

John Stuart Mill's Idea of History: A Rhetoric of Progress

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the crucial role the idea of history plays in John Stuart Mill's social and political thought. Insofar as Mill argues that historical change and progress are synonyms, the latter deserves a careful attention. However, academic literature has mostly regarded Mill's philosophy of history a topic of minor importance. Some of his philosophical views on history, it will be argued, clearly affect his political views, but they also inform his scientific study of society. Accordingly, historical research aims both at understanding the past to guide society's future. By analysing the different sources from which Mill draws inspiration, the paper considers his views against the background of his personal and intellectual context. Mill's temporary depression, along with Macaulay's criticism of the utilitarian ahistorical conception of politics, triggers an enquiry into the appropriate method to study society, which eventually places history at its core. His reading of Coleridge and a number of French thinkers reflects a renewed interest in the discipline. The article discusses, first, Mill's interpretation of Coleridge as Bentham's opposite pole. Later in the article, I highlight Mill's debts to Comte and Saint-Simon, especially as regards what he calls the "Inverse Deductive Method". Some remarks on French historiographers, like Mignet, Dulaure, Sismondi, Michelet and Guizot, also support my argument.

KEYWORDS

John Stuart Mill, history, progress, rhetoric.

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I

Towards the end of his life, John Stuart Mill was elected Rector at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. In his inaugural public address, Mill argued that:

All true political science is, in one sense of the phrase, *à priori*, being deduced from the tendencies of things, tendencies known either through our general experience of human nature, or as the result of an analysis of the course of history, considered as a progressive evolution (CW XXI, 237).

The quotation introduces the initial discussion for this article, which can be further formulated by two questions: What is the role of history in John Stuart Mill's social and political thought? And, what does it mean to regard history "as a progressive evolution"? Mill's answer to both questions, originally presented in the late 1820s, went unchallenged for the remainder of his career. The speech, written when he was around sixty years old, stands as an example of Mill's firm views on history (CW I, 287).²

It is interesting to note that scholarly research has mostly considered Mill's philosophy of history a topic of minor importance, despite the fact that he believes "that it was responsible for the most radical change that occurred in his thought" (Bouton 1965, 569). With exceptions, mainly methodological studies in the social sciences examine the matter. This article aims, rather, to study the significance of Mill's views on history against the background of his personal and intellectual context, for it offers, on the one hand, an interpretation of his temporary depression or "mental crisis" and the subsequent intellectual development in his early twenties. On the other hand, it provides an opportunity to explore some key aspects of his interest in French thought and his relationship with French intellectuals.

History, as "the record of all great things which have been achieved by mankind" (CW XVIII, 145), has to explain the progress of society. In other words, it aims to describe the patterns that historical events show. The idea of progress plays a prominent role in Mill's philosophy of history. However, if we consider all the senses in which Mill uses the concept of progress throughout his work, it becomes clear that touches upon a variety of topics, such as economic growth and wealth or moral improvement. Whereas Kurer or Harris present a somewhat loose though general overview of Mill's concept of

2 Three years before Mill had published *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, where he dealt with historical issues in similar terms (CW X, 306-8).

progress, this essay will exclusively focus on the idea of progress as regards history (Kurer 1991; Harris 1956).

II

In England, by the time Mill turns to writing, history as a discipline is still in its infancy. As Cairns remarks, his “life coincided with the rise of the modern historical profession” (Cairns 1985, xxv). More precisely, “the shift towards professional status, and a changing social role for historians, effectively began during the middle decades of the nineteenth century” (Harrison *et al.* 2004, 16; for a wider perspective see Levine 2002). It was not the same case in Germany or France. Unlike her continental neighbours, Britain does not “need a history of the present dedicated to protesting its potential as a modern state” (Bentley 2011, 205). Mill, who praises French historiography in an 1826 review, is aware of the imbalance and admits the flaws of his own country in this respect (CW XX, 17-8, 260).³ Still by 1853, he notes “how new an art of writing history is, how very recently it is that we possess histories” (CW XI, 328). Taking into account the development of historiography, Mill’s views on a new science of the past are to be seen as a great novelty. Moreover, it explains why Mill’s philosophy of history merges sometimes with analyses of French historians: “historical thought becomes philosophy of history” (Bouton 1965, 570).

