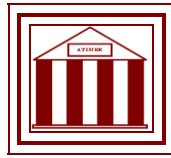


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**John Stuart Mill: On the Concept of
Liberty and the Breaking of the Connection
between Freedom and Property**

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John Stuart Mill: On the Concept of Liberty and the Breaking of the Connection between Freedom and Property

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Abstract

John Stuart Mill's main contribution to philosophical-political thought concerns the concept of liberty. Mill's view marks the beginning of a new tendency of liberal thought, the thus called New Liberalism, to distinguish it from the traditional liberal point of view: the Classic Liberalism.

In the Nineteenth Century the traditional point of view was represented by Herbert Spencer (*On The Proper Sphere of Government*, 1842; *The Man versus the State*, 1884), with particular regard to his reading of Smith, Malthus, Darwin; on the opposite side, after Mill and building on the theoretical basis of Mill's thought, there was chiefly Thomas H. Green (*Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, 1885-1888, *On the Different Senses of Freedom* 1886; *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*, 1861).

The opposition between the two tendencies emerged in the Nineteenth Century, but it is not confined within that age; it still persists, as an actual one: in the Twentieth Century, exponents of the New Liberalism include John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, 1971; *Political Liberalism*, 1993) and Ronald Dworkin (*Taking Rights Seriously*, 1977); exponents of the Classic Liberalism include Friedrich von Hayek (*Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 1973) and Robert Nozick (*Anarchy, State and Utopia*, 1974).

The core of the difference between these two tendencies mainly concerns the role of the State in relation to individual freedom and the significance of the economic freedom in relation to the general notion of liberty.

With regard to the first point, Classic Liberalism maintained and still maintains that the task of the State is to safeguard public order and to protect people and property. With regard to the second point, it maintained and still maintains that the economic freedom is inherently part of the general notion of freedom. Mill was the first liberal thinker to revise this line of thought.

The problem I am going to examine concerns a specific point of Mill's philosophy: the breaking of the connection between freedom and property, and its main effect: the end of the traditional liberal opposition between liberty and law.

Keywords: liberty, property, law, liberalism

The Background

To understand the importance of the turning point represented by Mill's conception of liberty it is useful to spend some words to describe what was the view of liberty in his own day.

In the Victorian age, liberty was thought of as a private right that the State should not interfere with by laws, enactments and so on. As already noted above, it was thought that the task of the State should be only to safeguard people and property.

The connection between liberty and property was a very strong one: liberty was thought of as functional to property, and property, in turn, was thought of as functional to liberty.

The reason for such a point of view is that in the English tradition the concept of liberty had always had an utilitarian foundation and a materialistic meaning: "to be free" had always meant "liberty of action" and "liberty of action" meant the absence of legal restrictions to the fulfillment of one's own project.

This point of view involved an absolute opposition between liberty and law: the ruling idea was that where law was there couldn't be freedom, and that where freedom was there couldn't be law.

The roots of such a point of view date back to Hobbes: they lie in the Hobbesian idea that individuals have the right to do everything that the State does not forbid.

Writing about liberty, Hobbes uses a physical approach, influenced by Galileo and Gassendi. In *Leviathan* he writes

Liberty properly means lack of opposition (by opposition I mean external obstacles to motion) and it can be related both to irrational and inanimate and rational creature[...] A free man is he who is not impeded to do what he wants do[...] Every time that the words "to be free" and "freedom" are referred to anything else than body we make a mistake, because what isn't subject to motion isn't subject to hindrance. (*Leviathan*, 1651, part II, chap. XXI, §1).

In the Natural Condition, the lack of hindrances is granted both by the absence of political power and by the Law of Nature. The lack of political power entails that nobody can compel anyone to do anything; the Law of Nature, on the other hand, authorizes everybody to do whatever he wants. In the Political Condition, i.e. when the State is founded, the lack of hindrances rests on the "silence of the law": everybody can do whatever the law doesn't forbid.

On this basis, the opposition between liberty and law is taken for granted: where there is law, there isn't liberty; and where there is liberty, there isn't law. Liberty and law are mutually conflicting.

The political theory of John Locke reinforces the relation between liberty and law, both in the Natural and in the Political condition, in the direction of

natural rights: life, freedom, body, property. Locke gathers all these rights within the concept of 'property'.

