ON MINORITY: MILL AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION
IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY*

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ABSTRACT
This text intends to analyse Mill's early concern on political representation of minority groups from several premises. The first one is that Mill considered political representation as a reflection of the members of a nation. The second is his defence of minorities' political representation. The third is Mill's consequent claim of the extension of suffrage and proportional representation. But this does not mean that Mill was a communitarian or a multiculturalist, because, he is involved in the liberal tradition. Thus, the only subject of political rights is, according to Mill, the individual. At the same time, Mill defended the primacy of the national interest as opposed to the sinister interest of groups. Actually, the primacy of national interest limited his support for national minority groups (such as the Irish, the Scots, etc) and his defence of working class did not conclude in a defence of class representation. Conversely, it served for Mill to support a higher value for the vote of the individual who is part of other minority: the elite.

Keywords: Minorities, political representation, universal suffrage, multicultural society.

RESUMEN
Este trabajo pretende analizar la temprana preocupación de Mill sobre la representación política de las minorías, atendiendo a varias premisas. La primera es que Mill consideraba la representación política como reflejo de los miembros de una nación. La segunda premisa es su defensa de la representación política de las minorías para equilibrar el poder de las mayorías. La tercera premisa es la consiguiente reivindicación que hizo Mill de la extensión del sufragio y de la representación proporcional. Pero esto no significa que fuera un comunitarianista ni un multiculturalista, ya que Mill se mantiene en la tradición liberal. Esto le lleva a sostener que el sujeto de todo derecho político es el individuo, al mismo
tiempo que defiende la primacía del interés general frente a los intereses, a su juicio siempre sinistros, de los grupos. Precisamente, la primacía del interés general limita su petición de respeto a las minorías nacionales (irlandeses, escoceses, etc), mientras que su defensa del sufragio para los grupos sin representación política, como por ejemplo, la clase trabajadora, no sólo no desemboca en una defensa de la representación de clase, sino que le sirve para justificar el valor superior que debe tener el voto de aquellos individuos que forman parte también de otra minoría: la élite.

**Palabras clave:** Minorias, representación política, sufragio universal, sociedad multicultural.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Mill’s opinion on political representation is both an alibi and a starting point when we are thinking about political representation of traditionally exclude groups. He was one of the first defenders of political representation of the national or racial minority groups, working class and women. That meant as well the defence of the extension of suffrage to all of them. In 19th century, Mill had advocated a Parliament reflecting the make-up of the nation’s people. His concept of representation meant reflection of society, not action, if we accept Hannah Pitkin’s classification (Hannah Pitkin 1967, ch. 4). This representation as reflection or performance of different, specific characteristics and interests of certain groups is demanded in the current multicultural world, where the modern individual identity is criticised and where homogeneity is breaking up into a myriad of colourful identities. Nowadays, women, immigrants, national movements, members of religions and ethnic or cultural groups continue to search for an effective political representation that demonstrates their special identity within the framework of a democratic state. In this context, representation as reflection permit the presence of a large variety of individuals clustered together in many distinct collective identities and the claim of special representation rights like quota for them.

Certainly, Mill would not agree with a representation by means of quota, if it is considered a collective right, because, according to him, the groups have sinister interests that break up national sovereignty and fight to control government. But in spite of his distrust of sinister interest, Mill admitted the right of the minority to be represented. Moreover, Will Kymlicka has said that Mill and, later, Dewey, were concerned with community and considered that commonality of cultural membership was not an obstacle but a precondition of individual freedom (Kymlicka 1989, pp. 208 y 209). I would like to talk about how Mill managed to match both theses, opposition to sinister interest and minority representation, by accepting Mill’s defence of universal suffrage as a key to comprehension.
2. Mill's opinion about minority

As mentioned above, it is possible to find in Mill's work a starting point to claim political representation of minority and traditionally discriminated against groups, even though he was thinking about the individual. Properly, representative government is already rooted in the idea of social diversity, as Bernard Manin has pointed out (Manin 1997). But 19th century political representation was far from satisfactorily representing social diversity. In this debate, Mill showed his support for political representation of all, not only majorities but minorities as well, so as to guarantee the representation of all. Mill though it consequently brought about a more democratic government. And in order to extend political representation to all, Mill defended Thomas Hare's system of proportional representation and universal suffrage.