The poor state of British historiography may be one of the reasons why Mill’s education, though involving the study of Scottish historians, lacks a sense of the philosophical and scientific value of history.⁴ However, Mill slides into a depression about 1826 in which he questions his own philosophical ideas and revises personal beliefs. As he recalls in his *Autobiography*, the teachings received from his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, were put into question (CW I, 139). Yet what is more interesting is not how he feels during the crisis, for it lasts only a few months, but what may be understood as a longer and more complex process of gaining intellectual independence. According to Hayek “it is from the recovery from that depression toward the end of 1828 that we must probably date the beginning of his career as an independent thinker” (Hayek 1942, 10; see also Robson 1968, 76). The famous

3 As Philips observes, Mill “pays full compliments to the earlier generation, while at the same time denying that their work should be considered history at all” (Philips 2000, 42). Elsewhere, Burns has argued that Mill thinks of his father’s *History of British India* as part of this tradition (see Burns 1976, 10).

4 The fact that Mill began reading some historians when he was just four years old suggests that history was for him an entertainment (CW I, 554).

mental crisis is the preface to his public career, in which he looks upon history as worthy of philosophical study.

A year after his recovery, in 1829, James Mill's *Essay on Government* receives a demolishing attack from Thomas Macaulay (Macaulay 1829). The historian criticises James Mill's way of proceeding a priori in politics, suggesting instead his own empirical method. Macaulay's criticism undermines John Stuart Mill's convictions as a Benthamite, although he does not agree with either of them. Rather, he takes a stance between the two sides and advocates his own method to study society: the Inverse Deductive or Historical Method. In his own words, "a foundation was thus laid in my thoughts for the principal chapters of what I afterwards published on the Logic of the Moral Sciences" (CW I, 169). Mill is referring to the sixth book of his *System of Logic*, where we find his most extensive account on the method of sociological enquiry and, hence, history. From this moment on, Mill observes, it becomes apparent that a "philosophy of politics supposes a previous theory of human progress, and that this is the same thing with a philosophy of history" (CW I, 169). Although the controversy between Macaulay and James Mill turns out to be crucial, the British historian will not be the only important figure in Mill's process of intellectual autonomy.

Then, how does the new set of beliefs come about? To answer the question we have to analyse the influence of Coleridge and some French thinkers with whom Mill becomes acquainted. He begins to read Coleridge and the Coleridgeans in 1828, as a result of his friendship with some anti-Benthamite contenders at the London Debating Society (CW I, 159). Although Mill does not mention any interest on Coleridge's works until this moment, he regards Bentham and Coleridge as philosophical counterparts. Subsequently he argues that "it would be difficult to find two persons of philosophic eminence more exactly the contrary of one another" (CW X, 120).

When it comes to their understanding of history there arises a manifest opposition. On the one hand, Bentham "assumes that mankind are alike in all times and all places" (CW X, 16). On the other hand, unlike his mentor's, Coleridge's philosophy is "concrete and historical" (CW X, 125). More accurately, he ranks first among those "who inquired [...] into the inductive laws of the existence and growth of human society" (CW X, 139). History represents for the Benthamites "a dusty record of the crimes and follies of mankind," while for the Coleridgeans embodies "an inspiring chronicle of the gradual unfolding of society" (Packe 1954, 245; see also Preyer 1958, 16, and Burns 1976, 3).

