

Experiments in Living and Liberal Imperialism: A Reinterpretation of J. S. Mill's International Political Thought

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Abstract

By way of re-examining J. S. Mill's thoughts on liberal imperialism that consist of a theory of non-intervention and a theory of state-building, this article is meant to offer a re-interpretation of his political theory, so as, on the one hand, to challenge Michael Walzer's communitarian reading and, on the other, to meet some recent criticisms made from those who interpret Mill either as an originator of democratic peace or as a liberal imperialist.

It reads Mill's *autobiography* in the light of the doctrine of "experiments in living" highlighted by Isaiah Berlin and the ensuing new wave of attempts that try to reconcile Mill's utilitarianism with liberalism. Furthermore, the resulting interpretation presents Mill's liberal imperialism as a theory which is of a piece with his defence of individual liberty and support for utilitarianism, with the latter two understood as two logically as well as practically related doctrines linked by his concept of a

“progressive being” which in turn is derived from Mill’s reflection on his own experiments in living.

Keywords: liberalism, imperialism, intervention, experiments in living, Democratic Peace theory

Until recently, John Stuart Mill’s international political thought was largely neglected in the field of international relations, with Michael Walzer’s interpretation of it as the major presence. A new wave of interest in Mill’s liberal imperialism, however, has arisen, and the ensuing rediscoveries and findings invite us to reconsider the subject matter, partly because they together have proved him to be timely as a political thinker in our global age, and partly because their interpretations complement as much as contradict each other. Indeed, these theorists have not only contributed in their own way to shed light on different aspects of Mill’s international thought, but also point to theoretical difficulties unfamiliar in the literature on Mill’s political thought. Furthermore, the time has come for us to piece those findings together – if possible, into a coherent theory.

This article understands Mill’s liberal imperialism to be a complex composed of a theory of non-intervention and a theory of state-building in another country, and is meant to read Mill in his own terms and together with other parts of his political thought. The first section provides an analysis of Walzer’s Mill so as to clear the way for an interpretation, and the second discusses Mill’s account of state-building and its entailed difficulties, as well as the alleged

self-contradictions in it. The third section of this article goes on to complete the reconstruction of Mill's liberal imperialism by way of reading it in the light of his "experiments in living" as a doctrine as well as a practice. The resulting reading presents Mill's liberal imperialism as a theory which is of a piece with his defence of individual liberty and support for utilitarianism, with the latter two being understood as two logically as well as practically related doctrines linked by his concept of a "progressive being" which in turn is derived from Mill's reflection on his own experiments in living.

I. Mill and Walzer's Mill on Intervention

Mill's international political thought is complex, and central to it are the following two pillars: a theory of non-intervention and a theory of state-building. This section deals with the former, which is well known to international relations theorists today as a result of Walzer's authoritative interpretation (Walzer 2000). Walzer interprets Mill by a close reading of the latter's 1859 essay "A Few Words on Non-Intervention" (Mill 1825, CW XXI, 109-25),¹ which argues for a differential treatment of nations: among civilized states, their interaction must be governed by the principle of non-intervention; when dealing with barbarous peoples it is morally

¹ Works cited in this article refer to Mill, John Stuart. 1963-91. In *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson. Toronto, CA: University of Toronto.

allowable to intervene with their internal affairs. Mill's reasons are as followed:

In the first place, the rules of ordinary international morality imply reciprocity. But barbarians will not reciprocate. They cannot be depended on for observing any rules. Their minds are not capable of so great an effort, nor their will sufficiently under the influence of distant motives. In the next place, nations which are still barbarous have not got beyond the period during which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners (Mill 1963-91, CW XXI, 119).

As a matter of fact, barbarous peoples are understood to have not yet reached the degree of civilization to form a sense of *reciprocity* without which international morality would not have been effective. The principle of non-intervention is grounded upon a notion of equality among civilized states which are willing to cooperate and obey treaties. By contrast, the rationale behind the idea of intervention is a political will to bring civilization to the life of the barbarians – in the *interest* of the latter.

Note that progression from barbarism to civilization is not an automatic process for Mill. Rather, as pointed out by Jahn (2006, 193), such progression *historically* has taken two forms: (1) to be carried out by an indigenous leader of extraordinary quality; (2) to

be made possible by a foreign and superior power. Either way this understanding of progress is elitist in nature, and that fits in Mill's overall political thought as conventionally understood.

Equally important is that Mill's concern for intervention is essentially moral in nature (Souffrant 2000). It is "moral" in two ways. On the one hand, Mill warns that acts of intervention are rarely justified for the following three apparent reasons: firstly, intervention can be risky and it is never easy for it to be successful; secondly, once an act of intervention starts, it is difficult for the intervening state to extricate itself from the situation; as a consequence, thirdly, the cost of intervention can be very high in terms of either military expenses or human life (Ellis 1992, 166). On the other hand, as argued by Mill, "Intervention to enforce non-intervention is always rightful, always moral, if not always prudent" (Mill 1963-91, CW XXI, 123). Indeed, he makes it clear that:

But the case of a people struggling against *a foreign yoke*, or against a native tyranny upheld by foreign arms, illustrates the reasons for non-intervention in an opposite way; for in this case the reasons themselves do not exist. A people the most attached to freedom, the most capable of defending and of making a good use of free institutions, may be unable to contend successfully for them against the military strength of another nation much more powerful (Mill 1963-91, CW XXI, 123).

