

Was John Stuart Mill a Socialist?

John Stuart Mill might have lots of libertarian fans, but his idiosyncratic ideas, despite their limitations, had more in common with democratic socialism than pro-capitalist ideologies.

Replica of a portrait of John Stewart Mill commissioned by Sir Charles Dikes. (G. F. Watts / National Portrait Gallery)

John Stuart Mill was the most influential liberal thinker of the nineteenth century. Many of his arguments for free speech and personal autonomy became staples of the tradition, and he still enjoys a pious following among libertarians and self-styled classical liberals. Naturally, the latter affinity has won Mill plenty of enemies on the Left. Karl Marx famously dismissed the “imbecile flatness” of bourgeois hacks like Mill in the first volume of *Capital*. Years later, Herbert Marcuse (rightly) [chided him](#) for holding “elitist” opinions.

This is unfortunate since, as Mill put it in *Autobiography*, his “ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class [him] decidedly under the general designation of Socialists.” It doesn’t get more emphatic than that.

By the end of his life, Mill espoused [what we’d now call liberal socialism](#): a political order that protects and expands most classical liberal freedoms, but jettisons the stringent private property rights so dear to early liberals like John Locke and James Madison.

Mill’s brand of liberal socialism was analytically blinkered and, in some important respects — particularly on the question of democratization — deeply flawed. But it’s striking that the alleged patron saint of Victorian [capitalism](#) was in fact one of its sharpest critics.

J. S. Mill’s Arguments for Liberal Socialism

By his own admission, Mill came late to socialism. Born in 1806, he was radicalized both by reading socialists like Charles Fourier and Robert Owen and by the influence of his longtime friend and eventual wife, Harriet Taylor, who pushed him to take the oppression of women and the laboring classes more seriously.

Mill’s most significant writings on the subject were later editions of *The Principles of Political Economy*, the short tract [Socialism](#), and *Autobiography*. Together, they showcased Mill’s deepening sympathy for socialist reforms and a conviction that those who “at present [receive] the least share” of society’s benefits deserve far more.

In *Socialism* he lambasted classical liberals — the “levellers of former times” — for criticizing aristocratic privilege and inherited power while failing to examine the many ways capitalist society erected similar inequalities. He praised socialists as their “far-sighted successors” — more consistent in seeking to ensure material equality as a prerequisite for the flourishing and freedom of all.

Mill’s arguments for socialism were very different from the historical materialism of someone like Marx. Characterized by straightforward moral claims in the manner of the utopian socialists, Mill’s politics were an intriguing mix of three distinct elements: classical liberalism, utilitarianism, and English romanticism.

From the classical liberals, Mill took a deep respect for individualism and the priority of personal liberty while severing it from the “[possessive individualism](#)” of someone like Locke, who believed property owners had a natural right to profit from workers’ labor. Mill’s individualism was far more egalitarian. He retained the utilitarianism of his youth — “everybody [is] to count for one, nobody for more than one,” in Jeremy Bentham’s words — which established moral and material equality as the baseline from which deviations had to be justified.

But Mill was also deeply concerned that Bentham’s reasoning was unduly mechanical, reducing humans to little more than hedonistic utility maximizers. So, from English romanticism, he took the position that what is important in life is not just the pursuit of pleasure, but that each is empowered to become the kind of person they wish to be — that we have the capacity to follow our “inward forces” and express our individuality through ever more diverse experiments in living.

What we get in Mill, then, is an egalitarian expressive individualism that departs sharply from Locke in holding that all individuals must be guaranteed the ability to live good lives — not just property owners, who become rich by living off the alienated labor of workers.

Mill drew on these philosophical convictions to argue that capitalist society was fundamentally flawed. While its material productivity was undeniable, he thought capitalism failed badly in equitably distributing resources — and that it lent itself to neo-Lockean apologias about the virtues of hardworking capitalists and the vices of the poor.

