now, and…prepar[ing] the way for all which can be realised hereafter'(Mill 1848c, 739). Indeed, his invocation of this slogan reveals much about the content, and development, of Mill's socialism.

For one, it adds weight to the idea that his commitment to liberty took him to socialism, as Mill frames the socialism of 1848 expressly in these terms: the revolutionary workers of 1848 saw 'that they had obtained a government who sincerely desired the freedom and dignity of the many' (Mill, 1848b, 775).

We also glean some further insight into his commitment to equality. In his *Vindication*, Mill says:

> '[E]quality, though not the sole end, is one of the ends of good social arrangements; and that a system of institutions which does not make the scale turn in favour of equality, whenever this can be done without impairing the security of the property which is the product and reward of personal exertion, is essentially a bad government – a government for the few, to the injury of the many. And the admiration and sympathy which we feel for the glorious band who composed the Provisional Government, and for the party which supported them, is grounded above all, on the fact that they stand openly identified with this principle, and have in all ways proved their sincere devotion to it' (Mill, 1848a, 354-55).

This commitment to equality, rooted in Benthamite utilitarianism, but also incorporating Mill's more 'socialist' idea of what property-rights ought to be secured (i.e. not inherited property, or all *existing* property-holdings, but 'property which is the product…of personal exertion), is a core, and rather unexplored, area of Mill's socialism, light on which is cast by detailed consideration of his reactions to 1848.

Similarly, there has been relatively little exploration of Mill's endorsement of 'fraternity'.[16] Yet, from his writing on France in 1848, we can see that fraternity was important to Mill as part of human progress, something which also ought to be guessed from his early commitment to the democratic ideals of the French Revolution (whose slogan this was), and his endorsement of 'the cooperative principle' as 'realis[ing]…in the industrial department, the best aspirations of the democratic spirit' through not only increasing liberty, and making distribution more equitable, but also 'putting an end to the division of society' (Mill, 1848b, 793).

[16] Though see McCabe, 'Mill and Fourierism'.

So much for what his reaction to 1848 can tell us about the content of Mill's socialism, particularly in its relatively early development. I turn now to the second question posed above – what his reaction to 1848 tells us about his view of revolution.

1.2. 1848 and Mill's view of 'legitimate' revolution.

When Mill first read of the French Revolution as a teenager, he says, 'the subject took an immense hold of my feelings. It allied itself with all my juvenile aspirations to the character of a democratic champion…and the most transcendent glory I was capable of conceiving, was that of figuring, successful or unsuccessful, as a Girondist in an English Convention' (Mill, 1873, 65-7). Mill remained a staunch supporter of the Girondin – a position which is not as un-revolutionary as might be supposed, though Mill emphasises their gradualism and moderation (Mill, 1828, 99). His support for the French Revolution was rooted in his anti-aristocratic feelings, and commitment to 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. As noted, the events of 1831 'galvanised' him: he went to Paris, and had friends who were involved in the revolutionary action of 1831, and also 1832 (Mill, 1832, 115).

Mill's view, between 1820 and 1832, then, was not strictly anti-revolutionary. Indeed, in the wake of events in 1831 (where Mill had led the Paris Opera in a rendition of the revolutionary anthem *La Marseillaise* (see Mazlish, 1988, 237f), and increasingly frustrated with the lack of change in England, he wrote:

> 'If there but a few dozens of persons safe…to be missionaries of the great truths…I should not care though a revolution were to exterminate everyone in Great Britain & Ireland who has £500 a year. Many very amiable persons would perish, but what is the world better for such amiable persons[?] (Mill, 1831b, 84)'

Of course, this is something of a rhetorical flourish, used to highlight his actual point – that both Tory ideas and Liberal ideas are needed for social progress – but it is revealing nonetheless.

Having sketched Mill's early interest in, and reaction to, two different revolutions in France, let us turn to his view of 1848. Mill's lengthy *Vindication* of the February Revolution is a defence partly of actions by the Provisional Government once it was in power, and partly of the mode by which it came to power. This sheds important light on Mill's own view of justified, 'legitimate' revolution.

He portrays the resort to violence in 1849 as the final resort of a people whose liberties were being systematically eroded; their government betraying the principles by which it had been brought to power; and in which they were given fewer and fewer legitimate means by which to protest – even, finally, the outlet of 'reform dinners' (Mill, 1848a, 326-330). The very success of the revolution, Mill felt, showed that the existing government was no longer fit for purpose, but 'a government wholly without the spirit of improvement' (*ibid*., 334). But, he says, 'no government can now expect to be permanent, unless it guarantees progress as well as order: nor can it continue really to secure order, unless it promotes progress' (*ibid*., 325):

> 'While reformers have even a remote hope of effecting their objects through the existing system, they are generally willing to bear with it. But when there is no hope at all: when the institutions themselves seem to oppose an unyielding barrier to…progress…the advancing tide heaps itself up behind them till it bears them down' (*ibid*.).

