

MILL'S UN-UTILITARIAN REJECTION OF REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM

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A pesar de las reticencias de Mill frente al socialismo, se puede considerar al propio Mill como una especie de socialista, dadas las opiniones que expresa en sus *Capítulos sobre el socialismo*, *Principios de economía política*, y en su *Autobiografía*. Sin embargo, aunque Mill se mostraba favorable al socialismo gradualista, siempre rechazaba el llamado "socialismo revolucionario." En este ensayo se argumenta que el rechazo por parte de Mill de la opción del socialismo revolucionario no era consecuente con una perspectiva utilitarista, ni siquiera si reconocemos, siguiendo a Jonathan Riley, el alto valor que Mill concedía a la seguridad.

Palabras clave: J. S. Mill, socialismo, utilitarismo, comunismo

Despite Mill's reservations about socialism, it is not incorrect to regard Mill himself as a socialist of sorts, given the views expressed in such works as the *Chapters on Socialism*, the *Principles of Political Economy*, and the *Autobiography*. Yet while sympathetic to gradualist approaches to socialism, Mill appears to have consistently rejected the more radical alternative of "revolutionary socialism." This essay argues that Mill is inconsistent, from a utilitarian point of view, in rejecting the option of revolutionary socialism, and that this remains the case even if we grant, following Jonathan Riley, the paramount value of security for Mill.

Keywords: J. S. Mill, socialism, utilitarianism, communism

I

John Stuart Mill is, as Richard Arneson once pointed out, "one of the very few philosophical representatives of the liberal political tradition to have given a detailed and sympathetic examination of the socialist critique of private property" (Arneson 1979, 231).¹ Indeed, Mill's sympathy for "the socialist cri-

1 Cf. Claeys 1987, 122. It is worth pointing out that Mills's remarks on socialism, both favorable and unfavorable, are typically meant to apply to *communism* as well, for, as John Robson reminds us, "Mill, like his contemporaries, does not distinguish as we would between Socialism and Communism, using the terms interchangeably for the most part to refer to kinds of 'Association'" (Robson 1968, 276). Insofar as Mill does sometimes distinguish between socialism

tique of private property” and capitalist society generally was such that toward the end of his life he could even regard himself as a socialist of sorts,² despite harboring a number of fundamental reservations, both moral and economic, about socialism. To be sure, in the well-known passages of the *Autobiography* in which he professes his adherence to socialism Mill does not specify the actual strain of socialism that he had come to endorse.³ Even so, one thing is clear: to the extent that Mill was in fact a kind of socialist or quasi-socialist,⁴ the type of socialism that he embraced was without question a variety of *ethical* socialism, that is, a concept of socialism deriving from “the belief that socialism must be founded upon and reflect the acceptable moral principles of a good society” (Self 1993, 337). What is more, not only does the hyper-moralized conception of socialism that can be distilled from Mill’s writings represent a distinctive version of ethical socialism, a tradition associated with thinkers like Eduard Bernstein in Continental Europe, and R.H. Tawney and William Morris in Great Britain. It also amounts to one of the most uncompromising varieties within this tradition, combining as it does—and sometimes accentuating—motifs and commitments found in a number of other species of ethical socialism.

Lest this characterization of Mill’s outlook seem implausible, consider the following aspects of his conception of socialism. First of all, the desirability of, and justification for, socialism stems, in Mill’s view, from moral considera-

and communism, adds Robson, “he uses Communist to mean that social organization which implies an absolute equalization of labour and wealth, the ‘extreme limit of socialism’” (Ibid.) (The affinity between this perspective and the distinction between socialism and communism conventionally extracted from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* should be obvious.)