First of all, two meanings of minority can be found in Mill's works: that of the others who are not part of the majority and that of elite. Both of them appear in Mill's opinion of representative government and proportional representation. The first one supports pluralism, multiplicity and it permits us to connect Mill's concept of democracy to an arithmetical equality, which leads to his defence of universal suffrage and the claim to proportional representation as reflection of the different individuals making up the whole nation. The second one supports selected and unique individualities within a nation and it rather connects Mill's democracy to a geometrical equality, which means that universal suffrage does not have the same value. Let's go back to the former meaning of minority, which Mill talks about when he asks for universal suffrage and for the representation of all.

Universal suffrage is taken by Mill as a tool to ensure the match between the interests of the members of the sovereign elected legislature and the interest of not only the 19th century traditionally accepted electors but of the whole people. He defended it in different writings, from Rationale of Representation, in 1835, to Recent Writers on Reform, in 1859, and to his better known political writing, that is, Considerations of Representative Government, in 1861 (Mill 2001). For example, in Rationale of Representation, (Mill 2001 p. 27), a commentary on Samuel Bailey's book of the same title, Mill reflected about interest of sections not being represented, like middle class, women, poor people, different kinds of workers or "free blacks", and considered that failure to be an evil. In Recent Writers on Reform (Mill 2001 p. 358) he referred more specifically to Hare's proposal as a way to guarantee minorities representations focusing

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on Parliament as a reflection of the whole nation although not having unanimous opinions. “The minorities in the nation—Mill said—ought in principle, if it be possible, to be represented by corresponding minorities in legislative assembly, is a necessary consequence from all premises on which any representation at all can be defended. In a deliberative assembly the minority must perforce give way, because the decision must be either aye or no; but it is not so in choosing those who are to form the deliberative body: that ought to be the express image of the wishes of the nation, whether divided or unanimous, in the designation of those by whose councils it will be ruled; and any section of opinion which is unanimous within itself, ought to be able, in due proportion to the rest, to contribute its elements towards the collective deliberation”.

Following these statement, Mill wrote in Representative Government (chapter V, dedicated to “Of the Proper Functions of Representative Bodies”) that Parliament must be “an arena in which not only the general opinion of the nation, but that of every section of it, and as far as possible of every eminent individual whom it contains, can produce itself in full light and challenge discussion” (Mill 2001 p. 432). This opinion continues in the same text, chapter VII (whose precise title is “Of the True and False Democracy; Representation of All, and Representation of the Majority Only”), but now specifically as a condition to improve democracy: “In a really equal democracy—Mill said—every or any section would be represented, not disproportionately, but proportionately. A majority of the electors would always have a majority of the representatives; but a minority of the electors would always have a minority of the representatives. Man for man, they would be as fully represented as the majority. Unless they are, there is not equal government, but a government of inequality and privilege; one part of the people rule over the rest: there is a part whose fair and equal share of influence in the representation is withheld from them” (Mill 2001 p. 449). Hence, Mill was interested in the individual expressing his demand in Parliament and giving him the power to do that: “man for man”, he said. But Mill is also talking about “sections”, or “minorities” in which individuals are involved, asking for them an “equal share of influence”. Because all of them, “have equal need of a voice in it (in good government) to secure their share of its benefits” (Mill 2001 p. 479). And this is without taking account differences of sex, height or in the colour of the hair. All these words can be read in chapter VIII, related to “Of the extension of the Suffrage”. Thus, Mill points universal suffrage as a means to grant a representation-reflection of different interests of the sections within a nation, even the minority. But did Mill support the representation of minorities themselves conceived of as a collective subject?
3. MILL’S OPINION ABOUT GROUP REPRESENTATION

The later 19th century political practise and theory had found some elements to shape a new collective subject for new rights or powers in Romanticism, Socialism and Social Science methodology. All of them contribute to criticise modern individualism and rationalism and come back to community. Firstly, Comte started to eliminate subjectivity in History by making it an objective transformation. Secondly, the claims of social class and the class struggle itself were built on the group, for example on social class, by means of a social science made not only by scientific socialism but also by utopian socialism. A label of scientific objectivity is attained thanks to sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists shaping collective identity. Finally, although Romanticism focused on the importance of the “hero” and the exceptional individual, it looked back to the Middle Ages to find and recover medieval communities in contrast to the rationality of the isolated and ordinary individual.

