John Stuart Mill's view on Democracy and Government in Gregory Conti's *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation*

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Early on in *Parliament: the Mirror of the Nation*, Gregory Conti criticises what he sees as a 'too-exclusive' focus on John Stuart Mill when considering the political thought of Victorian Britain (7). In Mill scholarship, we might think there has been a much 'too-exclusive' focus on *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*, and relatively little consideration of his views on representative government.[1] *Parliament* provides an excellent guide to the context of Mill's writing on representative government and Parliamentary reform (particularly in mid-to-later life); and especially his endorsement of Thomas Hare's idea of 'personal representation' (which we would now call Single Transferable Vote).

Conti does an excellent job of introducing a rich and complex debate around the idea that Parliament should, in some important sense, 'mirror' the 'nation' which is both – as he points out – unknown, and foreign, to the modern reader, and very close and salient given modern discussions around the meaning of 'representation' and whether parliaments are sufficiently 'representative'.

Conti's central claim is that 'the ideal of the mirroring Commons was the polestar for a sprawling Victorian discussion about political representation', but that the meaning of 'mirroring was a closely contested question' (359). Though 'mirroring' is explored in detail, the meaning of several key terms such as 'variety of suffrages', 'democracy', 'liberal' and 'representation' could be more clearly explained. The clearest exposition of the terrain Conti maps, and the terms he employs, comes in the conclusion (359-365).

'Democracy' seems to variously mean one-man-one-vote (and Conti does not seriously challenge the 'democratic' credentials of those who did not advocate one-person-one-vote) and 'rule of the many', though as some 'democrats' supported very limited franchises, it is not really clear how 'many' would be 'ruling' – and all the theorists discussed aside from Dewey in his later years, advocated some form of representative institutions. Indeed, *Parliament* focusses on discussions around the 'representative' and 'democratic' nature of the House of Commons without once mentioning the House of Lords, which seems an interesting lacuna (the more so as some of the arguments in favour of 'pocket' – or 'rotten' – boroughs allowing the inclusion of 'great men', independent thinkers, and experts in legislative deliberation are so closely aligned with apologists for the House of Lords as appointed and composed today).

In contrast to what a modern reader might think, 'liberal' in *Parliament* is distinct to, and often in contrast to, 'democratic', with 'liberals' supporting the idea of Parliament as a 'mirror' and apparently seeing this as a way of ensuring a 'moderate' Parliament.

'Representative' is contested by various thinkers whose ideas are explored in the book, because – in part – the debate Conti maps is over what 'representation' should mean, as well as what 'representatives' should do. Indeed, the notion of 'mirroring' the nation could have been dug into in more depth here: did the ideal Parliament merely 'reflect back' to the nation an accurate image

of itself, or was it, rather, an accurate microcosm of society in which MPs 'representing' particular view-points would deliberate?

That there was this debate in the long nineteenth century, along with interesting debates over whether constituencies should be geographic or more aligned with 'identity', is interesting context for understanding the history and evolution of British Parliament, and devolved governments, today as well as showing that there are very few new arguments under the sun. Similarly, the British roots of, and long history of discussion around, Proportional Representation are, as Conti notes, worth rescuing and re-examining (and were notably absent from what passed for debate around the referendum on 'alternative vote' in 2011). This said, *Parliament* might benefit from *more* engagement with what these past debates can tell us about salient modern questions regarding representation, and particularly the question of *what* (and perhaps who) is being represented in any 'representative' system, and why. Hare's argument that the invention of the Post Office meant the UK could be plausibly seen as one constituency (245) seems even more plausible in the era of social media, television, radio etc., with attendant repercussions for who is representing whom in Parliament.

From a Millian perspective, it is always useful to be reminded about other schemes for plural voting, and that many people had a right to more than one vote (e.g. people could vote in their home constituency, and also in University elections), as this helps contextualise Mill's ideas, and emphasise their radical nature, despite their deeply conservative appearance to modern eyes. It is also useful to situate Mill in a broader debate about representation, 'democracy', deliberation, competency, the suffrage, and parliamentary reform, as well as reminding Mill scholars about key figures in Mill's intellectual *milieu* – most obviously Hare, but also other reformers such as George Jacob Holyoake and Frederick Maurice.

As noted, the book is very deliberately *not* about Mill, but a few Mill-related questions might usefully have been gone into more deeply. I will highlight just three here. Firstly, the question of the ballot. There is an interesting aside that the nature of Hare's form of PR – where candidates are ranked until the voter has no remaining preferences – would do away with the ballot. Mill's position on the (secret) ballot is a surprise to most, who identify liberalism with privacy at the ballot box, and a little more detail on how supporters of PR intersected with supporters and/or opponents of 'the ballot' would have been appreciated. This question also seems to importantly intersect with questions over the extent of the franchise: for Mill, the more limited a franchise, the more need for public voting, as voters were exercising power over a larger pool of people who had a right to know how that power was being exercised and on what basis.[2] Relatedly, it raises questions around how Mill's view of voting as a public trust led him to endorse PR.

Lastly, the relation between Mill's plans for plural voting and his support for PR. To what extent could one replace the other, and to what extent did he feel people could (and should) have multiple votes *within* a system of PR? And, relatedly, the extent to which Mill was an outlier on this issue, and any discussions he may have had with Hare on the question.

Although Conti says there has been 'too much' focus on Mill, he presents some apparently 'Millian' objections to Hare's scheme towards the end of the book (319-343). This is something of a puzzle, as Mill endorsed – indeed, proselytized for – Hare, and the arguments are not Mill's *own* objections but those which Conti sees as being broadly 'Millian'. It is not clear whether this is to suggest contradictions in Mill's thought. The people concerned (e.g. Ramsay McDonald, D.G. Ritchie, James Fitzjames Stephen) are not particularly known as being Mill's followers, and though some of these arguments might be aligned with *On Liberty*, that is not how Mill himself used them.

Overall, though, this book provides detailed background to the somewhat understudied question of Mill's views on 'democracy' and 'representation', and any Mill scholar interested in these questions will find much of interest.

[1] Some notable exceptions being, of course, Nadia Urbinati, Dale Miller, Wendy Sarvasy, Elvio Baccarini and Viktor Ivankovic.
[2] J. S. Mill, *Considerations of Representative Government* 19 (Toronto, 1977), 488-500.