- 2 “[O]ur [he and Harriet Taylor’s] ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists” (Mill 1981, 239). Of course, if Mill’s “sympathetic examination of the socialist critique of private property” sets him apart from nearly all other major figures in the liberal tradition, his ultimate embrace of socialism puts him in a class of liberal theorists of which he may well be the only member.
- 3 In the other relevant passage of the *Autobiography* Mill notes only that he eventually underwent, partly because of Harriet Taylor’s influence, “a greater approximation, so far as regards the ultimate prospects of humanity, to a qualified Socialism” (Mill 1981, 199). In any event, if we had to choose one label for Mill in this connection, perhaps the most appropriate would be “evolutionary socialist,” which is how Joseph Schumpeter categorized him (Ottow 1993, 479).
- 4 The classification of Mill as a socialist is, of course, contentious. If, nonetheless, I do not hesitate in labeling Mill a “socialist,” it is not only for the simple reason that I am loath to question Mill’s own self-characterization in the *Autobiography*. The label also seems appropriate in light of both the attitude toward socialism expressed in Mill’s other writings and the positions and commitments held by other varieties of socialists, whether in his day or ours. In connection with the latter consideration, both Raimund Ottow and John Robson argue that Mill was indeed a “socialist” in terms of the sociopolitical context of his time (Ottow 1993, 481; Robson, 1968, 270). Ottow and Robson are correct, in my opinion, although I would argue that Mill is likewise a “socialist” with respect to contemporary usage of the term. (Skeptics would do well to examine the programmatic statements, and concrete policies, of, say, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party [PSOE], currently in power in Spain, or the French Socialist Party [PS].)

tions.⁵ Second, Mill assigns an important role to moral advocacy in advancing the cause of, and bringing into being, socialism (along with, of course, the need for practical experiments in worker cooperatives in the economic realm).⁶ Thirdly, Mill assumes that the principal condition for the advent, viability and success of socialism is moral “education” and progress, including the cultivation, among all members of society, of a disposition to subordinate personal interests to those of society as a whole, and a heightened commitment to cooperation.⁷ Finally, Mill resolutely rejects violent revolution or calculated political upheaval as a method for establishing socialism, consistently arguing instead for a policy of gradualism.⁸

Yet while all of these views are characteristic of one theory or another among the great variety typically included within the tradition of ethical socialism—the broader framework within which Mill’s orientation should be situated, even though the relevant literature seldom mentions this affinity—Mill’s socialism may well be unique in integrating them all within a single theory or conception. This aspect of Mill’s socialism, the fact that it includes elements scattered among a number of its ethical socialist relatives, is perhaps what accounts for its appeal to many people. Whether or not this is the case, the ethical assumptions of Mill’s socialism are also ultimately the source of some of the basic flaws and contradictions besetting his conception of socialism, for they either imply positions that are inconsistent with other views that he holds, or they tend to commit him to dubious strategic proposals.⁹

5 For example, in his essay “Newman’s Political Economy,” Mill remarks, “It appears to us that nothing valid can be said against socialism in principle; and that the attempts to assail it, or to defend private property, on the ground of justice, must inevitably fail” (Mill 1967, 444). (Cf. the famous passage on the choice between communism and “the present state of society” in Mill 1965a, 207.) For a defense of the claim that Mill regarded socialism as morally superior to capitalism, see Riley 1998.

6 Most of Mill’s comments regarding the necessity and advisability of the moral appeal appear in the *Chapters on Socialism*. See, e.g., Mill 1989, 228 and 275-76.

7 See, e.g., Mill 1989, 271 and 275. Mill’s view that the viability of socialism will depend chiefly on the moral and intellectual improvement of the members of society is essentially a corollary of his fundamental conviction that “all real amelioration in the lot of mankind depends on... their intellectual and moral state” (Mill 1981, 245).

8 See, e.g., Mill 1989, 260-61. For an extensive account (which I criticize below) of the bases for Mill’s gradualism, see Riley 1998.

