

The work of JS Mill shows the importance of a common identity to the principle of European federalism

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The creation of a European federation raises a number of philosophical questions, both in terms of whether European federalism can be justified, and how a European federation could be constructed.

Corrado Morricone writes on the work of the English philosopher John Stuart Mill. He notes that while Mill recognised the dangers in eliminating differences between European states, he would also have viewed attempts to foster a common identity across Europe as a positive development.



In his [examination](#) of John Stuart Mill's thought on Europe in Mill's works *Bentham*, *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*, Simon Glendinning has shown why, according to Mill, we are Europeans because we are not *one*. He also states that European greatness stems from cultural and national diversities across the continent and that the danger of stationariness (in Mill's own words) comes from uniformity of thought. As a lesson for today, Glendinning argues that the European Union can be successful only if it preserves diversity and prevents intolerance.

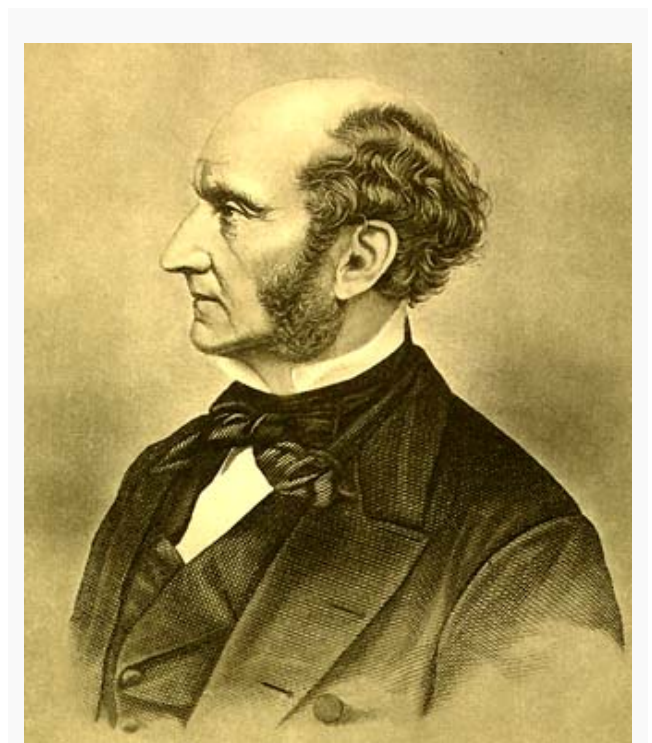
However, through an investigation of what is probably Mill's main work in the field of political theory, [Considerations on Representative Government](#), we may find further hints on why European federalists should consider a plurality of nationalities as positive and how a proper federation should be built.

Mill's take on nationality

Chapter XVI of Mill's *Considerations* deals with the topic of nationality in relation to the idea of a free and representative government. Mill states that the feeling of nationality may be caused by various elements. Factors such as 'race and descent', religion, language and geographical boundaries matter, but political identity and a common national history often are far more relevant. However, none of these factors is either necessary or sufficient by itself. Indeed, as in the case of Belgium or Switzerland, different nationalities may seem to be under the same government, but are, in fact, a single nationality because of their shared political history.

Although Mill thinks, as a general rule, that free institutions are only possible in a country constituted of a single nationality, he leaves room for the possibility of a sort of multinational state.

The first reason he gives for this is merely practical and geographical, because, 'there are parts even in Europe, in which different nationalities are so locally intermingled, that it is not practicable to be under separate government.' Contemporaneous examples would have been Hungary or East Prussia. The second reason derives from the proposition that different populations live at different stages of evolution, so for some nationalities it may be beneficial to be absorbed by another, more advanced, nation (according to Mill, this was the case for the Bretons and the Basques under the French dominion and the association of Scotland and Wales to a common British kingdom).



JS Mill (Public Domain)

Although the idea of different stages of civilisation may seem a bit anachronistic and even awkward today, we can understand its meaning in the context of Mill's entire philosophy, according to which free and rational debate and the liberty to experience and pursue different lifestyles are intellectually, morally and socially advantageous to individuals and to humanity as a whole. In this sense, Mill's philosophy is progressive (Mill is liberal and utilitarian, and generally both liberalism and [utilitarianism](#) are forms of progressivism), where progress is the beneficial social outcome of mutual discussion. In his own words:

Whatever really tends to the admixture of nationalities, and the blending of their attributes and peculiarities in a common union, is a benefit to the human race. Not by extinguishing types, of which, in these cases, sufficient examples are sure to remain, but by softening their extreme forms, and filling up the intervals between them.

There are two ways to achieve this goal, according to Mill. One is the authoritarian rule by advanced nations over less civilised ones which, in the long run, would turn itself into a free government with all nations treated as equal, as they progressively become equally civilised. The other is a federation of free states.

Mill's take on federalism

Mill gives three conditions under which a federal government is possible: a mutual sympathy among the populations, as well as a community of interest; member states must not be so powerful as to rely solely on their individual strength; and there must not be a marked inequality among the member states. In Chapter XVII of his *Considerations*, after having expounded on the way the American institutional model works, Mill affirms, 'When the conditions exist for the formation of efficient and durable Federal Unions, the multiplication of them is always a benefit to the world', because they make the weaker stronger and they prevent aggressive and petty policies and wars, while fostering trade and mutual cooperation.

He concludes stressing the fact that under a central government (that is, a closer union than a federal one) constitutional provisions have to be set in order to protect national differences. Put in context, this precise remark apparently seems to imply that excessive centralisation is a danger, as it may lead to involuntary assimilation, while a well-functioning federal system would not really pose such a threat.

Relevance for the EU

What might a 'Millian' European federalist conclude from this? Yes, it is true that national peculiarities, as well as individual ones, have to be preserved and protected. However, their blending is not necessarily an evil and, actually, it might prove itself beneficial for the peoples of Europe. The lack of language uniformity is very likely a hindrance for a common European sentiment. Study and work experiences abroad would very probably boost the sense of a sort of European common citizenship – in order to create, in the long run, something similar to an 'admixture of nationalities'.

However, something else is necessary for a European federation to be a success. In the first instance, it is not enough that nations be equal under the law and the treaties. Citizens too must *feel* that even small or less wealthy nations are treated equally under rules which are beneficial to every country. National governments would have to act in order to achieve mutual benefit in the spirit of cooperation – not just in order to pursue the national interest. A common political identity would also be required for such a federation.

When Mill stresses the importance of national history and identity of political antecedents, he talks of 'collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incidents in the past'. From this perspective, European federalists would have to work hard in order to manage to build a common history and the feeling of a single polity – not to create a single European nationality, but a common identity. This would reduce the sense of

internal competition among countries in the EU and the lack of more direct democratic accountability and increase the feeling of a common political enterprise.

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Corrado Morricone is a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at Durham University. He is currently working on the political philosophy and democratic theory of John Stuart Mill. He is also focusing on utilitarianism, conservatism and 19th century French political thought (e.g. Tocqueville, Guizot, Comte) and their influence on Mill's philosophy.



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