The outcome of Mill's reading of Coleridge is twofold. Most significantly, he becomes more sensitive to the great value of history for social and political philosophy. About the Coleridgeans, Mill acknowledges that "the brilliant

light which has been thrown upon history during the last half century” comes from this school (CW X, 139). Furthermore, Coleridge partly influences Mill’s interest in studying the combined effect of order and progress in society, an issue that becomes central in his *System of Logic*, where he deals with the necessary conditions for social stability and progressiveness⁵ (CW, VIII, 917-25; Rosen 2003, 29-30; Bouton 1954, 573; Turk 1988, 171; on Coleridge see Edwards 2004, 284-300, and Morrow 1990, 115-20).

III

Mill keeps a long-lasting and fruitful relationship with a number of French philosophers and intellectuals. Besides, his lively interest in the country itself leads him to write a series of articles on French affairs, published in the *Examiner* since 1830 to 1834 (CW XXII and XXIII; Mueller 1956, 22-4). However, I agree with John Cairns when he states that “the casual reader of the few and sober pages” of Mill’s *Autobiography* in which he alludes to France “might not readily grasp what [the country] had been to him” (Cairns 1985, vii).

Mill’s interpretation of French thought reflects the new role that philosophy of history is going to have in his outline of the new social and political sciences. I will illustrate this claim by analysing mainly the impact of Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte on Mill’s point of views. Some French historiographers, like François Mignet, Jacques-Antoine Dulaure, Jean de Sismondi, Jules Michelet and François Guizot, deserve some attention, though brief in this article, since they also influence his renewed interest in history.

In 1820 Mill first visits France, where he “breathed [...] the free and genial atmosphere of Continental life” (CW I, 59). From that moment on, as observer and admirer, French literature captures the interest of the young Mill. In the 1826 reviews of the works by Mignet, Dulaure and Sismondi, he indirectly conveys an ideal image of a professional historian. Mill, who criticises Dulaure because he “does not look out for causes and effects” (CW XX, 51), praises Mignet as an example of a historian who combines “philosophical history” with “mere narrative” (CW XX, 3). In a preliminary form, Mill gives an account of the task of history that will characterise his later writings.

However, to judge by his description, for Mill the Saint-Simonian school was the most influential of the epoch (CW I, 171; Mueller 1956, 61). In 1829, Gustave d’Eichtal presents him some of their publications, among which is one of Comte’s seminal essays. Despite the fact that Comte had distanced himself from Saint-Simon as early as 1825 (Simon 1972, 140; on Mill’s first

5 Actually, Mill reproduces a long extract from *Coleridge* in his *Logic*.

impression about Comte see CW XII, 34-8), it is difficult to distinguish between the ideas of the two. To begin with, Saint-Simon's doctrine influences Comte's philosophy, as the latter was his disciple. In addition, the mentor appropriates Comte's historical philosophy (Packe 1954, 92). One of the main ideas they share is that organic and critical periods alternate in history. Mill elaborates on their works while discussing the topic in a series of articles (CW I, 173; Mueller 1956 61, 66; Hayek 1942, xxix). In an organic or natural state, "power and moral influence are [...] exercised by the fittest persons whom the existing state of society affords". On the contrary, a society that "contains other persons fitter for worldly power and moral influence than those who have hitherto enjoyed them" (CW XXII, 252), undergoes a transitional or critical period. According to Mill, society is passing through a "transitional state," and thus overcoming a "natural state", that is, "mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones" (CW XXII, 230).

Progress appears as a two-stage process: primarily, it takes place in a natural state when a society "moves onward" insofar as it does not collide with "the established order of things". At a further step, whenever a transitional stage is left behind, society "resumes its onward progress, at the point where it was stopped before by the social system which it has shivered" (CW XXII, 252). According to this theory, the progress of society never stops. More significantly, an exhaustive enquiry into the past allows him to establish a pattern to predict the future, since natural periods are always followed by transitional periods. Even if Mill leaves a series of unfinished articles which he finds "lumbering in style" (CW I, 181), the idea will play a prominent role in his *System of Logic*.