As one can see, prudential reason should be taken into account when considering an act of intervention. The risk that an act of intervention necessarily entails means that it cannot be deemed to be morally obligatory. Moreover, it is this risky nature that would make it praiseworthy for a state to uphold the rule of non-intervention in the case of an act of justifiable intervention. In any event, for Mill, it is morally *permissible* for a civilized state to intervene in a barbarous nation's internal affairs; yet when "the balance of forces on which the permanent maintenance of freedom in a country depends" is already "unfairly and violently disturbed" by foreign power, it is morally *praiseworthy* to assist the disturbed country to redress that balance – even if that country is a civilized state (Mill 1963-91, CW XXI, 123).

Unmistakably, for Mill there exists a set of moral rules that is binding on all peoples but that would be upheld only by civilized nations. This should have interested international relations theorists. However, the truth is that Prager (2005, 621) was baffled as to why even members of the English School, who more than others appreciate the contributions of classical political thinkers, have largely neglected Mill. In the end, it is the communitarian political thinker Walzer who shares with Mill the belief in the existence of an international morality and who has taken most seriously Mill's international political thought. In his classic *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer (2000, 87) argues that Mill's argument as sketched above is essentially a theory of intervention with "an understanding of

communal liberty” at its core. If his reading is correct, Mills theory of intervention can be boiled down to this: “self-determination is the right of a people ‘to become free by their own efforts’ if they can, and non-intervention is the principle guaranteeing that their success will not be impeded or their failure prevented by the intrusions of an alien power” (Walzer 2000, 88). In order to appreciate Walzer’s interpretation, it is necessary to dwell upon the last point that Mill makes in the passage just quoted. In today’s language, that means *counter-intervention* is the only exception to the rule of non-intervention, as an expedient to enforce rules of international morality. The idea of counter-intervention is open to a communitarian interpretation. Walzer intends to do just that. Instead of a utilitarian argument, he reads Mill’s argument as a rights-based one laying down a “self-help” criterion for a group of people to be entitled to self-rule: sufficient love of liberty-evidenced only by an active resistance to either domestic tyranny or foreign invasion.

The crux of the matter is that the “right” to self-determination must be *earned* by a people with a will to fight for freedom. That is how Walzer (2007, 352) understands Mill’s point that a people would be “fit” (Mill 1963-91, CW XXI, 122) for a free institution only when they make efforts to struggle for freedom. Walzer’s reading thus makes room for “counter-intervention in civil war” (as opposed to Mill’s idea of counter-intervention restricted to struggles against a “foreign yoke” discussed earlier) as well as for what is now called “humanitarian intervention” (Walzer 2000, 96-108;

2007, 350).² And central to Walzer's interpretation is that when a minority group fights to the death for its own freedom to become a state, other states may assist; or, when two groups fight against each other within a state, other states may intervene, for strictly speaking the "civilized state" by definition no longer exists then – hence the inapplicability of the rule of non-intervention.

Surely, what is now protected by the principle of non-intervention is "political communities", rather than "civilized states" as in the case of Mill's essay. By placing a burden of proof on the barbarous and the civilized people alike to vindicate their worth of communal liberty and integrity, Walzer has transformed what Mill takes to be the purpose of intervention – to restore the conditions requisite for "the permanent maintenance of freedom" in a civilized state. Indeed, while for Mill a "sufficient love for freedom" is essentially a criterion for distinguishing the civilized people from the uncivilized, Walzer takes it to mean a struggle for freedom at the collective level – that is to say, national self-determination.

To be fair, it is true that the idea of nationality as a defining feature of a civilized state can be found elsewhere in Mill's writings. For example, towards the end of *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) (Mill 1963-91) he argues:

² For a more detailed discussion of Walzer's extension of Mill's idea of counter-intervention, see Michael W. Doyle (2010).

Where the *sentiment of nationality* exists in any force, there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart. This is merely saying that the question of government ought to be decided by the governed. One hardly knows what any division of the human race should be free to do, if not to determine, with which of the various collective bodies of human beings they choose to associate themselves (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 547).

What is suggested by the passage is that a people are “ripe for free institutions” only when an effective sentiment of nationality among the members of a group of people can be detected (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 546). In other words, a sentiment of nationality is the very beginning of a people to become a nation – hence to be entitled to self-determination, which for Mill is a right to be conferred on the civilized nations alone. Also indicated is that there is a “communitarian” element in his thought, because Mill does emphasize the point that the will of a people to fight for their own freedom – against domestic tyranny or foreign power – is essential if intervention is to be successful in the end, for otherwise the people may become enslaved again and the cost entailed would not be justified at all.

However, for all the virtues of his communitarian interpretation, Walzer does not read Mill in the latter's own terms.

For one thing, Mill is a utilitarian. And that means even though his theory of self-determination and non-intervention is open to a rights-based reading, such a reading goes against the grain of Mill's overall thinking.

