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The English Utilitarians, Some Recent Reconsiderations

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Callum Barrell: *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.)

Helen McCabe: *John Stuart Mill, Socialist*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021.)

Niall O'Flaherty: *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment: The Moral and Political Thought of William Paley*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.)

In 1900, perhaps the greatest Victorian historian of ideas, Leslie Stephen, released his three-volume *English Utilitarians*. Coming to grips with the political thought of the century that had just ended, he believed, required considering the “dominant beliefs of the adherents of this school.” So privileged a point of access was offered by what we would now call “classical utilitarianism” that a study of it could serve as a “sequel” to his previous *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*. The utilitarians, Stephen was confident, could serve as a kind of synecdoche for a whole age. Further, if the utilitarians did not grasp the whole truth, there was no doubt that their “creed” would make up part of the “definitive system” that would arrive in due time.¹

While most of us no longer hold out hopes for the all-comprehending science of society that animated Stephen, interest in the utilitarian tradition is still strong, and such of its core aspirations as defining and measuring “harm,” delineating a space of individual liberty, and reconciling private interests and the good of all remain indubitably relevant. Naturally, though, persistence of attention does not imply stability of interpretation. As two of the scholars considered here stress, J. S. Mill was deeply influenced by a philosophy of history, derived from the eccentric French religious theorist Henri de Saint-Simon, in which societies alternated between “organic” and “critical” periods, the former characterized by consensus and the latter by dissensus. Adopting this nomenclature, we might say that the historiography of utilitarianism is in a critical phase. Recent studies have pushed back on

¹Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians*, 3 vols. (London: Duckworth, 1900), 1:11.

understandings that have persisted from Stephen's day, understandings which might be summed up in the notion that the utilitarian tradition was equivalent to a secular, unhistoricist liberalism. Three in particular merit lengthier reflection. Niall O'Flaherty's *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment* challenges dismissive accounts of pre-Benthamite, religious utilitarianism; Callum Barrell's *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism* attacks the conventional wisdom that this school was indifferent to history; and Helen McCabe's *John Stuart Mill, Socialist* aims for a resolutely socialist, rather than liberal, reading of the greatest figure in this tradition.

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O'Flaherty's book constitutes something of a departure for the series in which it appeared, the flagship of the "Cambridge School," Ideas in Context. For the Cambridge School, at least according to some critics, has been insufficiently attentive both to religion and to utilitarianism, the latter area of neglect being largely an artifact of its relative lack of interest in the nineteenth century. With his study of William Paley, a resolutely Christian thinker in whose oeuvre one can observe several aspects of the transition from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century preoccupations, O'Flaherty has set up shop at the intersection of these less trafficked streets.

O'Flaherty's study immediately stands as the essential work on Paley and the tradition of which he was the culmination. It has very much the virtues of Paley himself: thoroughness, evenhandedness, wryness, and limpidity. But "theological utilitarianism," even on its most capable presentation, was a dry school of thought, and those without an antecedent interest in the subject matter may find it tough to stay motivated throughout O'Flaherty's exhaustive study. Nevertheless, political theorists and historians of political ideas who sustain their attention throughout will profit from a wealth of evergreen insights.

The basic burden of *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment* is to demonstrate that the theological utilitarians and especially their greatest exponent, William Paley, conceived of themselves as participating in, even guiding, *enlightened modernity*. Our own associations of modernity or the Enlightenment with secularization or science *as against* religion, and the contrast between the stodgy and complacent Paley and the radical, innovative, forward-looking Bentham, have led us too quickly to equate "the intellectual mind-set and practical aims" of theological utilitarianism with something like a counter-Enlightenment project.² Far from standing athwart history yelling stop, Paley and his moderate-Anglican ilk saw themselves as espousing a program of moral progress at once religious and rationalist, advancing both piety and reason. O'Flaherty prosecutes this case beyond any reasonable doubt.

If our modern assumption of an opposition between religion and science has hindered us from grasping how Paley and his comrades could see themselves as "the true vanguard of the scientific revolution," we have been

²O'Flaherty, *Utilitarianism*, 22.

further inhibited from appreciating the true character of Paley's political thought by the identification of progressivism with "democratic ideals."³ This is a rather less pardonable reason to have caricatured Paley's views for, as O'Flaherty notes, however pervasive the equation of enlightenment with secularization might be, everyone with even a passing familiarity with eighteenth-century thought should know that the great aspirants after a reform-minded science of man were hardly uniformly democratic; this is the epoch, after all, which gave us the phrase *enlightened despotism*. While we may recall that neither Voltaire nor the physiocrats nor even the early Condorcet were *democrats* despite their faith in progress, when we brush up against lesser-known writers we tend to fall back into equating antidemocracy with antiprogressivism or antimodernism. Yet few impulses could mislead us more thoroughly. O'Flaherty's Paley belongs to one of the most important Anglophone outlooks on politics throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: that which rejected *political equality* not from the distrust of but from the *commitment to progress*. This mindset arguably achieved its apex in the great mid-Victorian jurist Henry Maine: admit the demos into politics on the same terms as the upper classes and invasions of property, attacks on science, irrational customs, the spread of fanaticism, and the contraction of freedom would all ensue.⁴ Opposing democracy was part and parcel of upholding enlightenment, and as the many poor depended especially greatly on enlightened governance given their lack of private resources, maintaining political hierarchy was paradoxically integral to ensuring the well-being of the worst-off. In Paley, then, we hear the perennial voice of self-assured paternalist technocracy, wrapped in a specifically late-Enlightenment Broad Church cloak.