Mill both wants to defend the leaders of the Provisional Government from the charge of 'plotting' a revolution, but also show that they did have a plan for power once they were appointed to it (*ibid*., 330). Moreover, these leaders were themselves the most moral of men, 'unselfish' and having 'neither expected nor sought' power 'nor used it for any personal

purpose – not even for that of maintaining…the ascendancy of their own party' (*ibid*., 320). Moreover, the brief violent revolution 'emanated from all that was honest and honourable in the hearts of the French nation' – a 'moral revolution' had preceded the political one (*ibid*).[17]

He approved much of their programme of reform, both in itself and a as a response to the political situation in which the Provisional Government found itself (*ibid*., 353). Though, in contemporaneous writing, Mill did not spare the Provisional Government from *all* censure. He did not support the actions of some Socialists during the 'June Days', feeling their violent action was understandable in the context, but precipitate – and not supported by their leaders (whom he admired, and continued to admire) (*ibid*.). But the Provisional Government, through its response to the June Days, 'disappoint[ed] the glorious expectations which it raised', threatening to jeopardise its own legitimacy by adopting some of the very laws which led to the overthrow of Louis Philippe in the first place (*ibid*., 354). Indeed, 'a government cannot be blamed for defending itself against insurrection', Mill wrote, but 'it deserves the severest blame if to prevent insurrection it prevents the promulgation of opinion' (Mill, 1848e, 1118). Indeed, he goes so far as to ask:

> 'by what right can the Assembly now reprobate any further attempt…by…Socialists, to rise in arms against the Government?...It tells them that they must prevail by violence before they shall be allowed to contend by argument…When they mouths are gagged, can they be reproached for using their arms? (*ibid*)'

That is, violence against the Provisional Government was not *previously* justified – but in the face of repression, it would now be.

Overall, from Mill's engagement with revolutions in France, we can discern the following attitude to revolution, which remained relatively stable throughout his life. Violent, extra-legal action aimed at capturing state institutions and radically transforming them was justified only under the following circumstances:

1. If it was done in self-defence.
2. If there was no other option but violent action.
3. If it was 'progressive'.
4. If there was a plan (even if that plan changed in the light of subsequent events) which gave it good reason to be considered sustainable. And, preferably, if there was a plan previous experiment already proved *worked*.

This not only Mill's defence of the French Revolution and National Assembly, but also of friends he had made in 1831, who were caught up in the protests surrounding the funeral of General LaMarque in June 1832 (see Mill, 1832, 115); and of the actions of both the Provisional Government in 1848, and potentially-insurrectionary Socialists, should they take violent action in the wake of the Law Against the Press. Grasping this view Mill had of 'legitimate' revolution, and also his normative commitment to the 'legitimacy' of a certain form of decentralised, cooperative socialism, helps us to better-understand Mill's position in *Chapters on Socialism*, to which I now turn.

2. Chapters on Socialism

Chapters was written late in the 1860s/the early 1870s; was left incomplete; and was published posthumously by Mill's step-daughter Helen Taylor. One way of reading *Chapters*

[17] This is Mill's own translation of Garnier-Pages' speech in the National Assembly: the language Mill uses is striking, given his own concerns about a political revolution needing a moral one if it is to succeed.

is as a response to a new, or at least, perhaps, newly-virulent, form of socialism – what Mill calls 'revolutionary socialism' and which we would now identify with Marx (though Mill himself would have had no specific reason to do so: Marx was not particularly well-known by name in Mill's lifetime). Indeed, one might read it as an attempted antidote to *The Communist Manifesto*, urging the working men of the world *not* to unite in revolutionary action, showing them both that they had a good deal more to lose than their chains, and that they would get a great deal less, even, than they had in return if they did try to throw them off through immediate, violent, wholescale overthrow of the existing system. Indeed, to invoke a different metaphor, Mill seems to be trying to persuade working people that, however difficult their position currently seems, 'revolution' will only send them right back to the very beginning – a Hobbesian state of nature from which will only emerge centuries more oppression and misery for the poor (Mill, 1879, 749).

Chapters is often read as Mill rejecting socialism *in toto*. This is, perhaps, because it so-evidently has a Marxian form of socialism in its sights, and – in the century-and-a-half since Mill's death – that has been the predominant form of socialism. In rejecting that, then, Mill does appear to be rejecting socialism as we know it. But this is to forget, of course, that what emerged as the dominant forms of socialism in the 20th century were not socialism as *Mill* knew it.[18] I suggest we should see *Chapters* as an argument against 'revolutionary' socialism of a specific form – but not as a rejection of 'legitimate' socialism.