9 One example of the latter: Mill maintains that “it is both the duty and the interest of those who derive the most direct benefit from the [existing] laws of property to give impartial consideration to all proposals for rendering those laws in any way less onerous to the majority. This, which would in any case be an obligation of justice, is an injunction of prudence also, in order to place themselves in the right against the attempts which are sure to be frequent to bring the Socialist forms of society prematurely into operation” (Mill 1989, 275-76). Yet if one bears in mind the interests attending, in most circumstances, the possession of power, it would seem quite foolish to invest any hope in appeals to the moral feelings of those who reap the greatest benefits from the present order of society. Indeed, elsewhere Mill implicitly acknowledges as

In the following remarks I should like to focus on the last aspect of Mill's socialism that I have mentioned, namely his commitment to gradualism as a means of introducing socialism. My central claim is that Mill appears to be inconsistent, from a utilitarian point of view, in admitting only the possibility of gradualist reformism (as opposed to revolution) as a way of establishing a socialist society. Moreover, I argue that this remains the case—this inconsistency does not disappear—even if we grant, following Jonathan Riley (1998), the paramount value of security for Mill.

II

It is well known that Mill, however sympathetic to certain initiatives proposed in various socialist projects, steadfastly advocated a policy of gradualist reformism and small-scale experimentation (e.g., within worker cooperatives), and flatly rejected “revolutionary” approaches to the creation of socialism. His views toward these two divergent approaches are most evident in the unfinished *Chapters on Socialism*, in which he frequently praises the practicality and moderation of reformist socialism based on trial and experimentation, while rather disdainfully dismissing the pretensions of revolutionary socialism.¹⁰ But was Mill's espousal of gradualism consistent with his other views and commitments? As I hope to demonstrate, Mill's unequivocal support for gradualism and uncompromising opposition to radical (or revolutionary) solutions to the ills that he described and condemned is much harder to justify on Mill's own terms than is normally supposed.¹¹

Before attempting to answer the question just posed, it is necessary to understand the reasons that Mill counsels gradualism as a means of pursuing socialism. While there are probably a variety of reasons for this preference, three seem to be especially central to Mill's thinking. First of all, Mill disdains *revolutionary violence*—the very antithesis of gradualist reformism; second, Mill is op-

much: “All privileged and powerful classes,” he observes in the *Principles of Political Economy*, “...have used their power in the interest of their own selfishness” (Mill 1965b, 760).

10 See, e.g., Mill 1989, 260-61. While Mill mentions some figures (e.g., Owen and Fourier) by name in discussing gradualist, experimental socialism, he neglects to provide any specific references in criticizing revolutionary socialism.

11 Lewis S. Feuer suggests that “Mill...uses the word ‘revolution’ to signify ‘a change of government effected by force’” (Feuer 1949, 302). This seems accurate enough, yet it is also important to underscore that Mill emphasizes that the change in question is an abrupt change and (at least in connection with the issue of socialism) one that transforms the socio-economic structure of society as a whole, and not merely its government (cf. Mill 1989, 260-61). In any event, I am using “radical” and “revolutionary” here in a sense that combines all of these elements, and thus means, roughly, abrupt (and large-scale) economico-political transformation effected by force.

posed to any abrupt transformation of the existing property laws,¹² which would, among other things, undermine security; and third, Mill believes that workers must still undergo a lengthy process of education, both moral and intellectual, before they themselves will be capable of governing, or participating in the governance of, society.¹³ Common to all of these concerns is Mill's resistance to any policy that would diminish utility, the maximization of which is of course the ultimate moral or theoretical consideration for Mill. Indeed, Mill is quite explicit in insisting that utility must be the criterion for assessing the respective merits, and shortcomings, of capitalism and socialism (Mill 1989, 261; 1967, 443).¹⁴ It is clear, then, that the answer to the question posed above will be determined by the answer to a more fundamental philosophical question: Do utilitarian calculations clearly dictate a policy of political gradualism in the establishment of socialism, assuming the desirability, on utilitarian grounds, of the latter?