These three branches of 19th Century thought were present in Mill’s works, but he never ceased to think about national welfare and individuals whereas he always considered other groups as different from the nation being the sum of sinister interests.

Mill is far from being a multiculturalist or, even more, a communitarian. And although it is for different reasons, all of them being connected to his concern about the evil power of sinister interest. His typically 19th century nationalism, his proposal of social and work reforms, his feminism, and, eventually, his defence of universal suffrage should be seen in the light of that fear. In chapter VI of Representative Government, significantly entitled “Of the Infirmities and Dangers to which Representative Government is Liable”, Mill included the rule of numerical majority, because it is surely dominated by “sectional or class interests” (Mill 2001 p. 442). Mill’s opinion about the typical cornerstones of current identities (religion, language, ethnicity or sex), now being demanded within a nation, must be considered under his perception of majority likely dominated by sinister interest. “Suppose—he said—the majority to be whites, the minority negroes, or vice versa: is it likely that the majority would allow equal justice to the minority? Suppose the majority Catholics, the minority Protestants, or the reverse; will there not be the same danger? Or let the majority be English, the minority Irish, or the contrary: is there not a great probability of similar evil?” (Mill 2001 p. 442)

Neither should it be forgotten that Mill considered nationality as an important condition of representative government, according to chapter XVI of Representative Government. It could explain why Mill’s specific opinion about different national cultures within the same state is assimilation. It is the current liberal and rooted in the Western political
tradition opinion about minority cultural, national, religious or ethnic groups (Van Dyke 1995 p. 35 y Kymlicka, 1995 p. 5). “Free institutions —Mill said— are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist. The influences which form opinions and decide political acts are different in the different sections of the country.” (Mill 2001 p. 547)

The most important thing for Mill is the national interest considered as a whole, for whose sake he demands the assimilation of nationalities within the strongest of them or a definitive separation that will probably result in one of them joining a different neighbour in a federation. But according to Mill, separation will only be possible if the nationalities are geographically separate (Mill 2001 p. 551). If not, Mill supports the “admixture of nationalities and the bending of their attributes and peculiarities in a common union (...) not by extinguishing types (...) but by softening their extreme forms, and filling up the intervals between them.” (Mill 2001 p. 549)

He admits that it is possible when the nations have different strength and the most civilised succeeds in overpowering the least and the members of the former are not made “odious by being invested with exclusive privileges” (Mill 2001 p. 550). For all those reasons, his opinion about the Scottish or the Irish is far from supporting a federal organisation for Great Britain. He was clearly in favour of their assimilation to England, seen consequently by Mill as the most civilised nation in Great Britain, whereas he thought that the Scottish should not be interested in sulking “on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of the past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world” (Mill 2001 p. 549). Talking about Ireland, Mill does not hide his worry, expressed already in the press, about how “atrociously they have been governed”, but his naive thought is that “no Irishman is now less free than an Anglo-Saxon, nor has a less share of every benefit either to his country or to his individual fortunes, than if he were sprung from any other portion of the British dominions. The only remaining real grievance of Ireland—he says—that of the State Church, is one which half, or nearly half, the people of the larger island have in common with them” (Mill 2001 pp. 550-551).

So far as women are concerned, Mill considered them, in Representative Government as half of the human race, not a group of it having a sinister interest. It means that, for him, women are not a “minority”. This is currently clear but the vision of minorities still involves women,

2 The italics are mine.
because they are treated as cultural or ethnic group within a nation, with
similar social policies trying to guarantee equality of opportunities.

Finally, I wanted to refer to another kind of division and group political
representation that worried Mill: class division and class representation.
Mill's opinions about both of them, given in different moments, appear
to us in contradiction. First of all, as he was as well a sort of socialist
he was very concerned about economic causes of social division, in other
words, the class division between employers and labourers. Mill consid-
ered it as inevitable, even within a united democratic nation “not divided
itself” — Mill wrote in Representative Government — by strong antipathies
of race, language, nationality or religion” (Mill 2001 446-447). In the
19th century, Mill believed that ethnic, national or religious division are
not as inevitable or habitual as social division. In the 20th century the
totally opposite opinion can mostly be found (maybe because we are all
middle class now).