Understandably enough, O'Flaherty sees his endeavor as reconstructing a *lost* tradition. He wants to correct the historical record, to show that, contrary to prevailing narratives, Paley and his ilk were not stuck on the margins of a secular, democratizing Enlightenment, that "theological utility thrived because it embodied . . . the values . . . of an enlightened age" and that it was seen as "the quintessence of eighteenth-century modernism" by many. But, as the previous paragraph hints, perhaps contrary to authorial intentions, *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment* made me wonder whether Paley did not have as strong a claim to the future as better-regarded writers.

For one thing, it is interesting to look more closely at Paley's treatment of the parliamentary reform movement. No doubt, *prescriptively* he is one of history's losers here. Within three decades of his death the constitutional system which Paley had so revered was shattered by the 1832 Reform Act. And yet, *predictively*, Paley was more correct than most proponents of reform. Although there was a small rump of true democrats in the reform movement from the 1790s to the 1830s, the overwhelming majority of reformers held that

³Ibid., 26–27.

⁴Henry Maine, *Popular Government* (London: Murray, 1885).

reform did not imply universal suffrage—that a proper redistribution of political power, one well short of and in no way implicating democracy, could be effected once and for all.⁵ Though the slippery slope was probably less steep than Paley had imagined, surely he has been proved more prescient than his antagonists who believed that one could erect stable nondemocratic electoral boundaries after the armor of the Immemorial Constitution had been pierced. O’Flaherty does not play up this point,⁶ but Paley and later critics of parliamentary reform like Coleridge and the young Peel were more farsighted than proponents of moderate reform about the ultimate consequences of the constitutional alterations under debate.⁷

Paley was, I think, not merely vindicated as a prognosticator even as his positive vision was left behind. For O’Flaherty’s study made me less certain that Paley has really lost the battle of history. For the antiegalitarian, technocratic streak which we find in Paley has never wanted for champions within the utilitarian tradition. Alongside the aforementioned Maine, the mid- and late-Victorian periods had their fair share of antidemocratic utilitarian eminences, such as John Austin and James Fitzjames Stephen (not to mention Mill’s many deep fears about democratization going awry). It is not only as a rejoinder to Henry Sidgwick’s views about esotericism in moral teaching that the denigration of utilitarianism as a “government house” ideology has stuck.⁸ In our own time, the average champion of cost/benefit analysis in politics tends to wish to optimize the existent constitutional structure by more efficiently harnessing elite knowledge and employing bureaucratic mechanisms to guide the populace. Moreover, such characters seem to have an intense focus on the threats that ignorance and extremism pose to prevailing but fragile norms which are seen to have permitted gradual progress. In other words, even if she does not dwell on “unintended consequences” as incessantly as Paley did,⁹ the modern utilitarian in politics seems more Paleyite paternalist tinkerer than Benthamite radical. There is surely more of the former than the latter in Cass Sunstein’s picture of the world, at least.

Quibbles with *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment* can only be minor. One is that O’Flaherty insists on the consistency of Paley’s essential position over time. The trouble is not that he fails to make out the case, but that he seems to view vindicating Paley’s consistency as bound up with demonstrating the inadequacy of conservative or counter-Enlightenment caricatures of

⁵E.g., Robert Saunders, “Parliament and People: The British Constitution in the Long Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Modern European History* 6, no. 1 (2008): 72–87.

⁶Cf. D. L. Le Mahieu, foreword to *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, by William Paley (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), xxi–xxviii.

⁷E.g. Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 190–92.

⁸E.g., Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, “Secrecy in Consequentialism: A Defence of Esoteric Morality,” *Ratio* 23, no. 1 (2010): 34–58.

⁹E.g., O’Flaherty, *Utilitarianism*, 205.

him. It is unclear, though, why there should be any connection between the two issues. Plenty of reactionaries remained perfectly steadfast in their views, while there have been many progressives whose views shifted as events and opportunities dictated, and vice versa. Perhaps O'Flaherty believes a certain amount of coherence is necessary for a figure to merit the kind of close attention he gives Paley, but that seems dubious too. A second quibble is that, while the book masterfully conveys the contours of the Paleyan *Weltanschauung* and draws connections to his intellectual/political milieu, a certain analytic slipperiness sometimes creeps in. Those with political theory backgrounds may wish, for example, to understand more clearly what exactly is the relationship between Paley's championing of generous poor relief and "the principle and reality of equality before the law"¹⁰; puzzlingly, O'Flaherty treats the former as inhering in or following from the latter, but this linkage is unconvincing. Opponents of the Poor Law (as critics of the welfare state today) did not think they were undercutting tenets of legal equality.