One reason that we should hesitate to answer in the affirmative, or rather should be inclined to answer in the negative, derives from Mill's own description (and denunciation) of the kind, scope and magnitude of the economic injustices that exist in capitalist societies, or in any event the most advanced capitalist societies of his day. In his review essay "Newman's Political Economy," for example, Mill acknowledges a "mass of physical and moral evils which are not only consistent with, but directly grow out of the facts of competition and individual property" (Mill 1967, 442). Likewise, in his *Principles of Political Economy*, he speaks of "the miseries and iniquities of a state of much inequality of wealth" (Mill 1965a, 202) and "the inequality and injustice with which labour (not to speak of remuneration) is now apportioned" (Mill 1965a, 207). This latter state of affairs in particular is what Mill denounces in a celebrated passage in Chapter One of the *Principles of Political Economy*, where he deplores

the present state of society with all its sufferings and injustices...[and in which] the produce of labour should be apportioned as we now see it, almost in an inverse ratio to the labour—the largest portions to those who have never worked at all, the next largest to those whose work is almost nominal, and so in a descending scale, the remuneration dwindling as the work grows harder and more disagreeable, until the most fatiguing and exhausting bodily

12 As I argue below, Mill is in fact inconsistent in his opposition to measures that undermine security.

13 With regard to Mill's rejection of revolutionary violence, see the passage cited in note 10; as for his insistence on education, see the first passage cited in note 7. I address Mill's views on security, and furnish a number of relevant citations, below.

14 Riley is therefore quite correct in claiming that "Mill's evaluation of capitalism and socialism cannot be understood apart from his general utilitarian philosophy" (1998, 360).

labour cannot count with certainty on being able to earn even the necessities of life... (Mill 1965a, 207).¹⁵

Lastly, consider the indictment contained in the following passage from the *Chapters on Socialism*:

No longer enslaved or made dependent by force of law, the great majority are so by force of poverty; they are still chained to a place, to an occupation, and to conformity with the will of an employer, and debarred by the accident of birth both from the enjoyments, and from the mental and moral advantages, which others inherit without exertion and independently of desert. That this is an evil equal to almost any of those against which mankind have hitherto struggled, the poor are not wrong in believing (Mill 1989, 227).

Given the nature and scale of the privations, injustices and evils that Mill inventories in these and similar passages, it is far from obvious why, as a utilitarian, Mill should so resolutely and unswervingly defend a policy of gradualism in striving for some form of socialism, or radically modified capitalism. After all, the harms that he describes would seem to be so momentous and extensive that the utility produced by their elimination through revolution might easily outweigh any harms wrought by the revolution itself, and so a favorable assessment of revolution would seem warranted from a utilitarian perspective.¹⁶

If, these considerations notwithstanding, Mill never questions his adherence to a policy of gradualism, the reason may be, as Jonathan Riley has argued, “the priority given within his philosophy to general security of certain legitimate expectations” (Riley 1998, 360). According to Riley, “Mill’s evaluation of capitalism and socialism is readily comprehensible in terms of his liberal utilitarian philosophy interpreted to give lexical priority to general security and individuality over other values, including, economic efficiency and growth, in cases of conflict” (Riley 1998, 379). For Mill, “That imperfect security, associated with the existing system of unequal rights and holdings, has priority such that a reduction of security cannot be balanced or offset by increases in other values” (Riley 1998, 367). It is, then, the paramount value attached to the security of various sorts of expectations that, on this view, accounts for and justifies Mill’s insistence on adopting a gradualist strategy in trying to construct a more

15 Cf. Mill 1965a, 209, and the following remark from the *Chapters on Socialism*: “The very idea of distributive justice, or of any proportionality between success and merit, or between success and exertion, is in the present state of society so manifestly chimerical as to be relegated to the regions of romance” (Mill 1989, 231; cf. Mill 1967, 444).

16 Moreover, as George E. Panichas rightly observes, “Mill says precious little to justify his belief that a transition to socialism would involve the devastation he envisions. Indeed, his claim is quite troublesome as the only defense stated is yet another appeal to the lack of intellectual and moral development of persons” (Panichas 1983, 263).

egalitarian society. As Riley puts it, “the necessity of this gradualist strategy signals the overwhelming importance of general security of certain legitimate expectations for his version of the utilitarian philosophy” (Riley 1998, 357).