That is to say, a "right" for a utilitarian must be read on its own terms. Indeed, given that prudential reasons are not ruled out by Mill, his theory of intervention cannot be a bona fide rights-based one, for there are other considerations, and they are utilitarian ones. After all, as indicated by the second reason for the differential treatment of nations in the first quoted passage of this section, intervention for Mill is basically a "civilizing project" or, more specifically, a "project of imperial liberal reform" (Mantena 2007a) which is utilitarian in nature – for the "benefit" of the nations in which intervention takes place. While intervention in a civilized state for Mill is morally allowed only as an act of counter-invention to enforce non-intervention, intervention for Walzer (2000, 90) is justified as an act "to recognize and uphold communal autonomy".

For another, note that right after making the civilization/barbarism distinction Mill does go on to say this:

To characterize any conduct whatever towards a barbarous people as a violation of the law of nations, only shows that he who so speaks has never considered the subject. A violation of great principles of morality it may easily be; but barbarians have no rights as a nation, except a right to such treatment as

may, at the earliest possible period, fit them for becoming one.

The only moral laws for the relation between a civilized and a barbarous government, are the universal rules of morality between man and man (Mill 1963-91, CW XXI, 120).

Undeniably, there is a reference to the “rights” of barbarians as a nation, and that does lend support to Walzer’s reading which emphasizes the communitarian dimension of a group of people. The last sentence in that passage, however, suggests that Mill’s considerations on the issue take place at the individual level rather than a collective one. In any event, as vindicated by his *On Liberty* (1859) (Mill 1963-91) which earned him the reputation as an epitome of a liberal (Gray 1983), Mill is an individualist. It is curious why Walzer should have ignored this. To refrain from speculating about it, however, fidelity to the text means that we must take it seriously that the relation between nations for Mill are governed by “the universal rules of morality *between man and man*” – nowhere does he suggest that the logical relation between man and man must be carried over to the level of international relations. Yet Walzer’s interpretation relies either on the *analogy* between morality at the individual and morality at the international level, or the metaphor of a state as a man *writ large*.

To leave the issue of Mill’s individualism for further discussion to the third section of this article, perhaps a more troubling aspect of Walzer’s interpretation that deserves our attention now is the fact

that it is made possible only by playing down the distinction between civilized and uncivilized states. Yet that distinction is crucial in Mill, without which he could not have argued for intervention as a means to lift barbarous peoples to the higher stage of human civilization. Surely, in making redundant Mill's civilized/barbarous distinction, which amounts to abolishing his hierarchical view of humanity altogether, Walzer in effect – as morally praiseworthy as he could be and certainly politically incorrect by our standard – blots out what he takes to be the *telos* of political development from his vision of the world and removes the logic originally operative in Mill. And that risks obscuring what Mill's thought may contribute to today's international thought.

Perhaps Walzer has no intention to remain true to Mill's thinking anyway, as he himself acknowledges that his communitarian interpretation is an "appropriation and use" of Mill's thought (Walzer 2007, 348). Certainly, it is valuable in its own right as a theory of intervention, or as an integral part of the arguably most important theory of just war since Aquinas. Nevertheless, there are other ways of appreciating Mill as an international political thinker. And one way to do so is to read him on his own terms – together with his other writings.

Indeed, recent studies reveal that Mill's international thought is highly relevant to our age. They go much further than Walzer in terms of the text on which they rely for critical reconstruction. In particular, it is Stephen Holmes (2007) who has drawn resources

from Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* to demonstrate how the latter's theory of democratization can help us make sense of liberal imperialism and in particular the USA's war against Iraq. Meanwhile, if Beate Jahn's historical and contextually sensitive reading is correct, the timeliness and worthiness of Mill's international thought lies in its being a "classic mirror" of the Democratic Peace thesis that undergirds today's liberal interventionism and is riddled with self-contradictions and ethnocentrism (Jahn 2006). Together, their studies imply a theory of state-building, to which this article now turns.

II. Alleged Self-contradictions in Mill's Liberal Imperialism

When commenting on "A Few Words on Non-Intervention", Walzer (2007, 354) once observes that Mill "seems interested only in the more standard questions of *jus ad bellum* rather than providing a theory of *jus post bellum* instructing the victors how to rebuild the intervened state's economic and political structure". This is true only to a certain degree. For, as a matter of fact, *Considerations on Representative Government* does contain a theory of post-interventional state-building. This section deals with this theory of state-building, without which Mill's theory of intervention cannot be fully understood.

To begin with, according to Jahn, Mill's theory of state-building is embedded within a "philosophy of history" empirically derived from direct observations. This is a four-staged drama of

human development (Jahn 2006, 192-93): (1) the stage of savagery in which people were so undisciplined that they were unable to have social life, for that presupposes their willingness to obey laws and cooperate with each other; (2) the stage of slavery in which savages were made to obey laws through a despot with force and will; (3) the stage of barbarism in which people were able to obey legal rules and social customs but were still hindered by what Mill calls the “inveterate spirit of locality” (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 417) as well as other forms of mental shortcomings that made the representative institutions and government by deference impossible; (4) the stage of civilization characterized by modern states wealthier and more powerful than those in the previous stages because the rule of law has been firmly established – hence the protection of property rights and the guarantee of justice – so that men can act together for common purposes in large bodies.