Overall, though, O'Flaherty has produced an impressive and enriching work. One important service that the history of political thought can render is to present us with the strongest possible reconstruction of what a political dispensation or regime type meant to the most articulate people who lived under it. If, as a great intellectual historian once put it, "nearly every system which professes to be deduced from general philosophical principles will be found on investigation to bear a very close relation to the facts of some existing government,"¹¹ this lesson holds doubly true for the likes of Paley, whose political theory was tightly tethered to an understanding of the late eighteenth-century English state as progressive and orderly, justifiably hierarchical but fair to all classes. The mind of the *enlightened ancien régime* is no better accessed than through Paley; and as this is a regime which scholars of politics will always be able to study with profit, O'Flaherty's contribution promises to be lasting. Indeed, as Western states become increasingly unequal, responsive disproportionately to elite opinion, and steered by a self-assured philanthropic paternalism interrupted by occasional eruptions of populist fervor, we may wish to turn to Paley, rather than to more famous thinkers, for insights into our own governing practices and ideologies.¹²

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¹⁰Ibid., 235.

¹¹J. N. Figgis, *Typical English Churchmen from Parker to Maurice* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1902), 232.

¹²Britain from the Glorious Revolution to the First Reform Act has a good claim to being the archetypal example of a "decent consultation hierarchy" in Western political history (John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 71–77). Paley can be considered one of the great thinkers of this broad form of government.

Like *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment*, Barrell's *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism* is indubitably successful in its key aim: countering the image of utilitarians as philosophical radicals possessing a philistine's contempt for history. "An attentiveness to history," Barrell shows, was present among the utilitarian crowd starting from Bentham, and not merely a late addition by the more ecumenical Mill *files*. Instead, J. S. Mill did not so much bring history within the sights of this tradition as take a side in a long-running debate within it. As Barrell puts it, the bulk of the utilitarian school from Bentham forward did not neglect history; what they did was to "conceptualise[] historical and political enquiry as methodologically distinct but complementary enterprises."¹³ History could furnish important materials for political and philosophical reflection, but historical truths were categorically distinct from political causes of action or from the philosophical determination of moral concepts. History and politics, in a manner of speaking, farmed neighboring but separate fields, with politics reaching over and picking up some of the fruits from history's plot of land. By contrast to this conceptually tidy approach, Barrell identifies another camp in which he places both Mills, a camp which was altogether less neat; here "the division of labour was intentionally less clear-cut," with James hailing "history as the real business of philosophy" and John Stuart "collaps[ing] politics into a philosophy of human progress."¹⁴

Barrell unearths much thought-provoking material, and he is deft in juxtaposing contending positions on the question of history's status as a science and the relationship of historical research to the kinds of reform-minded philosophy that utilitarians undertook. However, his handling of the political implications of these conceptions of history is unsure in some places.¹⁵ This is particularly true regarding J. S. Mill. Take the following passage:

When reformers of various camps—radical, conservative, liberal, and socialist—addressed the social question, they tended to give little thought to workers' intellectual and moral improvement, leaving intact the basic structures of industrialism. . . . Mill was clear that humanity's ultimate prospects depended on the cultivation of workers' moral, intellectual, and aesthetic faculties, whereas a majority of reformers, including the Saint-Simonians and Comte, wanted to preserve the social structures of industrialism and reconstruct on its basis a new kind of society in which the masses were excluded from spiritual and temporal power.¹⁶

¹³Barrell, *History*, 16, 18.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 18, 61.

¹⁵It is also worth noting one factual error: James Fitzjames Stephen is mistaken for his father James Stephen on 148. This does not deeply harm Barrell's analysis; but one should not draw a tight link between James's *Lectures on the History of France* and James Fitzjames's attacks on *On Liberty*, which came over a decade after the former's death.

¹⁶Barrell, *History*, 213.

There are a few problems with this passage. First, Mill's distinctness is vastly overstated. Writers from across the ideological spectrum were intensely focused on the question of the moral effects of modern industry; this has to have been one of if not *the* most moralistic age in treatments of the economy and the working class in history. For instance, Comte, cited here, did not invent the term "altruism" because he was indifferent to workers' character, and Mill did not mock him as a "morality-intoxicated" writer out of the blue.¹⁷ Likewise, Comte's followers, both Right- and Left-aligned, saw the political self-abnegation of the working class as the necessary route for not only their economic security but also their moral betterment. In a similar vein, it does not follow from support for "leaving intact the basic structures of industrialism" that one was indifferent to workers' moral welfare: one may, as many Victorians did, have championed the new industrial order as morally salutary for workers. What marked Mill from his contemporaries was not the desire for economic life to prove morally beneficial, but how he interpreted the ideal of moral uplift and which elements of the current economic regime he judged consistent with it. He differed from Comte and many socialists, for instance, in seeing competition as an aspect of the economic dispensation to be preserved (and perfected) rather than abolished. All sides felt there were *standards of moral uplift* by which economic rules and institutions were to be evaluated, but they parted ways in filling out the content of those standards and in assessing what moral effects nineteenth-century capitalism was actually producing.