Mill would have none of that. To his great credit, he recognized that most of the reasons people fell behind in capitalist society had little to do with their personal efforts — and that even if capitalists were in fact more capable and harder working, it wouldn't justify allowing millions to languish in poverty.

Writing in *Socialism*, Mill offered a scathing account of this kind of reasoning, invoking the most autocratic ancient tyrants.

If some Nero or Domitian was to require a hundred persons to run a race for their lives, on condition that the fifty or twenty who came in hindmost should be put to death, it would not be any diminution that the strongest or nimblest would, except through some untoward accident, be certain to escape. The misery and the crime would be that they were put to death at all. So in the economy of society; if there be any who suffer physical privation or moral degradation . . . [it] is pro tanto a failure of the social arrangements. And to assert as a mitigation of the evil that those who thus suffer are the weaker members of the community, morally or physically, is to add insult to misfortune.

The Limitations of Mill's Socialism

Mill concluded *Socialism* by arguing that a just liberal society must experiment with different types of socialist organization to better the situation of the least well off. He never produced a systematic work explaining what those experiments should be, but in the later editions of *Principles of Political Economy* he endorsed worker cooperatives as superior to capitalist-managed firms and insisted there was “nothing in principle in economic theory” that spoke against experimenting with socialist principles and forms of organization. He also argued the state should help secure more equal economic opportunities for all and supply an array of public services, particularly education.

Interestingly, he was one of the first major liberal and socialist writers to take seriously the problem of women's equality and, in *The Subjection of Women*, even wrote that reform must go beyond securing liberal political rights for women. Patriarchal institutions like the family, he wrote, would have to be scrutinized and refashioned.

His record was less admirable on the question of democracy. Mill had some democratic instincts, arguing for universal suffrage in *Considerations on Representative Government* and, as a member of parliament, calling for the enfranchisement of not just working-class men but women as well. Some of his concerns with democratic rule — for instance, the potential for a tyrannical majority to oppress minorities — remain valid.

But he was also trepidatious about the uneducated and unintelligent having too much of a say in politics, and supported British colonialism, viewing the non-European subjects of its empire with condescension. He didn't seem to grasp how the persistence of parochial attitudes and institutions maintained the inequalities he frequently criticized.

This speaks to the second major limitation of Mill's liberal socialism: its lackluster interpretation of power. Mill stuck to making ethical arguments for liberal socialism. Undeniably convinced it was the right social arrangement, he viewed moral suasion as the means to bring it about. He seemed doggedly uninterested in analyzing the power dynamics of the bourgeois liberal state, its history, and the way imperial powers like the United Kingdom worked to spread capitalism at the barrel of a gun. He failed to think through what social agents might have the power and interest in winning a liberal socialist order.

Mill was aware that concentrating political power in the hands of capital and the wealthy undercuts egalitarian reforms, and he even recognized that seemingly private institutions, like the patriarchal family, are defined by unequal power dynamics that require correction. But he was simply unwilling to contemplate a more thorough democratization of society, even though it could break up many coercive power structures.

On these points, someone like Marx is simply a far more acute and helpful analyst than Mill.

The Value of Mill

Mill was a complex thinker who was often tugged in multiple directions. Rather than choosing a path and sticking to it, his response was usually to try to synthesize the best elements of competing traditions into a seamless whole. Nowhere is this clearer than in his variant of liberal socialism, which linked liberalism's commitments to individualism and moral equality to the socialist demands for economic equality and workplace democracy.

Any liberal socialism today would need to be more throughgoing in its democratic commitments and shrewder in its analysis of power in capitalist societies. But Mill does provide a platform for thinking more carefully about the relationship between the great modernist doctrines of liberalism and socialism, and how they might be conciliated.

At the very least, those of us on the Left shouldn't allow libertarians and classical liberals to claim him as one of their own when Mill called himself a socialist and heaped nothing but scorn on defenders of capitalist exploitation and inequality.

So . . . two cheers for J. S. Mill?