

# James Mill :History of British India

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## Abstract

This paper argues that James Mill's History of British India is, on the one hand, intellectually linked to the Scottish Enlightenment, while, on the other hand, moves beyond that intellectual tradition in the post-French Revolution age. This paper makes three central claims. First, it argues that in reacting to Montesquieu's idea of oriental society, the contributors to the Scottish Enlightenment used ideas of moral philosophy, philosophical history and political economy in order to create an image of a wealthy Asia whose societies possessed barbarous social manners. Some new writings about Asian societies that were published in the 1790s adopted Montesquieu's views of oriental societies, and started to consider the history of manners and of political institutions as the true criteria of the state of civilisation. These works criticised some Asian social manners, such as female slavery, and questioned previous assumptions about the high civilisation of Indian and Chinese societies.

This paper argues that Mill's History, following William Robertson's History of America, was based on a study of the historical mind to interpret the texts published in the 1790s and the early nineteenth century. Second, this paper argues that Mill adopted Francis Jeffrey's idea of semi-barbarism in his study of India. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, William Alexander and Francis Jeffrey started to think of history in the context of a tri-stadia theory, which was more idealist and less materialist than the earlier four-stages theory. Mill tried to develop a holistic view of Asian society. In so doing, he came to criticise the British government's mistaken mercantilist view of government, which he regarded as unsuitable for the conditions of Indian society. Following Adam Smith's moral philosophy, and inspired by the socio-economic progress of North America, Mill suggested that the primary goals for the British government in India should be to improve its agriculture and to secure social freedom. This paper also concludes that the discussions about Chinese society played an important part in shaping Mill's view of the concept of semi-barbarism. He prescribed a powerful state for India in order to remove the mercantilist view of government, and to execute administrative and judicial reforms. This paper concludes that, while Scottish philosophical history helped Mill to create a critique of the British government's attempts to govern India as a commercial society, Benthamite Utilitarianism taught Mill to see history from a teleological viewpoint.

*Key words: History of British India, civilization, Utilitarians, the Burkean school, humanism*

## Objective

This paper intends to look at oriental society through western lens in general and James Mill History of British India in particular

## Introduction

This paper will examine Mill's History with respect to three successive phenomena - the Scottish Enlightenment, the Edinburgh Review and, finally, Benthamite Utilitarianism. It will analyse Mill's ideas on civilisation and his History in the context of the intellectual legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment, in which Mill was brought up, in that of the radical or late Enlightenment age, wherein, sometimes in conflict with the prevailing ideology, he tried to rationalise imperialist government. Historians generally set Mill's life and thought in two contexts: Benthamite Utilitarianism and the Scottish Enlightenment. With respect to Benthamite Utilitarianism, students emphasise Mill's role in propagating radical reform and democracy. Stokes' *English Utilitarians and India* is a study of this kind par excellence; he contrasts Mill with the Burkean school of British rulers in India, including Thomas Munro (1761-1827), John Malcolm (1769-1833), Charles Metcalfe (1785-1846) and Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859). Stokes argues that, in contrast to the Romantic school, which favoured a paternal politics and unitary form of administration for India, Mill promoted separation of governmental powers; Mill, in short, created a Benthamite political legacy based on political liberalism and laissez-faire economy in dealing with Indian affairs.<sup>30</sup> Majeed also interprets Mill's History in the context of Utilitarian politics. In his *Ungoverned Imaginings*, Majeed, on behalf of James Mill, describes the History as a mirror in which English society is reflected as problematic for the Utilitarians. While this study agrees with the importance of Benthamite Utilitarianism in Mill's thought on Indian society, it will, nevertheless, argue that the Scottish Enlightenment plays an equally decisive role in shaping Mill's History.

The theory of semi-barbarism helped Mill to reject the cultural ideology of Hindu superiority over Muslim societies. Lastly, this paper argues that Mill's History was influenced by and sought to accommodate Benthamite Utilitarianism. Mill believed the supposed semi-barbarous and problematic native of Indian society could be reformed without following the steps taken by European history or institutions. It is true that when Mill worked in East India House, he was full of Benthamite reform projects. But when his History was composed, his view of civilisation and history was far beyond Benthamite Utilitarianism.