Second, the passage above is vague, and this characteristic weakens Barrell's analysis of Mill's *politics* as a whole (as opposed to his analysis of Mill on social science and history, which is relentlessly nuanced and detailed). To take one example: Barrell's trenchant investigation of the historian of Greece and radical politician Grote sputters when he tries to examine the lessons that Mill drew from Grote; Barrell falls back on the generality that Mill "tried to reconcile the performance of civic duties with the claims of individual liberty."¹⁸ One wonders again: Who in this period did *not* believe that some settlement recognizing both the claims of society and those of the individual was required? To tell us anything concrete about *Mill*, as opposed to the general conundrums that political theory faced, we need more specificity about how "civic duties" and "individual liberty" were conceived, what the practical implications of those conceptions were taken to be, and how Mill's conceptions differed from others'.

Finally, even where *History and Historiography* hits on a striking dimension of Mill's thought, there is a tendency to leave the most conceptually vexing issues unprobed. Barrell accurately notes that, largely owing to the influence of "Saint-Simonianism," Mill came to stress the relativity of political

¹⁷E.g., William Selinger and Gregory Conti, "The Lost History of *Political Liberalism*," *History of European Ideas* 46, no. 3 (2020): 341–54.

¹⁸Barrell, *History*, 112–15.

structures and practices: “different stages of human progress not only will have, but ought to have, different institutions.”¹⁹ And he correctly observes the connection, in Mill’s hands, of this “doctrine of relativism” with his defense of “benevolent colonial despotism.”²⁰ But to leave it there is, at least for a political theorist, unsatisfying. For Barrell evinces no recognition that this connection is theoretically *underdetermined*, and that what really does the work of linking up an underlying philosophical viewpoint (in this case, relativism rather than universalism about political institutions) with an important policy standpoint (support for the empire) are what Mill called *axiomata media*, middle principles or intermediate axioms.²¹ Only a little reflection is required to see that there is no necessary or exclusive conjunction between imperialism and Mill’s form of relativism. Political universalists are at least equally likely to be imperialists; those who hold that only democracies or republics are legitimate systems of government have been only too ready to countenance adventurism and domination abroad. Even more to the point at hand, the heritage of Saint-Simonian historicism in particular was not dispositive of imperialist proclivities: the greatest of Saint-Simon’s disciples, Auguste Comte, whose influence on Mill’s notions of social science Barrell examines, was *skeptical* of imperialism, and many of his followers, the Positivists, were anti-imperialists.²² In sum, for all its acuity, *History and Historiography* leaves some of the real puzzles at the heart of Mill’s politics unsolved: Why did Mill’s harmonization of citizenly obligations and individual freedom assume the specific shape it did in his major works? Why did Mill take the precepts of historical relativism to confirm rather than undercut imperialist commitments?

These frustrations notwithstanding, *History and Historiography* brings out cogently a crucial but often overlooked feature not only of Mill’s thought, but of nineteenth-century liberalism more broadly. This is what we might call the “ripeness is all” thesis. As we have seen, Barrell frequently speaks of the *relativism* Mill picked up from historicizing, stadial theories. But it is important not to equate *moral* relativism as we commonly understand it now with Barrell’s exposition of Mill’s *historical* relativism. For it was essential to Mill’s relativism that it in no way rejected the possibility of attaining *the right* laws and practices and structures. Instead, its character was to deliver an *absolute* injunction to find the correct *fit* between the historically conditioned circumstances of society and one’s desired reforms. This outlook cashed out in the exhortation to tailor institutions appropriately to what

¹⁹Ibid., 168, quoting Mill’s *Autobiography*.

²⁰Barrell, *History*, 168.

²¹Mill, letter to Jules Ernest Naville, Jan. 4, 1860, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 91), 32:159.

²²Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Guizot and Tocqueville called “the social state.”²³ Just as on a nonrelativistic theory, there were right answers, or at least better and worse ones; but what the right answer was differed according to the stage of social evolution that the people in question had reached.²⁴

It is as a result of this viewpoint which so profoundly “blurred the boundaries between politics and history” that what we might call the *accusation of anachronism* proved such a potent weapon in the hands of many of the epoch’s great thinkers. The fundamental charge of *Democracy in America* is that antidemocratic visions have passed their expiration date; Constant attacks Rousseau’s and the Jacobins’ affection for ancient liberty as incompatible with modernity. In terms of the shape of the thought, these liberals’ deployments of the imputation of anachronism brought them close to nonliberal thinkers such as Hegel or Comte or Saint-Simon. Although of course they differed on which agendas counted as anachronistic, it was fundamental even to Comte, who believed that his system captured all that was good in conservatism,²⁵ that attempts at *restoration* were doomed to accomplish nothing but increase the labor pains in the birth of the order to come.²⁶ A wide array of figures in this era shared the perceptions both that one could never go back and also that it was dangerous to try to skip stages, to reach the end point of progress too quickly. For the political theorist, the most enlightening achievement of *History and Historiography* is to show how profoundly J. S. Mill partook of this wide-reaching *façon de penser*, and in so doing to highlight the porousness of the boundary between liberal and illiberal understandings of history and politics in the early-/mid-nineteenth century.²⁷ Mill, the “patron saint of liberalism,” was interested in currents of thought that we would now unhesitatingly describe as “illiberal”; liberal political theory in the 2020s—after so many decades of conceptual honing and refinement, institutional disciplining and cabining, and with a long legacy of concrete issue-positions behind it—has much less cross-fertilization from other schools than it experienced during a more ideologically open and inchoate age. And as Barrell proves beyond a shadow of a doubt, the way in which Mill was most affected by those outside the liberal canon was in his preoccupation