In the *Natural Condition*, the Law of Nature maintains that nobody has the right to damage others with regard to the natural rights, because human beings are equal and independent, as sons of God (*The Second Treatise on Government*, 1690, chap. II, §6.)

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions (*The Second Treatise on Government*, 1690, chap. II, §6.)

In the *Political Condition*, Civil Law must protect the natural rights, because such a protection is exactly the reason for the foundation of the State. The supreme power, Locke writes, cannot deprive anyone of his 'property'. That is to say that no law can be made against life, freedom, body, possession. (*Sec.Tret.Gov.*, chap.XI, §138)

The supreme power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his own consent: for the preservation of property being the end of government, and that for which men enter into society, it necessarily supposes and requires, that the people should have property, without which they must be supposed to lose that, by entering into society, which was the end for which they entered into it (*Sec.Tret.Gov.*, chap.XI, §138)

It is in Locke's theory that we find the first clear enunciation of the connection between liberty and property: right to property depends on every individual's right to his own body, and this right in turn depends on the right to life and liberty.

The starting point of these connections is that everything in nature is given by God in common to men: but, when a man removes something out of this common condition, he uses his own body and his own hands, so he mixes his labour with and connects to it something that is his own. It is this fact that makes his own property what was before a common property (*Sec.Treat.Gov.*,chap. V, §27).

[...] every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property (*Sec.Treat.Gov.*,chap. V, §27).

The relation between property, liberty and law is here clearly defined. It endures in the English political thought with Adam Smith with regard to economic theory, and with Jeremy Bentham and John Austin with regard to legal and political theory.

According to Smith, every man must be free to pursue his own economic interest: an “invisible hand” transforms his own interest into the interest of the community as a whole. By pursuing his own interest in fact he is "led by an invisible hand" to achieve an aim which was not in his intention. (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776, book IV, chap.II).

led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776, book IV, chap.II).

According to Bentham, liberty is absence of coercion, while law is essentially coercion. Law therefore cannot produce liberty. In Bentham’s idea, liberty is “a branch of security”

personal liberty is security against a certain species of injury which affects the person; political liberty, is [...]security against the injustice of the members of the Government (*Principles of the Civil Code*, 1802, part I, chap.II)

Finally, according to Austin liberty is freedom from legal restraints.

Freedom, Liberty, are negative names, denoting the absence of Restrain. Civil, Political or Legal Liberty, is the absence of Legal Restrain (*Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1826-1832, 1th ed, 1861, lec.XII)

If liberty is freedom from legal restraints, then legal restraints involve a decrease of liberty. The sphere of human action mainly affected by such an idea was that of economic liberties, starting from the freedom of private enterprise, including the freedom of contract, the freedom of each one to decide the cost of labour and the working hours, the freedom to employ children as workers, and so on -without any legal interference.

The idea that liberty was freedom from legal duties was a general one, so it did not concern only the ground of the economic liberties. Every kind of freedom was involved, because every kind of freedom was thought to be on the same level, and based on the same foundation. Freedom of speech and freedom of private enterprise, for instance, were seen to stand on the same level, as were freedom of worship and freedom of contract. In this way, legal restrictions too were conceived to be on the same level: as a decrease of liberty.

It is quite evident to our own culture and human sensibility that there is a difference between legally enforcing a decrease of the freedom of speech and

enforcing a decrease of the freedom of contract, or between limiting the freedom of worship and limiting the mistreatment of manpower. But this was not the point of view in the Victorian age. At that time, the dominant view was that all liberties were on the same ground and had the same foundation.

In order to get out from that frame of mind it was of fundamental importance to separate the sphere of economic liberties from the sphere of personal liberties. And in order to do it, it was essential to give liberty a new foundation. This is precisely what Stuart Mill did.

Liberty: a new perspective

As I said above, from Hobbes on the concept of liberty had always had a materialistic meaning: from a theoretical point of view, the starting point of

Mill's foundation of liberty was to strip the concept of liberty of its materialistic and utilitarian meaning .