Secondly and unsurprisingly, Mill also catalogued class division as
another “infirmity or danger” for representative government (we are still
in Chapter VI Representative Government). That is because classes are
considered to have sinister interests too, that is in Mill's words, “interests
conflicting more or less with the general good of the community” (Mill 2001
p. 441). Consequently, Mill said that “politically speaking” (and politics
is the issue we are talking about), classes are “any number of persons
who have the same sinister interest, —that is, whose direct and apparent
interest points towards the same description of bad measures” (Mill 2001
p. 446). To avoid any evil control of government by any of these classes
holding sinister interests, Mill defended that both of them “should be,
in the arrangement of the representative system, equally balanced, each
influencing about an equal number of votes in Parliament” (Mill 2001 p.
447). Here it is, once again, the universal suffrage as relief.

In addition Mill had written in Principles of Political Economy3,
between 1848 and 1862, that labourers were the best knower of their
own interest, and defended their association in Trade Unions and even
the strike to promote them. Here it is Mill considering community as
a precondition of freedom, according to Kymlicka. “It is a great error to
condemn, per se and absolutely, either trades unions or collective action
of strikes. Even assuming that a strike must inevitably fail whenever
it attempts to raise wages above that market rate which is fixed by the
demand and the supply (...) Still more might poor labourers who have to
do with rich employers, remain long without the amount of wages which
the demand for their labour would justify, unless in vernacular phrase,

3 John Stuart MILL, Principles of Political Economy and Chapters of Socialism, edited with an
they stood out for it: and how can they stand out for terms without
organized concert? What chance would any labourer have, who struck
singly for an advance of wages? How could he even know whether the
state of the market admitted of a rise, except by consultation with his
fellows, naturally leading to concerted action?” (Mill 1998 p. 319)

However, there were further reasons for Mill to demand the ex-
tension of suffrage to labourers. One of them was Mill’s consciousness of
the dangers of a revolution or any way of social conflict, that is implied
in some words of Representative Government. “On the question of the
strikes, for instance, —Mill said in chapter III— it is doubtful if there
is so much as one among the leading members of either House, who is
not firmly convinced that the reason of the matter is unqualifiedly on
the side of the masters, and that the men’s view of it is simply absurd.
Those who have studied the question, know well how far this is from
being the case; and how different, and how infinitely less superficial a
manner the point would have to be argued, if the classes who strike were
able to make themselves heard in Parliament. It is an inherent condi-
tion of human affairs, that no intention, however sincere, of protecting
the interest of others, can make it safe or salutary to tie up their own
hands” (Mill 2001 p. 405). On the other hand, Mill warned in chapter
VIII that “whoever, in an otherwise popular government, has no vote,
and no prospect of obtaining it, will either be a permanent malcontent”
(Mill 2001 p. 469). 4

Another reason for Mill’s defence the extension of suffrage to labourers
is to encourage them to be responsible of their own lives. According to
Principles of Political Economy, “The poor have come out of leading-strings,
and cannot any longer be governed or treated like children. To their own
qualities must now be commended the care of their destiny. Modern
nations will have to learn the lesson, that the well-being of a people
must exist by means of the justice and self-government” (Mill 1998 book
IV chap. VII paragraph 2 p. 136). And Mill continues to say: “A people
among whom there is no habit of spontaneous for a collective interest
—who look habitually to their government to command or prompt them
in all matters of joint concern— who expect to have everything done for
them, except what can be made an affair of mere routine— have their
faculties only half developed” (Mill 1998 book V chap. X paragraph 5
p. 333). Above all, Mill wanted to open the individual’s mind to politics
and to remove self-interest or family interest, by means of suffrage: “A
person who is excluded from all participation in political business —Mill
had written in Thoughts of Parliamentary Reform— is not a citizen. He
has not the feelings of a citizen. To take an active interest in politics is,

4 The italics are mine in both quotations.
in modern times, the first step out of the narrow bounds of individual and family selfishness, the first opening in the contracted round of daily occupations” (Mill 2001 p 322)

If we consider carefully these reasons in benefit of the extension of suffrage to until then exclude groups, like working class, we can see that all of them take us to Mill’s concern about sinister interest handling and breaking up government, in other words rendering it impossible. As a matter on fact, Mill had yet expressed his opposition against “class representation” in *Rationale of Representation* (pp. 43-44): “This theory in question —Mill opined then— maintains, that a popular representation should represent, not the people, but all the various *classes or interests* among the people. The landed interest, it is said, should be represented; the mercantile interest should be represented; the monied, manufacturing, shipping interests, the lawyers, the clergy —each of these bodies should command the election of a certain number of members of the legislature (...). Each of which, the theory itself admits, has a private interest on its own, which is sinister interest, if it possessed the undivided control of the legislature, it would ruthlessly pursue, to the complete sacrifice of the general interest (...) Because the ruling power is divided among several of these knots (...) they instead of combining (...) and sharing the benefits of misrule among them (...) employ their whole exertions in protecting the community against one another”.