²³Melvin Richter, “Tocqueville and Guizot on Democracy: From a Type of Society to a Political Regime,” *History of European Ideas* 30, no. 1 (2004): 61–82.

²⁴Barrell, *History*, 169–71.

²⁵Auguste Comte, *Appel aux conservateurs* (Paris: Dalmont, 1855).

²⁶“There is a great difference between obeying the progress of civilization blindly and obeying it intelligently. The changes it demands take place as much in the first as in the second case; but they are longer delayed, and, above all, are only accomplished after having produced social perturbations more or less serious.” Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society,” in *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: The Early Essays of Auguste Comte*, ed. Ronald Fletcher (London: Heinemann Educational, 1974), 100.

²⁷E.g., H. S. Jones, introduction to *Comte: Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

with divining the suitability of reforms to societal requirements that could in turn only be seen in the light of “universal history.”²⁸ After *History and Historiography*, it seems inarguable that something like *historical fit* must take its place alongside liberty, utility, etc. as a master theme of Mill’s oeuvre, and that consequently Mill’s own notions of progress cannot be readily assimilated to those promulgated by left-liberals today.

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An interest in notions of progress connects Barrell’s study with Helen McCabe’s recent portrayal of Mill as a socialist. Further, several of the secondary dramatis personae, such as Saint-Simon, overlap between the two works, for the “socialist” and “historicist” sides of Mill were to a significant degree watered from the same canal.

But here the similarities end. Barrell revels in “jagged lines” and so firmly disavows “the mythologies of doctrine and coherence” that he suggests “abandon[ing] the search for analytically stable ideas” altogether.²⁹ McCabe, on the contrary, aspires to show that Mill’s thought forms a “coherent . . . whole,” and she everywhere stresses logicity, constancy, even unity.³⁰ Her Mill is the dedicated expositor of a “consistent” system³¹—a position that has found able defenders, although one that provokes instinctive skepticism in anyone who has recently tried reading through the whole thirty-plus volumes of his *Collected Works*. But McCabe argues not only that Mill’s life-work was coherent but, as her title indicates, that he was coherently *socialist*. Her Mill is meant to be a new Mill, not a “paradigmatic liberal” but a thoroughgoing socialist.³²

John Stuart Mill, Socialist is provocative and challenging. McCabe is commendably forthright that she is trying to correct prevailing notions about Mill, which she sees as one-sided, by herself pressing a controversial perspective as far as it can go. Can we fashion out of the Mill corpus a fully socialist thinker? Alas, we confront some difficulties.

I was fortunate to participate in a symposium on *John Stuart Mill, Socialist*, in which I examined both the book’s many virtues and some general problems with its argument; I will not recap those points.³³ Moreover, given its controversial thesis, the book has received a fair bit of attention already, so I will not rerun the summaries one can find in other reviews. Instead, I want simply to highlight a few difficulties that not only bedevil McCabe’s case, but trouble any effort to bring Mill into the socialist fold.

²⁸Barrell, *History*, 183.

²⁹Barrell, *History*, 225.

³⁰McCabe, *Mill, Socialist*, 5.

³¹Versions of the word appear eight times in less than a page at one point (*ibid.*, 4–5.)

³²*Ibid.*, 3.

³³Gregory Conti, “In What Senses Should We See John Stuart Mill as a Socialist?,” *History of European Ideas*, forthcoming.

There are different ways to think about what is involved in labeling someone a socialist. One centers on self-understanding: Did the thinker in question believe herself to be one? Here, the evidence base is quite thin. As McCabe herself has admitted, the book was inspired by one moment in Mill's *Autobiography* in which he refers to him and his wife falling "under the general designation of Socialists."³⁴ Depending on how precisely one tabulates it, McCabe cites this line some 25-35 times. Fascinatingly, when quoted in full (as McCabe only does twice) the passage does not clearly constitute an instance of self-description, but instead seems more to reflect that he believes they are "being looked upon as socialists."³⁵ Mill makes one other gesture in this direction in the *Autobiography*, which McCabe also quotes liberally, in which he unambiguously attributed the appellation to himself, but here an element of equivocation enters as well: he says his political views took on "a greater approximation" to "a qualified Socialism."³⁶

Most Mill scholarship has rejected seeing these sentences as sufficient evidence that Mill aimed over the course of his career to expound a socialist viewpoint. For any prolific author, especially one as politically engaged as Mill, it is an uphill climb to hinge so much of his ideological orientation on so little material.³⁷ A default to caution about overreading a small number of snippets out of a huge corpus should apply at least double for Mill, who boasted incessantly of his eclecticism and of his success in drawing together insights from discrete intellectual sources. He stands almost certainly as the Anglophone philosopher *most* profligate in attaching political labels to himself and in doling out praise to an array of traditions for the partial truths which he believed them to contain. Mill called himself a "radical" and a "liberal" vastly more frequently than he took on the socialist moniker; and during the crucial period of the 1860s, in both private correspondence and public speeches, Mill seems overwhelmingly

³⁴MCCabe, "Response to Comments—John Stuart Mill, Socialist," *History of European Ideas*, forthcoming; Mill, *Autobiography*, in *Collected Works*, 1:239.