It is true that Mill recognizes the Utilitarian Principle as the ultimate appeal in all ethical questions, as he writes in *On Liberty*, but it is also true that he adds that such a principle must regard the "permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (*On Liberty*, 1859, Introductory, Mill's *Collected Works* XVIII)

it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being (*On Liberty*, 1859, Introductory, Mill's *Collected Works* XVIII)

What Mill means by "permanent interest of man as a progressive being" emerges some pages later. Quoting Wilhelm von Humboldt and agreeing with him, Mill writes that the human being has ends which depend on desires, but he has also an end which is independent on, an end prescribed by "the eternal or immutable dictates of reason": this end is his own spiritual and intellectual development (*On Lib.*, chap. III)

the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole (*On Lib.*, chap. III)

This is a remarkable idea, given what it entails: namely, that there are higher and lower desires, as well as higher and lower pleasures.

In the essay on *Utilitarianism* (1861) the discussion about the different kinds of pleasures is more explicit, and Mill writes that some pleasures are more desirable and more valuable than others. This is a remarkable idea because it is in contrast with the stronger brand of utilitarianism, exemplified by Jeremy Bentham and by Mill's own father, James.

The turning point for such a detachment from strict utilitarianism happened when Stuart Mill got in touch with Alexis Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* (1835-1840) he reviewed in 1835 and 1840 (C. W. XVIII); but some premises of the new course date back to his essay on *Bentham* (1838, C.W., X). In this essay, Mill argues against Bentham, and emphasizes the idea of the human being as capable of pursuing self-perfection as an end. In Mill's view, Bentham is not capable to understand that 'happiness' has not just a materialistic and quantitative meaning, but also an immaterial and qualitative one. There are intangible goods that man may wish to pursue, starting from self-respect and dignity. Bentham, Mill writes, doesn't perceive the specificity of each man, and the personal nature of one's own end.

The same topic is treated in the review of Tocqueville, where Mill denounces the growing insignificance of individuals in comparison with the mass.

The topic of individuality and individual development becomes a central one in the essay *On Liberty*. Mill strongly maintains that different people require different conditions for their own spiritual development, and passionately defends *difference* as a value.

It is essential, he writes in *On Liberty*, that different persons can live in different ways, according to their different nature; whatever attempt to homogenize their lives ought to be called *despotism*. (*On Lib., chap.III*)

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and the interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation [...] To give any fair play to the nature of each, it is essential that different persons should be allowed to live different lives. [...] whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men. (*On Lib., chap.III*)

Mill's point of view is that liberty is, firstly and mainly, the possibility, for every man, to develop his own individuality, in the sense of his uniqueness and distinctiveness.

As was the case in the long-established English tradition, for Mill too the foundation of liberty lies in the ownership of oneself, but this concept now acquires a new meaning: the self no longer just aims at material assets. As Mill writes, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (*Utilitarianism*, chap.II, C.W. X).

Quoting von Humboldt again, Mill writes that there are two requirements for spiritual development: freedom and variety of situation, because these are necessary to render people unlike one another. (*On Lib., chap. III*).

The point is that in Mill's thought freedom is functional not *to doing*, but *to being*; its value lies not in *doing* but in *being*. This means that freedom is

not thought of just in terms of “liberty of action”. It also means that property is no longer the basis of liberty.

Freedom cannot be just “liberty of action”, because the concept of ‘action’ is not sufficient to convey an immaterial idea, such as the idea of ‘spiritual development’. For the same reason, property cannot be the basis of liberty, because an immaterial end, such as the spiritual and intellectual development, cannot depend on material assets, such as property. The strong traditional connection between liberty and property is now broken.

The same theoretical framework that allows Mill to break the strong connection between freedom and property, also allows him to consider law no longer as the opposite of liberty

Liberty and Law

In the Introduction of *On Liberty*, Mill writes that the only freedom deserving this name is for each man the opportunity to pursue his own good in his own way, without to deprive others of theirs. (*On Lib.*, Introd.)

The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it (*On Lib.*, Introd.)

He also writes that there is a sphere of human conduct within which the individual is sovereign, because it affects only himself. Within this sphere, he adds, his independence is absolute "of right". That means that there is a sphere within which the society has not any right to interfere with; Mill maintains that no society in which such a sphere is not respected may be called free.