In emphasizing the importance of security for Mill,¹⁷ Riley’s argument raises at least three fundamental questions. First, did Mill in fact accord lexical priority to security (of legitimate expectations), or rather how consistent was Mill in adhering to this postulate? Second, assuming that Mill did indeed posit the lexical priority of security, is it really the case that Mill considers all the relevant claims to security? Finally, whether or not Mill does himself maintain the lexical priority of security of legitimate expectations, what warrant is there on utilitarian grounds for so privileging this particular value?

As regards the first question, I wish to note here only that one finds passages in Mill’s writings bearing on socialism and capitalism in which he appears almost cavalier in his readiness to sacrifice security for the sake of other ends, namely the objectives of “economic efficiency and growth.” One such passage occurs in the final paragraph of his chapter “On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes” in the *Principles of Political Economy*, when Mill, in vigorously defending the value of competition, writes:

I conceive that, even in the present state of society and industry, every restriction of it [i.e., competition] is an evil, and every extension of it, *even if for the time injuriously affecting some class of labourers*, is always an ultimate good.[A]nd the time has come when the interest of universal improvement is no longer promoted by prolonging the privileges of a few. If the slopsellers and others of their class have lowered the wages of tailors, and some other artizans, by making them an affair of competition instead of custom, so much the better in the end. *What is now required is not to bolster up old customs*, whereby limited classes of labouring people obtain partial gains which interest them in keeping up the present organization of society, but to introduce new general practices beneficial to all... (Mill 1965b, 795-6; emphases added).

Mill’s endorsement of measures—in this case, patterns of competition—that would have an adverse effect on a particular class of workers and his readiness to subvert certain commercial customs plainly exemplifies, I believe, a willingness to subordinate a concern for the security of legitimate expect-

¹⁷ If I focus on the question of security and neglect that of individuality, which Riley also mentions in a passage cited in the previous paragraph (and elsewhere on the page from which this citation is taken), it is because the topic of security is Riley’s focus, too. At any rate, it is worth noting that Riley’s formulation contains an important ambiguity: it is not clear whether he regards individuality and security as having the same lexical ranking for Mill. (Of course, if according to Riley’s interpretation they do not have the same ranking for Mill, then we ought to be told which value has priority).

tations to other values. For the customs to which he refers were obviously intended to ensure the protection and security of certain legitimate expectations, which will be frustrated or thwarted by the new forms of competition. (Riley himself specifically mentions the role of customs in creating security of expectations, as we shall see in a moment.) Thus, there seem to be reasonable grounds for disputing the claim that Mill accords lexical priority to security (of legitimate expectations), or at the very least for assuming that insofar as he does so he is inconsistent in applying this principle.

Let us suppose, nonetheless, that Mill does indeed accord lexical priority to security of legitimate expectations. Even if this is true, it would still not be the case that Mill's view generates the justification for gradualism in the way suggested by Riley's argument, for the relevant considerations for the most part involve *competing claims to security*, rather than conflicts between security and other values. And since it is a matter of competing claims to a good that has the same (supreme) lexical ranking, the only way for Mill to settle the conflict is presumably by appealing to considerations of a utilitarian nature.

It may be helpful at this point to note Riley's definition of security: "Security is a product of general rules (laws, customs, and/or shared dictates of conscience) that distribute and sanction personal claims or rights. The rules and associated rights give rise to a pattern of legitimate expectations the fulfillment of which is equivalent to maximization of general security under those rules" (Riley 1998, 361). I take this to mean that "security" denotes the fulfillment of legitimate expectations, whose legitimacy derives from rights or claims grounded in rules of a certain sort. Put differently and perhaps more straightforwardly, conventions of various sorts yield certain rights or claims, which in turn generate legitimate expectations. "Security" arises from the fulfillment of these expectations.

Bearing these notions in mind, consider the myriad ways in which the kind of capitalist economic order analyzed by Mill precludes security for the propertyless, in that it either hampers the formation of legitimate expectations or systematically frustrates their fulfillment.¹⁸ To begin with, there is the issue of security of employment,¹⁹ and with it income, which for the propertyless is severely limited, when not nonexistent, under capitalism. I have already had occasion to cite one text in which Mill concedes that competition frustrates security of employment

18 The relevant rules in this connection—that is, the sources of the "legitimate expectations"—stem mainly from customs and "shared dictates of conscience."