Stephen Holmes (2007) also takes this historiosophy seriously, labeling it as an “idealized transitology”, and argues that it undergirds Mill’s theory of democratization which can help us not only make sense of today’s liberal imperialism but also identify what went wrong with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. More specifically, Holmes’ reading is basically a reconstructed theory of state-building at the core of which is a project of democratization that regards imperialism as a means to meet the challenge of creating the necessary socio-political conditions for democracy in states relatively backward in the line of political evolution.

Now, that representative democracy represents the highest form of government and the political culture sustaining it is the highest stage of human development. Naturally, the burden to teach the lesson of civilization falls on the most advanced countries. Indeed, the barbarous nations must be taught by “vigorous despotism” – which for Mill is “the best mode of government for training the people in what is specifically wanting to render them capable of a higher civilization” (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 567). In other words, the first lesson of civilization to be taught is the need for obedience. Of course, dictatorship of this sort is meant to be provisional in nature. And, as summarized by Holmes clearly, the task of this “handmaiden of social progress” is: firstly, to instill “habits of deference and passivity” and, secondly, to forge collective identities – without which collective self-rule would not be realizable (Holmes 2007, 320).

Unlike Walzer's Millian perspective that abolishes the civilization/barbarism distinction, Jahn's and Holmes's reading place this progressive view of civilization at the centre of Mill's international political thought. The theory of intervention and the theory of state-building are two sides of the same coin: in so far as Mill's argument for interference is understood as a means for regime change or state-building, the end of it is democratization and the means to it is imperialism – “the highest moral trust which can devolve upon a nation” (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 416). And surely this is consistent with Mill's two reasons for the differential

treatment of nations discussed earlier.

However, Jahn (2006, 195) is meant to lay bare Mill's self-contradiction. Central to her point is that the latter's imperialism is a "perfect mirror" of today's Democratic Peace theory. Her reasoning goes like this. First, non-liberal states are marked from liberal ones in that the former do not comply with international law, and for this reason alone should be deprived of the right to national self-determination and non-intervention. Second, intervention is deemed to be a proper way of speeding up these states' democratization and that of course is in the interest of their inhabitants who otherwise cannot enjoy the benefits from equality and liberty. Third, the fact that contemporary liberal foreign policy-makers prefer transnational interaction – only to be followed by armed intervention when it fails – mirrors Mill's support for the East India Company as an informal ruler managing the colonial India's internal affairs.

It must be pointed out that Jahn's goal is twofold: (1) Kant-inspired Democratic Peace theorists such as Michael Doyle have misappropriated Kant, for the latter clearly disfavoured interference by force, expected states to become republics through the internal political process rather than through outside interference, and finally would see the use of force as a means to establishing republics as a violation of the goal of perpetual peace (Jahn 2006, 190-91); (2) it is Mill who is responsible for the rise of Democratic Peace theory. This is surely not a place to address Kant's idea of perpetual peace; for the point is that Jahn has an understanding of Democratic Peace

of her own. And that is the vulgar form of the Democratic Peace theory as exemplified in George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address (for a detailed discussion, see Ish-Shalom 2008, 285-86; 2013; Segell 2005).³

The parallels between this vulgar version of the Democratic Peace theory and Mill's liberal imperialism presented by Jahn are indeed striking, and they certainly vindicate the timeliness of Mill as an international political thinker.⁴ Of course, Jahn is not unaware of their differences: few contemporary liberals today would endorse Mill's preferred "formal colonial rule" (Jahn 2006, 196). Yet the fact that Mill and today's liberals deny equal rights to a class of states, identified either as non-liberal or uncivilized states, means that they share the same hierarchical view of international order and the logic of regime change and institutional transplantation. Jahn's real point, however, is that underlying this liberal mentality is a set of self-contradictions operative at various levels of Mill's thinking.

Jahn's criticism rests chiefly upon the fact that Mill holds a

³ In the 2002 address, Bush coins the phrase "axis of evil" to denote Iran, Iraq and North Korea, on the grounds that they seek to acquire and develop weapons of mass destruction. The full text of the address can be accessed at Bush, George W. 2002. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union." <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29644> (August 13, 2013).

⁴ Jahn does not make distinctions between the types of Democratic Peace theory. In the field of international relations theory, the Democratic Peace thesis is essentially an *empirical* claim that democracies rarely or never fight against each other, and not a political prescription for regime change in non-democratic countries; see Doyle (1983) and Russett (1993).

self-contradictory view of modern civilization. Note that modern civilization is presented here in its best light, focusing on its being the highest stage of civilization that all backward nations (must) strive to emulate. However, in various writings of Mill, that teleological view seems to be the object of critique. For instance, in his essay on Coleridge (Mill 1963-91, CW X, 146-51), modern civilization is characterized as mankind's enslavement to artificial wants, a loss of individuality, energy, courage and self-reliance, as well as stark inequalities in wealth and rank. Given these socio-political malaises, the liberal thinkers should make efforts to reform their own systems rather than trying to transplant their already ill institutions that jeopardize individual freedom and equality. In any event, judges Jahn, Mill can hardly square his grand liberal project of democratizing the backward nations with his proposed remedy for the "vices and miseries" of modern states – to diversify and enrich their people's narrow minds by the study of the "opinions of mankind in all ages and nations" such as the noble cultures of Athens, Sparta, Rome as well as the barbarian ones of the Germans or the wild Indians (Jahn 2006, 199).