Mill did not have a normative problem with the very *idea* of socialism – indeed, he did not even disagree with *all* the critiques, or positive reform proposals, of 'revolutionary' socialism. But 'revolutionary' socialism's demand for immediate, violent, and wide-scale revolutionary action did not meet Mill's four criteria for legitimate revolutionary action outlined above.

Firstly, though he has sympathy for the position of the poor, and with several socialist analyses of the causes of this, he does not accept the more 'Marxist' ideas, such as capitalism *necessitating* an on-going decline in worker's wages (Mill, 1879, 728). If this was the case, then perhaps there might be arguments for thinking that workers would be entitled to take violent action in self-defence, but Mill thinks that – though wages might be subject to local declines, particularly in unproductive areas – wages are, actually, increasing (*ibid*). Capitalists definitely do not always 'play fair' when it comes to even allowing competition from workers' cooperatives – something Mill was aware of, for instance, through his support of the Wolverhampton Plate-Locksmith's cooperative, which local capitalist competitors tried to run out of business by colluding to sell below cost price (Mill, 1865b, 1116).[19] However, this does not amount to a 'self-defence' justification for revolutionary action by working people against capitalists.

Secondly, Mill evidently strongly believed there were viable alternatives to revolutionary socialism. He did not accept the Marxist belief that really reformatory action was impossible without a revolution, but, instead, thought change could come about through experiments within the existing framework of private property. Profit-sharing, cooperation and even experiments in Owenism and Fourierism were all plausible possibilities (depending on the moral character of the people attempting them). Plus, there were more reforms to be fought for through changes to legislation which Mill evidently had not despaired of – e.g. extension

[18] As J. Salwyn Schapiro rightly emphasises – though he is a little categorical when he says '[i]t cannot be too strongly emphasised that Mill knew nothing of Marx or of Marxism' (Schapiro, 1943, 147).

[19] Mill got his friend Henry Fawcett to help him raise the public profile of this case, particularly by encouraging the Christian Socialists Thomas Hughes, J.M. Mudlow and F.D. Maurice to write a letter in *The Spectator* (entitled 'Another Glimpse of Masters and Men') raising a public subscription. The cooperative kept going until 1879. Mill himself sent £10 (roughly £1000 in today's money) and asked for further copies of the printed appeal on their behalf so he could circulate them among friends. (Mill, 1865c and 1865d, 1019-1020).

of the suffrage, improvements to working conditions, land tenure reform etc. 'Revolutionary' socialism, then, could not claim to be permissible because there was no other option but violent action.

Thirdly, not only did 'revolutionary' socialists not have a plan for what would occur after the revolution, they deliberately eschewed having a plan. Evidently, this is not true of *all* 'revolutionary' socialists – for Mill was in contact with members of the International Workingmen's Association, and its Nottingham branch sent him a copy of their programme of reform. However, he saw the English delegates as being rather different to their Continental comrades, who he clearly defines in *Chapters* as both not having a plan, and deliberately eschewing plan-making (Mill, 1879, 749). Both of these are negative marks against revolutionary socialism. Even though Mill defends the Girondins against Scott's attacks that they did not have any proof that their plan was workable in France by asking what plan they *could* have had proof would work, this defence is not open to revolutionary socialists, because non-revolutionary socialists all have plans which they *are* showing to be workable and which, therefore, ought to be adopted rather than risking everything, as Mill puts it, 'in the hope that out of chaos would arise a better Kosmos', especially as 'chaos is the very must unfavourable position for setting out in the construction of a Kosmos, and…many ages of conflict, violence, and tyrannical oppression of the weak by the strong must intervene' (*ibid*).

On all these counts, then, revolutionary socialism fails to pass Mill's criteria for justifiable (violent) revolutionary action. The first two are plausibly seen as necessary conditions for his view – certainly, not meeting either is sufficient to ensure that action is not justified. Given this, the fourth is less important. But it is worth noting that Mill, whilst acknowledging that self-defence is a justification for violence, does not think *all* violence in self-defence is justified. He did not support the violent actions of Louis Phillipe's government (which precipitated the February Revolution) – nor does he support repressive actions by the Provisional Government, even in the face of violent unrest from Socialists in June 1848.

We might think that Mill did not believe 'revolutionary' socialism passed the 'progressive' or 'moral' test. But here there is more room for dispute, given, for instance, his approval of the plan of the Nottingham Branch of the IWA, and given his sense, which is clear from the 1840s onwards, that socialism is the stage of human progress which will eventually replace the 'critical' age in which he lived.[20]

This said, revolutionary socialism fails one kind of normative test – it seems not to care about how much misery it risks because at least the rich will suffer along with the poor when the whole system comes crashing down around our ears. The 'animating principle of too many of the revolutionary Socialists is hate', Mill says (Mill, 1879, 749). It is, he adds, 'a very excusable hatred of existing evils, which would vent itself by putting an end to the present system at all costs even to those who suffer by it…in the impatience of desperation respecting any more gradual improvement' (*ibid*.). Although 'excusable', however, he sees schadenfreude as morally-dubious. But this does not mean it fails a wider 'normative' test, in Mill's view, of being 'progressive'.