19 As we shall see, Mill himself refers to security of employment in an 1870 letter to Charles Elliot Norton, cited by Riley (1998, 360), but claims, curiously, that it requires "private ownership."

— “injuriously affecting some class of labourers”—and in both the *Principles of Political Economy* and *Chapters on Socialism* we find additional passages that likewise acknowledge competition’s adverse impact on security of expectations regarding continuity of employment (even though, to be sure, Mill thinks the competition is ultimately justified). But even if the conditions of one’s employment are such as to make possible legitimate expectations as regards continuity of employment and these expectations are subsequently fulfilled, Mill makes it clear that the nature of a worker’s employment under capitalism often precludes security of legitimate expectations as regards assurance of subsistence. I have already cited a passage from the *Principles of Political Economy* in which Mill observes that under the conditions of capitalism in his day “the most fatiguing and exhausting bodily labour cannot count with certainty on being able to earn even the necessaries of life” (Mill 1965a, 207); it is a point echoed in the *Chapters on Socialism*, in which Mill claims that in the case of much of the population “their daily bread is all that they have; and that often in insufficient quantity; almost always of inferior quantity; and with no assurance of continuing to have it at all” (Mill 1989, 230).²⁰ (Notice that, just as the previously cited passage also evokes a threat to physical security, these last remarks also evoke the insecurity of future employment.) More generally, Mill criticizes the relation of *dependence* (see, e.g., Mill 1965a, 209) to which capitalism subjects most workers, in particular dependence on others’ rules and decisions, and this too can be construed as minimizing security. This would in fact seem to be but one specific instance of the tendency of private property, as an institution, to undermine many agents’ autonomy, a point that Mill stresses in his essay “Coleridge”: “when the State allows any one to exercise ownership over more land than suffices to raise by his own labor his subsistence and that of his family, it confers on him power over other human beings—power affecting them in their most vital interests” (Mill 1969, 157-58). At any rate, it is also worth noting that in one of his more lyrical passages on the promise of “co-operation,” Mill asserts that one of the moral benefits of “co-operation” will be precisely “a new sense of security and independence in the labouring class” (Mill 1965b, 792).

It should be clear from these examples, all of which evoke the precariousness of expectations that plague the propertyless under capitalism, that forestalling the implementation of socialism entails hindering any security of legitimate expectations for many (notably the working class), even as it guarantees this security for others (mainly the possessors of private property). The estab-

20 It is true that Mill makes this remark in the course of summarizing “socialist objections to the present order of society” but there is no reason to believe that it does not represent his own view, given the tenor of his observations in the *Principles of Political Economy*.

lishment of socialism would, conversely, entail the provision of new forms of security—or effective guarantees for existing claims to security—of legitimate expectations for the many propertyless, while producing some loss of security for the owners of property. In short, if the rapid establishment of socialism or any program of radical egalitarian reforms were to lead to diminished security for some, their loss would be offset by the major gains in security for others.²¹ For these reasons—the fact that *it is really a matter of competing claims to the same good and that socialism would in all likelihood not produce an overall loss in the quantity of this good*—it is a mistake, it seems to me, to claim that utilitarian considerations dictate a policy of gradualism in the transition to socialism, or some alternative system consisting in a radically reformed capitalism. One can, therefore, assume that Mill gives security lexical priority and still maintain that he should favor a rapid transition to socialism.

At one point in his argument, Riley writes,

Violation of even a single person's existing rights is sufficient to reduce security and thereby render the reform self-defeating in utilitarian terms since other considerations of value cannot make up for that reduction of security. In short, raising the present level of general security requires egalitarian reform of the existing rules together with protection for any individual's legitimate expectations formed under the existing system (Riley 1998, 367).