³⁵Raimund Ottow, "Why John Stuart Mill Called Himself a Socialist," *History of European Ideas* 17, no. 4 (1993): 479–83. The relevant clause reads in full: "our ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists." The following sentence then "repudiate[s] with the greatest energy that tyranny of society over the individual which most Socialistic systems are supposed to involve."

³⁶Mill, *Autobiography*, 199.

³⁷The climb is especially steep here as Mill most often wrote *about* socialism without adopting any socialist affiliation. It is especially telling that in *Chapters on Socialism* Mill wrote not as a proselytizer but as an analyst of a set of "definite political doctrines" that would continue to gain in import owing to expansions of the suffrage (*Collected Works*, 5:707).

to have identified and been identified by contemporaries as an “advanced liberal.”³⁸

In sum, McCabe draws as much blood from the stone as she can, but I suspect that for most readers *Mill, Socialist* will not shake what has come to be a broad scholarly consensus: that he had much more sympathy with socialists than the “classical liberal” designation he is often given suggests, but that adequate grounds for thinking he was self-consciously engaged in a socialist political-theoretical project are lacking.

Even if we are not sold on the claims about his self-conception, we might nonetheless believe that the *content* of Mill’s political thought is best characterized as socialist. McCabe holds that when “we *do* see what Mill meant, it looks like socialism.”³⁹ She is entirely right that “one does not have to be a Marxist to be a socialist”; socialism is not reducible to Marxism alone.⁴⁰ And she is correct as well that Mill’s utilitarianism does not preclude his having developed a socialist program; for a long time it has been recognized that nothing intrinsic to the principle of utility requires *laissez-faire*.⁴¹ But even with these concessions made, we must ask: If “we uncover what is there” in Mill, does socialism fit the bill?

Now, to recur to the quotations from the *Autobiography* above on which McCabe dwells so much: one thing they both share, beyond their qualified character, is a projection of socialism into a region of the distant and ideal. Mill was “approximat[ing]” a “qualified Socialism” regarding “the ultimate prospects of humanity”; he and Taylor might fall “under the general designation of Socialists” concerning their “ideal of ultimate improvement.”⁴² McCabe is sharp in bringing this out, and she makes much of the idea that Mill’s “utopia” or “North Star” was socialist. There is some strong ground to stand on here. But as McCabe notes, Mill differed from the common run of nineteenth-century socialists in being “unwilling to draw detailed blueprints for a future society,”⁴³ and contra Marx and Engels he thought that the perfect society might well include competition and private property. Mill hardly committed himself regarding the formal institutions and laws of this utopia, and it is dubious at best whether these institutions and laws would be recognizably socialist as most scholars understand the term as opposed to comprising the purest forms of private property and market relations.

³⁸On the label generally see Rosario López, “‘Advanced Liberalism’ and the Politics of Reform in Victorian Parliamentary Debates of the 1860s,” in *Parliamentarism and Democratic Theory*, ed. Kari Palonen and José Rosales (Opladen: Budrich, 2015), 73–96.

³⁹McCabe, *Mill, Socialist*, 7.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 242.

⁴¹E.g., A. V. Dicey, *Lectures on the Relation between Law and Public Opinion during the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1905).

⁴²Mill, *Autobiography*, 199, 239.

⁴³McCabe, *Mill, Socialist*, 197.

If Mill only hinted at a socialist tendency within his own thinking in the context of an eventually ideal humanity, he most often expressed agreement with the socialist camps of which he knew in the context of *critiques* of the status quo. As he put it in his most strident moment of sympathy: “socialism, as long as it attacks the existing individualism, is easily triumphant.”⁴⁴ But even here, his blessing was far from unmixed, and we must not forget Mill’s penchant to exaggerate his affection for his interlocutors. He chided the socialists on several fronts, above all on their rejection of competition; indeed, so firm was Mill’s aforementioned celebration of competition that one wonders if this feature on its own should not exclude him from the socialist canon. Diagnostically, what Mill appreciated most was not the specifics of socialist critique but its spirit and the way it enlivened a political culture too prone, in his eyes, to apathetic submission to the status quo. Without socialists’ perspectives, there was little chance that the great intellectual task of a progressive age would be accomplished, namely, that “the whole field of social institutions should be re-examined.”⁴⁵ Mill’s high valuation of socialists’ service here extended beyond discussion: he cheered “experiments” with different kinds of “industrial combinations” and different models of “association” which he believed socialists were hungry to undertake, for these would reveal important truths about the possibilities and limits of socio-economic organization and contribute to the “education” of the enterprising workingmen themselves.⁴⁶ Their great work lay in generating inquiries into fundamental matters of social concern, contributing to the “work of thought and discussion, aided by progressive experiments” that characterized progressive societies.⁴⁷