On the other hand, this is the old representation of objective interest, defended by Burke, and rooted in the political representation of the Middle Ages. But Utilitarians, like Mill, supported the political representation of individuals having interests, not groups.

Does it show a contradiction with his ideas about universal suffrage and further socialist thesis about the labourer’s best knowledge of their own interest, and even with his specific defence of minorities, being represented by minorities? Could this Mill’s opinion in 1835 be applied to the other human features (for example, religion, languages, ethnicity or even height and colour of the hair) gathering groups and creating minorities? I think all must be understood, once again, under Mill’s refusal of sinister interest within every class or minority and under Mill’s concern of how to protect general, in the meaning of national interest from all kind of groups or classes. And this particular point of view about political empowering of groups could extend to the “Negroes”, the Catholics or even the Irish. In short, the problem for Mill is always how to avoid that sinister interest controlling representative government, whoever these interests belonged to.

As a solution, Mill added his other particular vision of minority, now meaning “the elite”. Thus, Mill defended emphatically, in *Representative Government*, to trust in the *minority* within every minority or majority

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group and connected it to his defence of "universal, but graduated suffrage" enjoyed by the elite (Mill 2001 p. 479 and chapter VIII, in general). According to him, they are the most excellent individuals in whom—as Mill supposed—"the consideration of sinister interest is subordinated to reason, justice, and the good of the whole" (Mill 2001 p. 447). That is the reason why their votes deserve a superior value. His elitism and his distrust of individuals belonging to the lower class, his support of qualified suffrage show his overall fear of a popular democracy and the power of the uneducated majority or minority that could control government in the name of sinister interests.

Actually, Mill was more interested in the special features of extraordinary individuals within every group rather than the special characteristics and sinister interests of the group itself. This is a much more typically 20th century issue and it takes us to a new concept of human identity, unknown to Mill's modern rationalism and individualism.

4. Conclusion

Political representation is nowadays being demanded, not in relation to the abstract and permanent identity of the isolated individual but to the basis of collective identity, although that too is sometimes as abstract as the individual. It is built on particular cultures, ethnicities, nations, religions or sex, even on social roles, that have become emancipating movements against political exclusion. They show important differences from the liberal modern and homogeneous individual and connect this uniformity to the principle of legal equality. All of these collective identities are being considered both as the elements to gather human beings in particular groups where they find their own personal and different identity, and as the cornerstone for improving their political power by having one of their own in Parliament. And their absence is seen as a lack of legitimacy in current political representation. At the moment, some kinds of people (especially immigrants, women, blacks, Muslims or people belonging to ethnic groups that are different to the ethnic majority within a national state), do not feel represented by traditional political parties, whether liberal, conservative or socialist. Only nationalist or religious parties seem to increase their number of votes, and it is due to these parties' appeal to a collective identity and commitment to increase the power of a national or religious identity.

The final triumph of modern liberal concept of representation as a reflection of voters has turned representative government, according to Marcel Gauchet (1998), into a play in which the collective identities of the groups, not individuals, are now the actors. Such a statement raises some important questions which were considered by Mill. How is the unity of sovereignty guaranteed if the particular interests of the
minorities are claimed against the decisions of the majority? How do minorities maintain respect for individual rights and democratic rules within the group? And, above all what should the function of a representative parliament be?

This issue, related to the function of a parliament, reminds us of the debate between Mill himself and Bagehot, the latter defending political action of Parliament, rather than the more passive task of reflection of variety in political discussion supported by Mill. But some questions still remain: what do we want a Parliament to be, a mirror or an acting political body? What is the main reason to guarantee minorities MPs? Is it to empower them to participate in political action or to admire them on a catwalk? The answers to these questions demand that we resolve the crisis of Parliament itself and make it a really effective power that holds popular sovereignty, because perhaps there is no political power to share and the struggle for quota to build a more representative Parliament is only an amusement, a pastime.

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