That this observation is largely beside the point should already be clear: it is not a matter of “other considerations of value” but other considerations based on *the same value*. One could, of course, stipulate Pareto efficiency as an additional constraint, and argue on those grounds that the loss of security occasioned by radical reform is, even if offset by other gains in security, still self-defeating. But Riley does not do this and, in any event, to do so would be to introduce a principle that is quite foreign to Mill's utilitarianism, a theory that is normally thought to entail, and evaluate actions on the basis of, interpersonal comparisons of utility.

21 The basic point, albeit with a slightly different emphasis, has been put well by George Panichas: “Security is a product of some economic institutions and as such (though it may not exist without the institutions) contributes to efficiency in a way which must be taken into account if the dismantling of the institution is being considered. The transition to socialism would entail a dismantling of the private ownership of the means of production and, it might be argued, the overall threat to security, hence efficiency, would outweigh the disadvantages of preserving private ownership. ... To use such a defense would involve an appeal to evidence showing that the security and productive stimulæ resulting from a newly established common property economy...would *never* make up that which is lost during a transition” (Panichas 1983, 269, note 39). Notice, however, that unlike my argument, Panichas's observation ignores the problem of *workers' present insecurity*.

This brings me to the last of the three questions that I raised, namely, Are there good utilitarian grounds for so privileging security of legitimate expectations? Here I should like to point out that insofar as Mill did in fact hold this view he was, on many conventional interpretations of utilitarianism, going against the spirit of utilitarianism, for to it is very difficult to see how on utilitarian grounds one can justify so privileging *any* single measure or policy. Riley contends that “Bentham and Mill both insist that legitimate expectations formed around the existing rules of property must not be disappointed by any egalitarian reform of those rules if security is to increase” (Riley 1998, 366-367). I wish to suggest that, if this is indeed the case, it marks a significant departure from the basic evaluative framework common to both thinkers, since there are sure to be situations in which security—and, more important, utility—might well be substantially increased by actions that, aiming at egalitarian reform, disappoint “legitimate expectations formed around the existing rules of property.” This is precisely what the passages and examples marshaled above are meant to suggest. Again, if security is the main justification for gradualism, and this justification fails, there seem to be few theoretical grounds, from a Milleian perspective, for Mill’s own insistence on gradualism.

One reason that Mill’s readers might be inclined to believe that the harm produced by abrupt, radical institutional reform would outweigh the benefits won, even if one conceives of the issue as a conflict between competing claims to security, is that Mill and his interpreters sometimes equivocate with respect to the meaning of the term “private property” in socialist and communist literature. That is, one frequently encounters equivocation as to the *kind* of property that is to be socialized or collectivized under socialism and communism. Mill is in most contexts careful to emphasize that, as he puts it in the *Chapters on Socialism*, “What is characteristic of socialism is the joint ownership by all the members of the community of the instruments and means of production... Socialism by no means excludes private ownership of articles of consumption; the exclusive right of each to his or her share of the produce when received, either to enjoy, to give, or to exchange it” (Mill 1989, 261).²² Or again: “The distinctive feature of Socialism is not that all things are in common, but that production is only carried on upon the common account, and that the instruments of production are held as common property” (Mill 1989, 262). In some passages, however, Mill uses the term “private property” or “individual property” without qualification, as when he writes, for example, that there are “two rival theories, that of private property and that of Socialism (Mill 1989, 226; cf. 267

22 Mill makes a similar statement with respect to communism in his *Principles of Political Economy*, noting that under a communist form of social organization people need not necessarily “be controlled in the disposal of their individual share of the produce” (Mill 1965a, 209).

and 275), or when he speaks of the label "Socialists" as "a designation...which implies...a remodelling generally approaching to abolition of the institution of private property" (Mill 1989, 225).²³ Needless to say, if, as Mill himself acknowledges, socialism does not exclude private ownership of "articles of consumption" and those kinds of property that form no part of the "instruments of production," it is highly misleading, to say the least, to counterpose "socialism" and "private property" or claim that socialism tends to "the abolition of the institution of private property." The equivocation is, at any rate, quite important, for if we assume that all that is to be collectivized or socialized are the major means of production, then it seems quite reasonable to assume that the security sacrificed as a result of collectivizations / socializations will be easily outweighed by the newly attained security. If, on the contrary, it is assumed that *all* individually owned property is to be collectivized (or socialized), then it may well be the case that the loss of security resulting from abrupt, radical reform would outweigh the gains in security.