As we can see, the first self-contradiction is allegedly shared by Mill and the Democratic Peace theorists, but the second is present solely in Mill's political thought. According to Jahn, Mill's own self-contradiction may be resolved if the domestic sphere is neatly separated from the international; but that is not possible, because the success of the liberal mission only means the obliteration of

cultural plurality in the international sphere – the intellectual sources on which men broaden their visions of the world and search for alternative ways of life in their society. Self-contradiction as such is a case of *performative contradiction*.

For the sake of discussion, it can be analyzed into two kinds of contradiction: *logical inconsistency* and *ethnocentrism*. To explain, at the core of Jahn's accusation is that the whole liberal tradition from Locke onwards upholds a view of human beings as "born equal, free, and rational" yet denies an equal right to many on the grounds that they lack the capacity to reason; from this it follows that liberalism is a tradition of thought premised not on the faith in the equality of man but a division of humanity into two categories: those who merit self-rule and those who deserve paternalism. Jahn contends that such contradiction is part and parcel of liberal thought and practice; Mill's support for both weighted suffrage and elite education is a case in point, contrary to the liberal ideal of equality. The problem is: supposing Mill is sincere, he has committed himself to both equal and unequal treatment at the same time – hence logical inconsistency. Or, if liberals like Mill openly admit that men are not equal (in their capacity to reason), they may be charged with ethnocentrism, since they measure the rest of humanity according to their own Western standard (of rationality). And that would make their talk of equality merely rhetorical, if not hypocritical.

To this accusation it may, for a start, be argued that the apparent inconsistency in the case of Mill can be explained away by

his evolutionary account of civilizational development. It is true that he is aware of the malaise of Western civilization; that is why he is intent on reforming England's social and political arrangements. However, Mill's prescriptions for it to cultivate active citizenship and to protect freedom of speech and expression are meant to finetune democracy rather than to abolish it. Furthermore, that does not contradict his belief that representative democracy as a form of government is in no way inferior to any other type of regime – from time to time changes are needed in order to remain “fit” for new circumstances, in the way backward states must introduce reforms to make progress. Mill's view of progress is not a Hegelian one, and nowhere in his oeuvre can be found a sense of complacency exhibited in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

With regard to the criticism that if Mill's liberal mission is successfully carried out, the plurality of cultures would be wiped out from the globe as a consequence and hence the *homogenization* of the world, it must be stressed that, as implied by Mill's well-known argument for freedom of expression in his *On Liberty*: there is a distinction between “dead dogma” and “living truth” (Mill 1963-91, CW XVIII, 243) – what is crucial for the latter is one's awareness of the possibility, rather than the presence, of an alternative way of thinking and living. Thus, homogenization itself is not an issue for Mill; what matters is whether one *chooses* his own life and *knows* why. Suffice it to say that Mill advises us to read history, and a

knowledge of alternative cultures or ways of life alone is sufficient for the function, if intellectual sources are our concern.

On the other hand, it must be noted that in arguing for liberal imperialism Mill also lays down necessary conditions for its success. For one thing, in the case of the backward countries, Mill calls attention to empathy as a necessary requirement for success. Empathy is understood in the broad sense of inside knowledge involving being thoroughly acquainted with the history and culture of the subject population and the capacity to feel with them (Holmes 2007, 339; Prager 2005, 631). To meet this demand colonial officials cannot but “learn slowly, and after all, imperfectly, by study and experience” because they “cannot judge, by the light in which a thing appears to [the subject people’s] own minds, or the manner in which it affects their feelings” (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 568-69). For another, since interference is to be allowed only as a means that “facilitates [the backward nation’s] transition to a higher stage of improvement” (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 567), a strong political will – including readiness for sacrifice – to govern the colonized state well is necessary. Together, these two requirements constitute Mill’s provisos of “inside knowledge” and “political will.”

Meanwhile, Mill warns his fellow colonial officials against the possibility of destructive unintended consequences in democratizing a foreign state. As reminded by Prager (2005, 632), Mill limits intervention to exceptional cases because he witnesses that “meddling disrupted the process of national self-determination

and often had unpredictable and profoundly perturbing effects.” Unintended consequences as such may not be avoided by inside knowledge. For instance, the very presence of the British Government on the scene may destroy the “balance of existing social relations” (Mill 1963-91, CW XXX, 227); for the old classes which stabilized the uncivilized society may be crushed except for the one which works with the colonial ruler. In addition, that may cause resentment among the already conflicting internal groups; hence further difficulties for the formation of a common identity. On the other hand, the “irreparable mischief” that the introduction of the English idea of “absolute property” in land into countries where it did not exist amounts to “trampling the rights of all except some one of the classes which, by the customs of the country, shared among them the right of using and disposing of the soil” (Mill 1963-91, CW XXX, 222). Mischief of this kind, notes Mill, could lead to the breakdown of the original rules and norms of a traditional society.

Awareness of the “moral hazards” (Prager 2005, 632) as such and the two provisos discussed earlier thus suggest a discrepancy between the vulgar version of the Democratic Peace theory and Mill’s international thought. To be sure, our initial response to Jahn so far still falls short of a full reply. Yet it suffices to show that Mill’s imperialism is not a “perfect mirror” of the Democratic Peace theory. In any event, the rationale for Millian liberal imperialism is embedded within a much wider theoretical context of and practical consideration than suggested by Jahn’s accounts. By contrast,

Holmes is more sympathetic towards, and more sensitive to the milieu of, Mill. Consequently, his reconstruction – with which the reading of this article until now is compatible – goes beyond Jahn's reading in appreciating the logical consistency between Mill's liberal ideal of active citizenship and the differential treatment of nations.