In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. [...] No society in which these liberties are not, on the whole, respected is free, whatever may be its form of government; and none is completely free in which they do not exist absolute and unqualified.

The same idea had been already stated by Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy*, in the chapter concerning the grounds and limits of the “non- interference principle”. There, Mill had written that whatever may be the political institutions under which control men live every individual human being has something like a "circle" around himself, which nobody ought to overstep, not the government nor any other individual; an inviolable region of the life, whether inward or outward, that concerns only the individual and does not affect interest of others (*Pr. Pol. .Ec.*, 1848, chap.XI, § 2, C.W. II).

Under whatever political institutions we live, there is a circle around every individual human being, which no government, be it that of one,

of a few, or of the many, ought to be permitted to overstep: there is a part of the life of every person who has come to years of discretion, within which the individuality of that person ought to reign uncontrolled either by any other individual or by the public collectively. There is, or ought to be, some space in human existence thus entrenched and sacred from authoritative intrusion, no one who professes the smallest regard to human freedom or dignity will call in question[...] I apprehend that it ought to include all that part which concerns only the life, whether inward or outward, of the individual, and does not affect the interests of others (*Pr. Pol. .Ec.*, 1848, chap. XI, § 2, C.W. II).

In *On Liberty*, this “space” or “region” is explained in detail, and identified as “the appropriate region of human liberty”.

It includes all the liberties concerning the sphere of individuality – liberty of conscience in the most comprehensive sense, liberty of thought and opinion in every field, liberty of expressing and publishing, liberty of tastes and pursuits, liberty of framing the plan of our life, liberty of association.

Because they are founded on the sovereignty that every man “of right” has on himself, all these liberties are *by rights*.

On account of individual sovereignty, not any State interference with these liberties ought to be allowed.

It is remarkable that, within this “appropriate region of human liberty” Mill doesn’t mention economic freedom. It means that he isolates economic liberty from all other liberties, and that he doesn’t acknowledge economic liberty as having the same nature as all others.

Mill agrees with the right of property, as well as with the value of private enterprise and the capitalistic system, yet he doesn’t include economic liberty within the basic liberties.

Why?

I think that the answer is to be found in his notion of liberty, related as it is to the distinction between self-regarding and others-regarding acts.

I already noted above that in the English political thought the idea of liberty as freedom from legal duties was a general one, without regard to the kind and nature of the liberty involved. This was not Stuart Mill’s point of view.

The reason why he doesn’t include economic liberty in the range of basic liberties is that, according with the notion of liberty outlined above, that kind of liberty *can* deprive others of the right to pursue of their own good.

It can be really difficult, or indeed impossible, for many people to pursue their own good, to develop their own individuality, without the help of laws. To restrict the province of government to the protection of person and property, as the *laissez-faire* school has maintained, means to exclude “some of the most indispensable and unanimously recognized of the duties of government” (*Pr. Pol. Ec.*, chap. XI, §1).

Mill writes that there are two kinds of intervention by the government, which really differ in their nature and effects, so that they require, for their justification, motives of a very different degree of urgency. One kind of intervention has an authoritative nature, and may concern the free agency of individuals: the government may prevent all persons from doing certain things, or from doing them without its authorization. The other kind of intervention is not authoritative in nature, because it doesn't restrain individual free agency. Mill's point of view is that, if the State supplies means to citizens for fulfilling ends, without compel them to use there is not any infringement of liberty, nor any degrading restraint.

It is the case, for example, of public health: they may be public hospitals, without any restriction upon private medical or surgical practice (*Pr.Pol.Ec.*, chap.XI, § 2).

When a government provides means for fulfilling a certain end, leaving individuals free to avail themselves of different means if in their opinion preferable, there is no infringement of liberty, no irksome or degrading restraint. One of the principal objections to government interference is then absent.[...] They may be public hospitals, without any restriction upon private medical or surgical practice (*Pr.Pol.Ec.*, chap.XI, § 2).

According to Mill, there are grounds where the State has not just the right but the duty to interfere with the liberty of action: if it is true that the State has not the right to violate individual liberty about what concerns just himself it is also true it has the duty to control the power that a man can have over others (*On Lib.*, chap. V).