Socialists were, in short, a major *deliberative* boon. By holding out high moral ideals toward which humanity over generations could aspire and by pointing to the status quo’s shortcomings, socialists—with the exception of the revolutionary ones—elevated and enriched Britain’s political culture. But when it came to the question of *what ought to be done*, Mill was largely critical. Mill opposed equal universal suffrage—although it was the staple political desideratum of the French and British socialists he knew. While Mill advocated the legal protection of unions, he opposed most of the unionists’ other aims. He argued *against* such measures as the imposition of equal pay throughout a sector; progressive income taxes, as well as taxes on savings and capital; minimum-wage laws; most public instruments for financial assistance to the poor; protective tariffs to boost domestic industries; regulation of

⁴⁴Mill, “Newman’s Political Economy,” in *Collected Works*, 5:444.

⁴⁵Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 711.

⁴⁶J. S. Mill, “The Savings of the Middle and Working Classes,” in *Collected Works*, 5:410. In the economic arena Mill articulated something like a *right to try*—to bring an “idea” to a “practical test”—which cohered with *On Liberty*’s enthusiasm for “experiments in living” (Mill, “Endowments,” in *Collected Works*, 5:621).

⁴⁷Mill, “Newman’s Political Economy,” 444.

prices; laws preventing exorbitant interest rates. These and similar proposals, Mill averred, reflected the mere “class interest” of the “majority of manual labourers.”⁴⁸

Aversions of this sort look not merely *not* socialist, but not even neoliberal, let alone social-democratic. There is no way around the fact that a great deal of the policy repertoire that all liberal/social-democratic governments now deploy to assist and protect workers met resistance from Mill. This resistance stemmed directly from Mill’s adherence to a kind of zero-sum political anthropology in which, at least after “civilization” had advanced to a certain point, government activity sapped citizens of energy, hindered their moral development, and undermined their autonomy. McCabe is cagey about these hyper-“liberal” facets of Mill’s program. She admits to being skeptical that Mill would have backed the welfare state but also tries to close the distance, suggesting that the welfare state is not “necessarily anti-Millian” because the former’s supporters have appealed to abstract values similar to those that animated Mill. McCabe does not confront, though, that there *were* figures in Mill’s day promulgating systems very close to the *État-providence* upon which social democracies have come to converge, including his own translator. Mill adjudged these systems, quite simply, “opposite” to his own.⁴⁹

In policy terms, three areas of the Millian agenda stand out as specially relevant to McCabe’s inquiry: (a) high inheritance taxes; (b) reform of landed property; (c) cooperatives. In all of these areas, Mill was genuinely *egalitarian*, but whether he is best thought of as *socialist* is a separate matter. Exactly how steep (a) would be is unclear, but while considerable it was intended to be consistent with the principle of private property.⁵⁰ Moreover, the proposal was justified on the grounds of equalizing opportunity (“starting fair in the race”) and reducing “unmerited” fortunes⁵¹—both ambitions which are consonant with “classical liberal” conceptions of society and economy. Similarly, Mill’s views on (b)—which varied over the decades and depending on the context being addressed, from promoting a mixed system of peasant proprietorship and large landowning in Ireland to defending a principle of partial nationalization in his last years—had a strongly meritocratic and individualist thrust. The problem with prevailing land-ownership arrangements was that they were, *in contradistinction to other forms of property*, unrewarding of hard work and productive of intergenerational hierarchies; and the wider distribution of landed property which Mill favored was not reviled by Marx for

⁴⁸J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, in *Collected Works*, 19:442.

⁴⁹Gregory Conti, “Charles Dupont-White: An Idiosyncratic Nineteenth-Century Theorist on Speech, State, and John Stuart Mill,” *Global Intellectual History*, forthcoming.

⁵⁰Thomas Holland, “John Stuart Mill and the Politics of Inheritance,” *History of Political Thought* 43, no. 1 (2022): 131–60.

⁵¹J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, in *Collected Works*, 3:986.

nothing.⁵² Interestingly, McCabe does not give much time to Mill's land proposals. For her, the locus of attention is (c). This concentration on cooperatives has long been typical of the *liberal socialist* or *market socialist* reading of Mill,⁵³ and in keeping with this longstanding line McCabe furnishes good evidence that Mill regarded industrial cooperation as a *socialist* system of organization. But of course, as the qualifying terms above suggest, the beauty of cooperatives to Mill and other Victorian liberals was that, if they were often seen a form of socialism, then they were the form uniquely consistent with private property and the market. Among Mill's friends it was commonplace for "co-operatives [to be embraced] as consistent with . . . traditional liberal views,"⁵⁴ and Mill himself did not indicate that rooting for cooperatives meant giving up on liberalism. Given that Mill was warier of state interference not just than subsequent figures who have adopted the market-socialist mantle but also than most cooperative socialists of his own day, and given that he remained so entrenched in the antiprotectionist bloc that he would have had fledgling cooperative firms compete against global capital, one might well wonder how Mill could have possibly believed his rosy forecasts (well reconstructed by McCabe) about their eventual triumph. In sum, Mill was genuinely *radical* on all three of these fronts, offering trenchant critiques of the status quo. But radicalism is a wider category than socialism, and there is a great distance between not being "an uncritical supporter of contemporary capitalism" and promoting solutions readily classifiable as socialist.⁵⁵