Nevertheless, according to Holmes (2007, 321), Mill's transitology noted earlier implies a view that mankind's "political evolution" has culminated in the European culture and social arrangement, if not the representative democracy of the British sort – a view tinged with national superiority. The restoration of the coherence of Mill does not automatically acquit him of ethnocentrism. The next section will address this issue in full.

III. Experiments in Living and the Case for Liberal Imperialism

To begin with, recall that Jahn equates Mill's empiricism with a historiosophy delineating the development of human civilization. That does not tell the whole story. For, as established by Prager (2005, 625), Mill's international ideas are "outgrowths of his personal struggles" to free himself from three tyrannies: (1) the exacting education received from his father, James Mill; (2) the gossip and social ostracism triggered by Mill's unconventional relationship with the married Harriet Taylor; (3) the oppressive relation between them in which Mill had to defer to Taylor's opinions even when he thought her wrong. These findings suggest

a different way of understanding the hitherto neglected “empiricist” connection between Mill’s liberal imperialism and life experiences. Nevertheless, Prager does not exhaust this connection. Nor does he make efforts to go beyond a motivational analysis. The section is meant to take seriously the neglected empiricist dimension in Mill’s liberal imperialism and address the issue of ethnocentrism accordingly.

This involves a reading of Mill’s liberal imperialism in the light of his idea of “experiments in living” found in *On Liberty* (Mill 1963-91, CW XVIII, 260-61, 281). This is the passage where Mill first brings up the idea:

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments in living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injuries to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be *proved practically*, when anyone thinks fit to try them (Mill 1963-91, CW XVIII, 260-61; author’s emphasis).

To be sure, this passage is meant to be an argument for liberty and individuality. And indeed Isaiah Berlin (1969, 206) understands this to be Mill’s defence for individual freedom on the grounds that liberty is a necessary condition for human beings “to choose and to experiment” – so as to realize their potential, and thereby become

“fully human”. This classic interpretation immediately casts light on how Mill understands the instrumental and the intrinsic values of individual liberty respectively. In addition, it touches on the empiricist dimension in Mill’s empiricism, and has since popularized the idea of “experiments in living”. Nevertheless, despite scholars like Ryan (1991), Gray (1983), and Wollheim (1991) having made their contributions to the development of “experiments in living” as a *concept* or a *doctrine* so as to make sense of Mill’s *theory* of liberalism, they have not attempted to read Mill’s *Autobiography* (1973) as a report of his *own* experiments in living.

Elizabeth Anderson (1991) is an exception. In an article meant to reply to the widespread criticism of Mill’s distinction between the “higher pleasures” associated with the exercise of mental faculties and the “lower pleasures” derived from bodily enjoyment as evidence of his perfectionism or elitism, she suggests that the distinction should be understood as an empirical report by Mill *qua* an experienced man who had conducted his own experiments in living before reaching that conclusion. This reading can make sense of Mill’s famous idea of a “competent judge” found in *Utilitarianism* (1861) (Mill 1963-91, CW X, 213)⁵ – that is, a man who has experienced so much that he can be trusted to make judgment about the quality of a pleasure. Furthermore, it also bolsters the case made by Prager sketched earlier. However, more importantly, Anderson’s

⁵ The idea can also be found in Mill’s neglected *Principles of Political Economy* (Mill 1963-91, CW III, 947-50).

suggestion at once lends a perspective for us to critically reconstruct Mill's rationale behind his support for liberal imperialism.

More than an account of Mill's motivation for theoretical concerns, as we can see, Anderson's reading points to the *methodological* dimension of Mill's political thought. To be sure, Mill is an empiricist. Thus, one should not be surprised to find Mill's *own* experiments in living led him to the discovery of the distinction between the higher and lower pleasures, and thereby refuted Jeremy Bentham's version of utilitarianism that recognizes no qualitative difference between poetry and pushpin.⁶ Note that what is at stake here is how Mill's argument is *justified* – or, *how* he has come to reach the conclusion that *X* is his *own* higher pleasure – and the way this verdict and *X* must be understood. Furthermore, if Anderson is right, then it is life experiences that paved Mill's way for weaving a *cognitive* dimension into Bentham's reflexive and bodily conception of pleasure – whereby the original pleasure-based Benthamite calculative idea of “utility” is transformed into a *reflective* mode of *judgment* which can only be made after an experiment in living.

Or, to take this line of reading a step further, one may also read this together with Mill's idea of “progress” again. Truly, as elucidated by him, utility is “the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a *progressive being*” (Mill

⁶ For influential discussions on this issue, see Roger Crisp (1997), Gray (1983), and Riley (1993).

1963-91, CW XVIII, 224). Mill's refined or, more specifically, empirically verified version of utilitarianism in effect regards whatever contributes to a man's making progress as a moral agent to be a utility. Undoubtedly, Mill would consider his own version to be an improvement – which in turn is a *proof* that *he himself* is a progressive being. Furthermore, a reflection as such might include: (1) an appreciation of the (social) context in which experiments in living are possible; which may lead to a consideration on (2) how experiments as such can be encouraged; and (3) under what conditions can an experiment in living be deemed as *valid* or successful.