Now, it seems clear that in trying to envision the loss of security resulting from radical egalitarian reforms, Mill often has in mind the latter, as it were "absolute," notion of totally eliminating private property. In the *Chapters on Socialism*, for example, Mill takes issue with "the revolutionary Socialists" because of their desire "to substitute the new rule for the old at a single stroke," and thereby "forcibly deprive all who have now a comfortable physical existence of their only present means of preserving it" (Mill 1989, 260). But one is hard pressed to understand why Mill thinks that this would be so if the only property to be collectivized consists of the "instruments of production." (One might also add the obvious point that it is not fundamentally a question of depriving people of "a comfortable physical existence," but of universalizing "a comfortable physical existence" and, on the other hand, eliminating the unjustified privileges that some enjoy at others' expense.) To take another example, in an 1870 letter to Charles Elliot Norton, cited by Riley, Mill maintains that "the feeling of security of possession and employment...could not (in the state of advancement mankind have yet reached) be had without private ownership" (Riley 1998, 360). Mill's claim here may well be true with regard to "personal property," but it certainly seems implausible with respect to the "instruments of production," at least if we think in terms of any "feeling of security of possession and employment" known to the great, propertyless majority of the pop-

23 Again, in the *Principles of Political Economy* Mill makes a similar remark with regard to communism, equating it with "the entire abolition of private property" (Mill 1965a, 203). For some unqualified uses of the term "individual property," see Mill 1989, 275 and Mill 1967, 442; and see Mill 1965a, 207 for a passage in which Mill explicitly contrasts "Communism" and "the régime of individual property." In a separate passage in the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill actually goes so far as to counterpose "socialism" to "individual agency" (Mill 1965a, 208)!

ulation. Riley himself, on the other hand, encourages the same equivocation regarding "property," when he remarks, by way of summarizing Mill's view, that "Socialists generally neglect the degree of protection afforded to individuality by private property rights. To the extent that liberty in purely self-regarding matters is tolerated in existing societies, that toleration is largely a by-product of the respect afforded to individual owners to exclude others from their property, including their private residences" (Riley 1998, 374). Putting aside the conflation of "individuality" and "liberty in purely self-regarding matters," notice that the example given for "private property" is a "private residence"—a kind of property which has generally been of little concern to socialists and communists—and not, say, a factory or some substantial holding of a natural resource.²⁴ In any case, as I noted above, so long as it is borne in mind that, as Mill himself reminds us, most varieties of socialism and communism do not aim at a collectivization of what is sometimes called "personal property," the notion that an abrupt transition to socialism would entail a major loss of security overall seems highly dubious, as does Mill's purportedly utilitarian justification for political gradualism in general.

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24 The passage under discussion here merits two additional comments. First, and most important, the passage seems to presuppose that the right to exclude others from, say, using, interfering with, or encroaching upon a given piece of property requires that one be the *owner* of the property. But this is plainly false, as is perhaps most obviously the case precisely with respect to one's residence: *renters*, too, enjoy the prerogative to exclude others from the property that they hold in the condition of mere tenants. In short, while ownership may be a sufficient condition for the right to exclude others from one's property, it is by no means a necessary one. Secondly, the proposition that "Socialists generally neglect the degree of protection afforded to individuality by private property rights" is, at best, misleading. To the extent that one can generalize in this connection, it would seem more accurate to say that while socialists acknowledge that private property rights afford a certain degree of protection to individuality, they also hold that some of these very rights make possible certain practices that effectively thwart the cultivation and development of individuality among broad sectors of the population. (To be sure, certain perfectionist socialists would argue, in addition, that the individuality that some members of society are able to cultivate as a result of private property rights is in fact an impoverished, distorted individuality, and therefore a form of individuality whose loss should not be cause for regret.)

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