

John Stuart Mill, Socialist, by Helen McCabe, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montréal and Kingston, 2021, 368 pp., £24, ISBN 97802280-05742.

In times of social and environmental upheavals, the works of John Stuart Mill have been receiving unprecedented attention. His defense of the stationary state, his position on the condition of women, and on the environment echo contemporary concerns and revive the interest of historians for these questions Mill raised in the middle of the 19th century. Mill is remembered today as a liberal philosopher, a utilitarian thinker, or as the author of *On Liberty*. The title of Helen McCabe's book: *John Stuart Mill, Socialist* is intriguing. 175 years after the publication of the first edition of *The Principles of Political Economy*, Mill's antagonistic views on liberalism and socialism are still subject of debate. This volume tackles the old question of Mill's position on the political spectrum. In his *Autobiography* published posthumously in 1873, Mill remarked that he had placed himself "under the general designation of Socialist from the 1840s". McCabe investigates the foundations of this self-designation and traces the evolution of Mill's socialist thought.

The socialist's status of Mill has been criticized by scholars who thought that Mill was only influenced by prominent socialists and feminists, such as his friend, partner, and wife, Harriett Taylor. Every opinion being subject to certain influences, is it so reprehensible that a woman could have had influences on her husband in the middle of the 19th century? Moreover, although we know that Marxism was not so influential in Mill's time and probably Mill never heard about Marx himself, his socialism was long dismissed because it was too different from Marxism. Besides, Mill's political ideas evolved, which has been the source of criticism. His ideas evolved due to the mental crises he went through in the 1820s, the revolutions of 1848, as well as the gradual detachment from the classical ideas of his father James Mill, and his father's friend, Jeremy Bentham. This ambiguity could explain why his political economy was not significantly discussed in the history of economic thought (in comparison to Ricardo, for instance) even if Mill was the dominant figure of the late Victorian age.

Helen McCabe comes to Mill's rescue by reconstituting and gathering in her book the socialist ideas spread across the 33 Volumes of his *Collected Works*. She shows Mill's awareness of socialism and his affinity with different socialist figures of his time such as Robert Owen,

Joseph Fourier, Louis Blanc and the Saint-Simonians. McCabe argues that Mill was probably closer to a form of cooperative socialism. Moreover, she shows that socialism, for Mill, was a long-term goal, the only way to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number. It was his vision for the future rather than a utopia.

McCabe's book is a must read for anyone interested in understanding the limits of Mill's liberalism and its compatibility with his other commitments to socialism or feminism. McCabe argues that much work has been done on Mill's unique conception of liberty. She shows that his commitment to liberty must, nevertheless, be understood alongside his other commitments to egalitarianism, social progress, securing subsistence, social justice, and fraternity to understand his brand of socialism. She demonstrates that Mill was critical of capitalism because of its inefficiency and waste. Besides, Mill criticised capitalism because of the absence of liberty of workers, the unequal distribution of capital and the obstinate pursuit of growth. Moreover, McCabe details Mill's idea of the stationary state, the ultimate stage of development of societies, in which the cooperative mode of production and consumption could be implemented and in which the virtuous "art of living" could replace the "art of getting".

Rather than focusing on the few pieces of his writings that remain popular today, McCabe's book shows that the study of Mill's whole work is indispensable to reconstruct his thought. Moreover, McCabe's book is important because it focuses on Mill's ideas rather than on identifying him with any school of thought. Indeed, McCabe underlines in the introduction that "fighting over how to *label* Mill can distract us from understanding what he actually had to say". The question of the legitimacy of branding Mill as a socialist arises but, in the end, it is not so important. His interest for the poor, minorities, women's independence, gender equality, and governmental intervention is enough to indicate his commitment to multiple social causes. Mill was a brilliant intellectual figure endowed with an emotional intelligence. This form of intelligence associated with a great sensitivity partly explains his creativity and his vision for the future of society. The question of the label needs to be put aside to recognise that Mill was a man ahead of his time. He was relentlessly questioning things; and his various opinions should be seen as evolving rather than being inconsistent with one another. Transformations, failures, misunderstandings, deadlocks are more subtle to interpret than a

bullet-proof theoretical consistency. McCabe's book is, therefore, important to read to understand how and why Mill's political ideas evolved, a difficult topic which has hitherto not been much investigated. Moreover, the book is important to understand that forgotten ideas from the 19th century, independent work from non-affiliated scholars, or work from minorities that didn't catch the attention of the mainstream, still matter today. Finally, the book can bring to light Mill's important insights on the limits to growth, cooperation, and the stationary state. Mill formulated these ideas against the backdrop of rapid environmental changes; they are thus worth revisiting today.

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