Although finally published in 1843, as early as in 1831 Mill is elaborating that part of the argument (CW I, 167; CW XII, 79). During the meantime, between 1830 and 1842, the six volumes of the *Cours de Philosophie Positive* appear. Mill admits that he "gained much from Comte," yet it is the Inverse Deductive Method what strikes him "as the one chiefly applicable to the complicated subjects of History and Statistics" (CW I, 219). After his reading of the *Cours'* last volume, Mill writes to the French philosopher that the *Logic* had to be revised (CW XIII, 561). Moreover, John Robson suggests that the chapters where Mill explains the Inverse Deductive Method are additions resulting from their agreement (Robson 1974, lxxvi; Bain 1882, 72, 68). Indeed, Mill's main borrowing from Comte (CW I, 219) provides him with a double strategy. By arguing for a methodology that enables a scientific study of society, he establishes a direct link between the unfolding of history and political science, that is, between the past and the future.

The Inverse Deductive Method, also called Historical Method, is “crucial to an understanding of his social philosophy” (Robson 1968, 150), since it is the key to the science of society or sociology. It aims at giving a rational account of historical change, that is, “the progressiveness of the human race” (CW VIII, 914). Historical facts, once analysed, unveil the “law of progress” which “enable[s] us to predict future events” (CW VIII, 914). In other words, the Historical Method should describe “the laws according to which any state of society produces the state which succeeds it and takes it place” (CW VIII, 912, 930). Fortunately, this task “has become the aim of really scientific thinkers,” such as Comte (CW VIII, 930). Remarkably, the idea of “state of society” underlies Mill’s scheme of sociology. Following Comte, he describes a state of society as the “the state of civilization at any given time” (CW VIII, 911-2). Accordingly, an advance in people’s knowledge, with its consequent shift in public opinion, brings about a transitional period, which, as Mill had previously argued, leads to progress (CW, VIII, 926; Rosen 2007, 138).

For Mill, progress and historical change are equivalent. More accurately, “Philosophy of History is generally admitted to be at once the verification, and the initial form, of the Philosophy of the Progress of Society” (CW VIII, 930). Thus, the crucial question remains whether progress means general social improvement. Mill confidently asserts that “progress and progressiveness” are not synonymous with “improvement and tendency to improvement” (CW, VIII, 913), or, to be precise, society is not bound to improve. While rejecting historical determinism, he endorses the value of individual freedom. The progress of society, when it takes place, results from mankind’s actions, which suggests that Mill’s later defence of liberty fits in with his theory of history (Gibbins 1990, 101). Thus, every human action can be explained appealing to the state of society or the “general circumstances of the country”, yet it also depends on “influences special to the individual” or free will (CW VIII, 933).

Nevertheless, his rejection of historical determinism does not mask his optimistic beliefs: “the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional and temporary exceptions, one of improvement” (CW VIII, 914). This allows him to support Comte’s law of the three states (CW VIII, 928), according to which society goes from a theological to a metaphysical period, before reaching a positive stage. Again, for both Comte and Mill, people’s beliefs or “the progress of human knowledge” influence the pace of progress.

Mill publishes two reviews of Jules Michelet’s and François Guizot’s historical essays in 1844 and 1845 respectively, which provide some insights into his own ideas concerning history. Mill reads with interest those historians who are at the “highest stage of historical investigation, in which the aim is not simply to compose histories, but to construct a science of history” (CW XX, 225). Among them, he believes, three French figures stand out: Michelet

and Guizot, but also Thierry (CW XX, 225, 221-2). Mill describes the course of history using two metaphors that reinforce both the Comtean notion of different stages of historical progress and history as a scientific discipline. History displays “a progressive chain of causes and effects”, which may be described as “a gradually unfolding web, in which every fresh part that comes to view is a prolongation of the part previously unrolled” (CW XX, 225).