And this brings us to a final point, one that I think should give us greatest pause in assigning socialist credentials to Mill. This is his ardent support for the New Poor Law. Those who wish to make of Mill a lion for the economic left tend either to ignore or euphemize this position. McCabe barely mentions it, and when she does, she claims that Mill endorsed "at least a 'less-eligible' Poor Law."⁵⁶ This is creative phrasing. In fact, what Mill did was attack a more generous form of social provision, the Old Poor Law, and celebrate (along with other philosophic radicals, who here are the forerunners of modern "austerity" and "personal responsibility" politics) its replacement, the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. This landmark legislation was despised by the lower classes. The act's underlying principle was that the centuries-old Elizabethan Poor Law, which had established a framework according to

⁵²E.g., Max Ridge, "John Stuart Mill, Land Ownership, and Politics of Time, 1846–1873" (working paper); Michael Evans, "John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx: Some Problems and Perspectives," *History of Political Economy* 21, no. 2 (1989): 273–98.

⁵³Notably, though, Mill never uses either of these terms in his whole corpus, even though such combinations were hardly beyond reach.

⁵⁴Joseph Persky, "Producer Co-operatives in Nineteenth-Century British Economic Thought," *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 24, no. 2 (2017): 319–40.

⁵⁵McCabe, *Mill, Socialist*, 51.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 79, my italics.

which parishes were to provide for local residents in need,⁵⁷ had been inefficient and extravagant, and that therefore the conditions for receiving relief had to be made “less eligible,” that is, clearly less desirable than accepting any employment.⁵⁸ Accordingly, its chief planks included labor requirements in (insalubrious) workhouses for able-bodied men to receive aid; a reduction in relief for unmarried mothers; segregation of sexes in the workhouses, including separation of spouses; and the creation of a centralized regulatory board to ensure parishes adopted the new rules.⁵⁹ Mill’s approbation of the New Poor Law remained constant, and he rejected alternatives as promoting indolence and ill morals in workers and foisting an undue burden on productive members of society.⁶⁰

Mill’s fidelity to a system that has struck many as stingy and punitive contrasts with Paley’s affection for the more substantial—and more socialistic⁶¹—Old Poor Law. Indeed, as O’Flaherty shows, not only did Paley *not* wish to trim back a scheme that Mill and later utilitarians would condemn as irrationally profligate, he wished to increase its level of provision and to initiate reforms that would remove the law’s unfortunate byproduct (tied to its local rather than centralized provision of financial assistance) of inhibiting the mobility of the poor.⁶² From premises of organic Christian hierarchy, Paley derived government-enforced obligations of redistribution and succor from the higher to the lower classes. From secular egalitarian first principles, on the other hand, Mill arrived at a position of seeking to keep public antipoverty spending low on the grounds that such programs were tantamount to a morally degrading paternalism. While most of Paley’s worldview will be unattractive to the modern Left, his defense of significant provision for the poor, guaranteed by the state and superintended by a dutiful technocracy, will, I suspect, be preferred by many readers today to Mill’s own vision, which held that workers making their cooperatives thrive against the backdrop of the thinnest of safety nets and market competition was the path to social justice.

We may, of course, consider Mill a socialist should we so choose, and McCabe provides much ammunition for those so inclined. But in that case,

⁵⁷E.g., Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531–1782* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵⁸E.g., Satoshi Fujimura, “Nassau William Senior and the Poor Laws,” *History of Economics Review* 70, no. 1 (2018): 49–59.

⁵⁹E.g., Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834–1884* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶⁰E. G. West, “J. S. Mill’s Redistribution Policy: New Political Economy or Old?,” *Economic Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1978): 570–86.

⁶¹Tellingly, Mill compared the 1848 “right to work” program of French socialists to the “Poor-law of Elizabeth,” not to the current dispensation which he supported. J. S. Mill, “Vindication of the French Revolution of February 1848,” in *Collected Works*, 20:348–49.

⁶²O’Flaherty, *Utilitarianism*, 272–73.

we should be frank that his was a socialism from which those who hope for durable improvement in workers' lives should probably steer clear. It still seems safest to see Mill as a tortured state-skeptical liberal possessed of utopian yearnings and radical impulses, but also harboring an abiding practical hostility not only to much that socialists have long advocated but even to policies that social democrats and centrist liberals regard as completely essential to a decent society. This excellent crop of books, in any case, shows just how variegated and beguiling and challenging were the positions on society, economy, and history running through the utilitarian tradition.