Arguably, anyone who reflects upon the above three questions in the capacity of a person having conducted an experiment in living would support a free and tolerant society. In any event, if experiments as such are to be encouraged, that society must cherish diversity and authenticity and allow its citizens to make wrong choices. This is the gist of *On Liberty* that defends freedom on the grounds of individuality as well as the idea of “fallibilism” which, as Berlin (1969, 192) notes, amounts to conferring “the right to err” on humanity. For Mill, the England during his lifetime falls short of this vision. In addition, included in his package of reform is the institution of representative democracy, which functions as a means to fostering active citizenship – by way of helping the young to cultivate a “public spirit” and allowing the cultivated to lead and serve the rest of the society (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 377). Mill's

Autobiography more than likely is a testament – written in the voice of a “competent judge” – to this public spirit as a form of higher pleasure, for the reference of the others.

However, while Mill worries about the imminent social conformism in England (Mill 1963-91, CW XVIII, 274), and therefore offers “freedom of expression” and “representative democracy” as a reform package to lift the relatively advanced nation to a higher stage of civilization, his prescription for backward nations is different, for what he sees as a problem is not conformism but their people’s general lack of a “habit or capacity of dealing with interests common to such communities” (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 417). No doubt, Mill’s differential treatment is due to different diagnoses. With regard to India, more specifically, he considers that “it has been the destiny of the government of the East India Company, to suggest the true theory of the government of a semi-barbarous dependency by a civilized county” (Mill 1963-91, CW XIX, 577).

At this point, critics may question whether Mill has the knowledge or experience necessary for arriving at his diagnosis. Or, to put it differently, granted that he has the point with regard to England, could he really be a competent judge when it comes to India? The answer to this certainly bears on the issue of ethnocentrism left by the previous section, as well as the ultimate validity of Mill’s liberal imperialism. Indeed, what has been established so far is that the theory is logically consistent, but,

given that logical reasoning may begin with a false premise, is it something that can be justified? The rest of this article is meant to address this difficult question.

To proceed, note that ethnocentrism is a form of prejudice. Furthermore, the object of prejudice is “national character”. That is to say, an act of ethnocentrism presupposes a generalization of another nation’s character as well as a way of separating nations into the “good” and the “bad” ones – the “civilized” and the “barbarous” nations as in the case of Mill; or the “good” and the “evil” states as found in George W. Bush’s 2002 speech mentioned earlier. Thus, an ethnocentrist is one who passes judgment on another state’s national character based on his own nation’s standard. Mill has been accused of being an ethnocentrist or even a racist (Mehta 1999), on the grounds that he uses England as the benchmark whereby other nations are judged to be backward.

To reply on behalf of him, some scholars have pointed to the fact that talk of national character and racial prejudice were commonplace in Mill’s Victorian England (Bell 2007; Brown, Nardin, and Rengger 2002, 465). Nevertheless, appealing to this historical fact does not help Mill much; rather, that seems to confirm that he was in the wrong. Indeed, Jahn (2006, 195) precisely regards this to be evidence for Mill’s ethnocentrism anyway.

A better defence for Mill’s position comes from Georgios Varouxakis’s study. According to him, what is behind the rationale of the very common ethnocentrism of Victorian Britain is “racial

determinism” based on a racial-biological explanation of savage society, often couched in Darwinian language (Varouxakis 2005, 139), and that is precisely what Mill pitted himself against. The idea of “race” was used basically as an explanatory tool, by which a nation’s failure could be accounted for. For instance, Walter Bagehot used it to explain why the French Revolution did not succeed, attributing the failure of that “experiment” to *national character* in terms of *blood* (Varouxakis 2005, 139-40). However, according to Varouxakis, Mill meant to discredit this way of understanding national character and failure. Instead of “blood” (hence incurableness), he attributes the backward states’ national character to “culture and institutions” which are malleable.

This shift in focus seems to suggest that Mill’s theory of liberal imperialism is not premised on racism as claimed by Uday Mehta (1999). No doubt, Varouxakis’s finding is consistent with the reading of this article. In fact, what this article continues to say will support his more recent interpretation of Mill as a cosmopolitan patriot thinker who considers the project of civilizing the barbarous to be not just a utilitarian duty, but also a way of protecting his motherland (Varouxakis 2005; 2013).

To continue, it cannot be overemphasized that Mill is a British empiricist, and that means he is essentially an individualist. This overall philosophical stance that bears on his writings should be understood. Yet it is so often neglected by interpreters of Mill’s liberal imperialism, as if his political theory is a *sui generis* theory

that can only be understood as an *a priori* system of abstract ideas subject to logical examination. This is a mistake. At least this way of reading is inapplicable to Mill, as our discussion of “experiments in living” has suggested. In addition, to read Mill in this way is unfair, for it runs the risk of attributing ideas alien to his thought. More likely than not, those who accuse him of ethnocentrism also ignore this basic feature of Mill as a thinker.