The State, while it respects the liberty of each in what specially regards himself, is bound to maintain a vigilant control over his exercise of any power which it allows him to possess over others (*On Lib.*, chap. V).

This is the case with family relations. Mill denounces the almost despotic power of husbands over wives, maintaining the need for wives to have the same rights and receive legal protection "in the same manner as all other persons". Mill's battle in favour of women's emancipation with regard to both civil and political rights is well known, as are his writings on this issue, such as his famous essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869)

But the condition of women is not the only involved in family power relations. There is also the question of children, fully subjected as they are to the will of their parents. It is unacceptable, Mill writes in *On Liberty*, that parents take position against the interference of law with their absolute control over their sons in the same way as they do about their freedom of action; children are not a property of their parents, nor they are part of them. (*On Lib.*, chap. V).

One would almost think that a man's children were supposed to be literally, and not metaphorically, a part of himself, so jealous is opinion of the smallest interference of law with his absolute and exclusive control over them, more jealous than of almost any interference with his own freedom of action (*On Lib.*, chap. V).

Mill denounces the "misapplied notions of liberty", which are a real obstacle to the State's fulfilment of its duties. He strongly asserts that it is the duty of the State to interfere with father's "liberty of action", with regard to both their children's education and their employment as workers.

Child labour should not be permitted, he writes, for if permitted it may always be compelled. "Freedom of contract -he adds- is but another word for freedom of coercion" (*Pr., Pol. Ec.*, chap. XI, § 9).

So it is the duty of the State to impede child labour, as it is its duty to enforce education, and to give pecuniary support to elementary schools, so as to make them accessible to all the children of the poor, either freely, or in return for a small fee.

Repeatedly, both in *Principles of Political Economy* and in *On Liberty* Mill highlights this topic. In *Principles of Political Economy* he writes that to deprive children of the basic instruction entails a double damage: not only toward the children but also toward the members of the community, because it is in the interest of the community that all its members have some degree of instruction (*Pr. Pol. Ec.*, chap. XI,§ 8). In *On Liberty*, reiterating his point of view he adds that it is not enough to give children food for their bodies, they also need education for their minds: to allow them to grow without a basic instruction is "a moral crime" both against the children and against the society. The duty of the State to compel education, Mill concludes, is therefore "a self-evident axiom" (*On Lib.*, chap. XI,§ 8).

From the Principles of Political Economy:

Education, therefore, is one of those things which it is admissible in principle that a government should provide for the people.[...] There are certain primary elements and means of knowledge, which it is in the highest degree desirable that all human beings born into the community should acquire during childhood. If their parents, or those on whom they depend, have the power of obtaining for them this instruction, and fail to do it, they commit a double breach of duty, towards the children themselves, and towards the members of the community generally, who are all liable to suffer seriously from the consequences of ignorance and want of education in their fellow-citizens. It is therefore an allowable exercise of the powers of government, to impose on parents the legal obligation of giving elementary instruction to children. This, however, cannot fairly be done, without taking measures to insure that such instruction shall be always accessible to them, either gratuitously or at a trifling expense. (chap. XI,§ 8)

From On Liberty

Is it not almost a self-evident axiom that the State should require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen?[...] It still remains unrecognized that to bring a child into existence without a fair prospect of being able, not only to provide food for its body, but instruction and training for its mind is a moral crime, both against the unfortunate offspring and against society; and that if parent does not fulfil this obligation, the State ought to see it fulfilled at the charge, as far as possible, of the parent (chap. V)

In the matter of education, the interference of the State with individual freedom is justified because this freedom does not concern only the individuals themselves, but those who depend on their will -their sons.

Government intervention is justifiable, because the case is not one in which the interest and judgment of the consumer are a sufficient security for the goodness of the commodity.

But, to assert that it is duty of the government to compel education doesn't imply that the State must have the monopoly of education neither in the lower nor in the higher branches; neither it implies that the government has any right to induce the people to turn to public teachers in preference to others nor that it has any right to confer advantages on the citizens who turn to public teachers (*Pr. Pol. Ec.*, chap. XI, § 8).