This said, Mill evidently did not endorse the *means* by which 'revolutionary' socialism sought to achieve 'progressive' ends, nor necessarily their understanding of what those 'ends' entailed. For instance, 'revolutionary' socialism emphasised equality – and, indeed, if we think Marx was, indeed, endorsing the distributive principle 'from each according to his capacities, to each according to his needs' in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*[21], then this is

[20] See Riley, 1996, 39-71 for how Mill consistently makes the moral case for socialism.
[21] Marx's view of distributive justice is not something there is space to explore in detail here.

the same principle (which Mill attributes to Blanc) that Mill endorses as a 'still higher' principle of justice in his discussion of communism in *Principles* (Mill, 1848b, 203). However, this very endorsement as an 'ideal' of justice explains Mill's reasons for disagreeing with the revolutionaries' proposed plan for reform, because Mill did not think society ready for this principle of justice: indeed, experiments in France showed that workers were not even ready for what they had initially thought of as justice – equal shares (*ibid*., 782).

Secondly, 'revolutionary' socialism has a strong 'fraternal' element regarding class-solidarity, and ending class division in society. But Mill's view of 'fraternity' seems to involve bringing employers and employees together, and gradually effacing that distinction as society moves towards classlessness by a 'spontaneous' and 'honest' transfer of capital from private into common hands. And this seems to be a rather different idea of 'fraternity' than a Marxist one.

Lastly, as is often emphasised, Mill worried about the potential negative impacts of 'communism' on individuality – though he also emphasised the current negative impact of capitalism on it, and said that this criticism was 'no doubt…vastly exaggerated' (*ibid*., 209). The 'communism' Mill has in mind is of small communities, but his concerns about both the impact of these, and the general negative impact of majoritarianism on individuality all also have bite when it comes to revolutionary socialism.

All-in-all, therefore, revolutionary socialism was not well-placed, in Mill's view to achieve 'all of liberty, equality and fraternity' which is currently capable of being realised. It tried to achieve a good deal *more* equality than was currently possible, tried to achieve fraternity through impermissible means, and posed some serious threats to liberty (though Mill does say that this charge again communism is 'vastly exaggerated', and something similar might also be true for 'revolutionary' socialism). Thus, it failed Mill's tests for 'legitimate' revolution – but for specific reasons, proper understanding of which should help us see better both the content of Mill's own socialism, and his nuanced view of legitimate revolutionary action.

Conclusion

Mill was a youthful champion of the ideas of the Revolution: 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity!'. Over time, I have argued here, he started to see something 'beyond' a realisation of these ideas through his father's preferred political programme of representative government, broadly liberal laws, and free markets. He started to judge political institutions by their effectiveness in preparing people for the *next* stage of human progress, and by the extent to which they forwarded that progress. And he started to see some form of 'socialism' as being the 'ultimate' end of humanity. It is for these two reasons that he wrote to his friend Blanc in 1848, expressing his support for the 'noble revolution' of February (Mill 1849b, 23); and said of the Provisional Government *both* that he felt great sympathy with it, *and* that its repressive actions meant 'the cause of legitimate socialism' was being 'thrown back'.

Mill wanted root-and-branch reform of existing society, from the patriarchal family ('the citadel of the enemy') through property rights to religion, education and class-relations. His concern regarding violent, extra-legal, immediate and wholescale transformation of such institutions, however, meant that he only thought this was legitimate if it was in self-defence; a last resort; done with a plan in mind; and done in order to achieve 'progressive' ends. The actions of socialists such as Blanc and Considerant in 1848 passed these tests, for Mill. And action by other socialists, once their right to free speech had been repressed, might have been legitimate. But in later years (i.e. when he was writing *Chapters*) Mill felt at least three of these criteria were not being met.

Importantly, though, this does not mean that Mill thought either *all* revolution, or all socialism, was 'illegitimate'. Instead, it shows more-precisely what form of socialism he was committed to, and how strongly, when he said his political position, from 1848 onwards, was 'under the general designation of Socialist' (Mill, 1873, 239). Moreover, it emphasises that not only was Mill's socialism an outcome of his commitment to liberty and equality – as others have also noted – but that there is also a strong theme of 'fraternity' in his socialism, which would repay closer study.

Helen MCCABE

University of Nottingham

helen.mccabe@nottingham.ac.uk

Characters: 48,702.