However, Mill appreciates both Guizot’s style in writing history and his persuasive lectures on the origin of progress in European civilisation. According to Guizot, whereas ancient societies remain stationary, ruled under the influence of one single power, modern European civilisation permits a “systematic antagonism”, both social and political, which has made progress possible over the centuries (CW XX, 169). Mill first grasps the significance of countervailing forces from Coleridge’s ideas of permanence and progression and later from Comte’s complementary dichotomy between order and progress (CW VIII, 917-25). A few years later Guizot provides him with yet another insight into the benefits of elaborating the ideas of antagonism and social balance (Varouxakis 1999, 301-3).

IV

The aim of this article has been to highlight the crucial role the idea of history plays in Mill’s social and political thought. In doing so, it is worth paying attention to Mill’s usage of the concept of progress as a rhetorical device, which strengthens the link between a scientific understanding of history and a foreseeable future. Besides, a review of Mill’s both earlier and later writings casts new light on two interconnected topics: a temporary personal crisis in 1826 and the considerable influence that French thinkers have exerted upon him since the 1820s.

Mill’s growing interest in history and his intellectual maturing process may be clarified by stressing the significance of three events that take place around 1829. First, Thomas Macaulay publishes a devastating criticism on James Mill’s *Essay on Government*, aimed particularly at his philosophical method and its political scope. Macaulay’s review leaves a deep impression on John Stuart Mill (CW I, 165), who takes up the challenge and suggests his own method to study society. Second, at The London Debating Society he makes the acquaintance of John Sterling, Frederick Maurice and Samuel Coleridge. Mill agrees with them on emphasising the importance of history for a satisfactory account of human experience. Strikingly, Mill begins reading Coleridge as Bentham’s intellectual adversary, but ends up considering him a model. Third, also at the Debating Society, he meets Gustave d’Eichtal, who would become his guide to read Saint-Simon’s and Comte’s writings.

Additionally, an outline of the three episodes help us understand why Mill rejects the Benthamite ahistorical way of treating politics and places history in the core of his social and political thinking. As Rosen writes, “Mill himself thought that progress in social science required the rejection of the geometrical method of Bentham and his father and its replacement by the historical method of Comte, which he also associated with Coleridge” (Rosen 2007, 139). Moreover, the three episodes culminate in the publication of various writings that illustrate his idea of history: A series of propagandistic articles titled *The Spirit of the Age* (1830-1), *Bentham* (1838) and *Coleridge* (1840), both monographs on “two great seminal minds” (CW X, 77), and Mill’s most systematic treatise on the philosophy of social science, *A System of Logic* (1843). Though, as Burns remarks, we do not have a substantial historical work, Mill’s philosophy of history is widespread throughout his writings (Burns 1976, 4). Ultimately, Mill’s changing attitude towards history provides an interpretation of his development as an independent thinker.

Likewise, most of the French scholarly literature Mill reads throughout his life deals with either history or the philosophy of history. According to Varouxakis, Mill has a “compulsive interest in France and an astonishing conversance with France and things French” (Varouxakis 2004, 45; on this topic see Mueller 1956). However, for Mill, it was Saint-Simon and Comte who best explained historical progress by conferring a scientific rank to the study of history and society. I have suggested, moreover, that by exploring Mill’s view of history we gain an insight into his relationship with French thought. To put it differently, one possible way to analyse Mill’s study of French contemporary thinking is by focusing on his historical writings.

For Mill, political philosophy is only possible as a philosophy of history. Furthermore, insofar as the progress of society becomes apparent by studying the history of mankind, political science faces a double task: it has to explain past events, that is, what he calls progressive change, while it also has to argue the conditions for future progress. Thanks to the historical method, Mill points out, “we may hereafter succeed not only in looking far forward into the future history of the human race, but in determining what artificial means may be used, and to what extent, to accelerate the natural progress in so far as it is beneficial”. History emerges eventually as essential to Mill’s social and political philosophy. Besides, given the privileged place that historical research occupies in Mill’s methodology of the social sciences, history aims both at understanding the past and guiding for “the noblest and most beneficial portion of the Political Art” (CW VIII, 930).

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SOURCES

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