One thing must be strenuously insisted on; that the government must claim no monopoly for its education, either in the lower or in the higher branches; must exert neither authority nor influence to induce the people to resort to its teachers in preference to others, and must confer no peculiar advantages on those who have been instructed by them (*Pr. Pol. Ec.*, chap. XI, § 8).

The reason why Mill rejects the idea of such a monopoly by the State is that it would imply the same pattern of education, with the consequence that it would be really difficult, or completely impossible, for each individual to develop his own originality. A general State education would be a contrivance "for moulding people to be exactly like one another" (*On Lib.*,chap.V).

Also the sphere of labour can be an object of legal interference, without harm to individual liberty. There are matters, Mill writes, in which the interference of the State is required to give effect to the judgment of individuals regarding their own interests; there are matters in which such a judgment cannot have effect, without the help of the law. One of these matters concerns the hours of labour. It is impossible, Mill writes, for a workman to refuse of working more than nine hours, however he may be convinced that it is his real interest, unless all workers -or at least the most of them- follow him in refusing alike. If he refuses to work more, while others accept, he will be forced to accept, or he will not be employed at all. It is possible a general agreement of the whole class, but such an agreement to be effectual needs the sanction of law (*Pr.Pol.Ec.*, XI, § 12) interference of the law is required, not to overrule the judgment of individuals respecting their own interest, but to give

effect to that judgment: they being unable to give effect to it except by concert, which concert in turn cannot be effectual unless it receives validity and sanction from the law. This is the case with diminishing the hours of labour.

A workman who refused to work more than nine hours while there were others who worked ten, would either not be employed at all, or if employed, must submit to lose one-tenth of his wages. However convinced, therefore, he may be that it is the interest of the class to work short time, it is contrary to his own interest to set the example, unless he is well assured that all or most others will follow it. But suppose a general agreement of the whole class: might not this be effectual without the sanction of law? Not unless enforced by opinion with a rigour practically equal to that of law (*Pr.Pol.Ec.*, XI, § 12).

Conclusions

As I said at the beginning of my paper, Stuart Mill is the first liberal thinker who founds the concept of liberty on something other than the concept of property. This does not at all mean that he did not recognize the importance of the right of property. In Mill, as in all liberal thinkers, such a right remains a basic one. What also endures is the idea that the State should not interfere with individual liberty of action -that men should act by themselves rather than let the State act on their behalf.

What really changes is the perspective within which these two ideas are now situated.

The new perspective shows first of all that liberty is no longer thought of as functional to property, because it is now fundamentally related to the development of individuality in the sense of the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each person; second, that such a relation entails that everybody must be in the condition to pursue his own development in his own way ; third, that when they are not able to do so by themselves, because of ignorance and poverty, it is the duty of the State to help them throw appropriate laws.

Many of the things asserted by Mill with regard to the State's duty to interfere with individual liberty are well established by now. Every modern State, in the Western area at least, has a legislation for the safeguard of children's education, as well as for the safeguard of public health. Every State has a legislation that forbids the mistreatment of workers. And nobody can lawfully employ children as workers, as it was usual in the Victorian age.

One might think that there is nothing to be learned from Mill nowadays. But this be a mistake. There is something, in Mill's political philosophy, that is still of the greatest importance.

The core of Mill's political philosophy is the idea of individuality and individual development. Everything Mill has written is related to this idea, sure as he was that no material development is really possible without an intellectual one, both for the individual and for society as a whole.

Individual development, related as it is to the concept of *difference*, means the development of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of each person.

Distinctiveness is the opposite of conformism and homogeneity: the homogeneity of cultural values, points of view, preferences, opinions, and so on.

It is exactly against the risk of conformism and homogeneity that Mill underlines the importance of *distinctiveness*. “Human beings are not like sheep; and even sheep are not undistinguishably alike” (*On Lib.*, chap. 3).

What Mill has taught us, his main and greatest message, is that *difference* is a value. Difference in points of view, difference in religious faiths, as well as difference among cultures and races.

In this age of ours, for many reasons so prone to homogeneity and conformism, the enduring message that Mill has left us is that the real threat comes not from difference, but from the lack of difference.

It is no coincidence that wherever it has risen and whatever color it has taken, Totalitarianism has always denied the value of differences, and always opposed them.

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