To illustrate, critics may now appeal to the fact that Mill does compare different nations. In addition, he often compares backward nations to children – indeed, so frequently that it gives the impression that he merely draws an *analogy* between man and nation to make out his prescription of “vigorous despotism” for savage societies which are, metaphorically speaking, people still in their childhood. If so, Mill’s theory of liberal imperialism is but an application of his treatment of children at the international level – that is to say, the same paternalistic logic is at work at both levels. And what is implied by this is that, firstly, Mill is still on the verge of ethnocentrism, for he belittles nations like India and, secondly, he has lost what Berlin (1996, 1-39) calls “the sense of reality” to have mistaken the metaphor for the real – a crime for an empiricist, so to speak.

This is not true. For one thing, methodologically speaking, as established in our discussion on Walzer, Mill does not rely on the metaphor of seeing a nation as a person *writ large*. Furthermore, in any event, Mill’s methodological individualism bars him

from *interpreting* a nation or its institutional structure as an “experimented” mode of collective life whose validity is *universal* or can be *mechanically transferred* to another state in a different context. Democratic Peace theorists are inclined to do so; and so was Bagehot mentioned just now. That is to say, Mill the empiricist has an acute sense of reality, and never intends his metaphorical use of “blood” (Varouxakis 2005, 141) or “child” to be more than a figure of speech.

For another, practically speaking, Mill’s empiricism implies that for him all propositions must be experimented with in order to be regarded as true, including forms of living – to be “proved practically”, as noted in the passage where he introduces the idea of experiments in living. However, what is even more important is that, for Mill, since no two states are exactly the same in every detail, we cannot *conduct* experiments at this level (Ryan 1987, 138-42). Indeed, the textual evidence confirms that he dismisses Marx’s socialism on the grounds that it was not capable of experimental trials on a full scale (Rosen 2013, 192-93).

In effect, Mill does not need to rely on cross-level *analogical reasoning* to argue for making his points with regard to nations anyway. For his liberal imperialism is an “outgrowth” from his own experiments in living. He reflects first in the capacity of an individual who discovers active citizenship to be a higher pleasure; then of a confirmed utilitarian who offers a package of social reform for England; and finally a cosmopolitan patriot who takes up his

utilitarian duty to better humanity in the belief that this could either earn his nation a reputation in history or protect the interests of the Empire – precisely as he concludes in his essay “A Few Words on Non-Intervention”:

The prize is too glorious not to be snatched sooner or later by some free country; and the time may not be distant when England, if she does not take his heroic part because of its heroism, will be compelled to take it from consideration for her own safety (Mill 1963-91, CW XXI, 125).

In the final analysis, Mill should not be read as arguing for the case that – to recall Holmes's words – the “representative democracy of the British sort” is the ideal form of government for all because it has collectively been experimented to be a success. His theory is not an “alibi for the *fait accompli* of empire” (Mantena 2007b, 114; 2010). Furthermore, his liberal imperialism is not meant to promote England as a “city on a hill” or a beacon to the rest of the world – as found in the American president's parlance.⁷ Rather, it is a theory with a utilitarian concern to better each individual man as a “progressive being.”

The “being” is a person. Each person is a centre where

⁷ For a discussion on the view of the USA as a “city on the hill”, the so-called “Jeffersonian” tradition of American foreign policy, see Walter Russell Mead (2002).

progress can be made. Content-wise, what counts as progress may vary from one individual to another. However, the way progress is made is the same for all – to conduct experiments in living and then reflect on them in due course. Mill's liberal imperialism that this article reconstructs is not only internally coherent but also logically consistent with his other aspects of thought. It is *justifiable* in his own individualist-empiricist terms – with Mill being an experienced 'competent judge'. Yet, whether this theory ultimately can stand criticisms from external perspectives is an issue beyond the scope of this article.

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生活試驗與帝國主義： 約翰·彌爾的國際政治思想之再詮釋

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摘 要

透過分析約翰·彌爾（John Stuart Mill）的「自由帝國主義」（liberal imperialism）思想，本文旨在重新詮釋其國際思想，亦即一套包括反對國際干預但支持協助他國建立民主制度的國際政治理論。此一詮釋一方面挑戰學界所熟悉 Michael Walzer 的「社群主義」（Communitarian）解讀，另一方面試圖回應學界對於彌爾作為全球化時代國際政治思想家的新一波關注。911 事件過後，有論者認為彌爾的帝國主義思想可用以解讀美國反恐戰爭的理據，也有批評者主張彌爾乃「民主和平論」（Democratic Peace Theory）的始作俑者，而且思想內容存在諸多矛盾。

本文的詮釋立足於以薩·伯林（Isaiah Berlin）的經典詮釋中所強調「生活試驗」（experiments in living）概念。此一概念引發了彌爾研究學界的新一波詮釋，企圖化解效益主義與自由主義的邏輯衝突。本文循線勾勒出此一詮釋的經驗主義層面，並據此重新解讀彌爾的《自傳》為深具理論意涵的一連串生活試驗，從而推論出彌爾的自由帝國主義實乃一套邏輯連貫且根植於實踐經驗的理論，如同其對於個人自由的捍衛以及效益主義的支持。其根基正是彌爾對於

自身生活試驗的反思，也就是他所謂的「進步的個體」（progressive being）概念之真諦。

關鍵字：自由主義、帝國主義、國際干預、生活試驗、民主和平論