If a student, like Stokes, understands Mill's view of India merely from the viewpoint of Utilitarianism, he would find Mill a theorist and activist ex nihilo in British politics, neglecting the significance of Mill's education and his thirty years in Scotland. While Mill's History customarily set in the context of the radical Utilitarian movement, some historians of civic humanism recognise the importance of the Scottish Enlightenment in shaping Mill's views of politics and society. John Burrow and Donald Winch ask how the ideologies of civic humanism of the eighteenth century were replaced by or transformed into the Utilitarian discourses of the nineteenth. To be more specific, Burrow and Winch try to determine how philosophical Whigs in the North interacted with philosophical radicals from the South, and how the political concerns of the eighteenth century were gradually taken over by the concerns with problems of society in the nineteenth century. In this intellectual movement, according to Burrow and Winch, Mill had his distinct role. Their discussions of Mill's History, unfortunately, do not move beyond the parameters set by Duncan Forbes; the History is still considered as a marginal text in the intellectual movement.

## The context of the four stages theory

In eighteenth-century Scotland, many writers held two distinct but complementary views on the nature of historical change. One was the four stages theory, the other the idea of progress. As the late Professor Ronald Meek observed,

since the 1750s, many Scots literati had perceived the evolution of human institutions in terms of qualitatively distinct stages of progress. With slight modification or variation, Lord Kames, John Dalrymple (1726-1810), William Robertson, Adam Smith and John Millar (1735-1801), generally agreed that human institutions evolved around modes of subsistence: from hunting or fishing societies to those which are pastoral, farming and commercial. This view of the development of civilisation is commonly called by modern scholars the four stages theory. Meek was particularly concerned with the methodological adequacy of the theory and its significance as a proto-Marxist theory of historical materialism. *There was an orthodox four stages theory of society, the stages being: hunting; pasturage; agriculture; and commerce.*

He compared the Scots' four stages theory with that of Turgot, Quesnay and some other French writers, and consciously identified Marx as their successor. Mill was immensely saturated in the Scottish tradition of philosophical history, but his seminal and problematic point in the History of British India was to demonstrate how to set up clear and distinct criteria to pin down every society on the scale of civilisation, for he was gravely concerned with reform—both in India and England. China or India were often regarded by eighteenth-century British writers as exceptions to many of the rules of social progress that they tried to make. For instance, Hume suggested a country which had a good foreign trade would give rise to domestic industry. Even if foreign trade later declined, the nation would remain powerful and opulent. Through the mechanism of commerce and exchange, the whole population in the country would enjoy home commodities. Hume argued that China was an opulent country, 'though it has very little commerce beyond its own territories'. Exceptions were present because dependence told them so. But the nineteenth-century writers knew more about China and India. They knew that China was not as tranquil as Montesquieu's or Voltaire's generation had thought it to be; it was frequently subject to rebellions and coups d'etat throughout its history. They also knew that China and India were not as opulent as the literati thought.

### **Timeline – “History of British India”**

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.

### **Mill's Views on historical progress**

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)

### **Mill’s theory of international relations**

James Mill, I will argue, developed a distinctive theory of international relations on the basis of his philosophy of history. Triggered by events ‘generated by my Indian experience and others by the international questions which then greatly occupied the European public’, Mill wrote *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* setting out ‘the true principles of international morality’. His theory of international relations, as set out in *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* but

also in Considerations on Representative Government is clearly a moral theory. Not only does the civilisational stage of a people determine the most appropriate form of government, the government itself is an institution for moralising and improving the people. For this reason, Mill argues that the government appropriate for a particular stage of development is the one which enables the people to move on to the next stage. This moral task, this responsibility towards the people is, however, not the final criterion, for 'the influence of government' he says, 'on the well-being of society can be considered or estimated in reference to nothing less than the whole of the interests of humanity'. It is this universal principle – the whole of the interests of humanity – which determine the quality of any given government as well as the criteria for ordering international affairs in general. The relations between sovereign states and dependencies are also governed by the level of cultural development. Mill divides dependencies into two classes: one is composed of people of similar civilisation as the mother country and fit for institutions of representative government, such as British possessions in America and Australia; the other is composed of much less advanced people, such as India. For the colonies of European race Mill argues for the widest possible measure of internal self-government.

There are some inequalities still in the system since Britain retains the powers of a Federal Government which means that the former colonies have no sovereignty over their foreign policy and have to join Britain in war without being consulted. Mill argues that the bonds between Britain and the settler colonies have to be severed if the settler colonies desire this. However, these bonds are, in his opinion, very valuable because they can be considered a step 'towards universal peace, and general friendly co-operation among nations'. On the one hand, it makes war between the members of the Commonwealth impossible, on the other, it prevents any member being incorporated into a foreign state as well as from becoming an aggressive power in their own right. Furthermore, these bonds provide an open market at least for its members and the connection adds weight to the moral influence of Great Britain in the councils of the world, that is, to the 'Power which, of all in existence, best understands liberty . . . and has attained to more of conscience and moral principle in its dealings with foreigners, than any other great nation seems either to conceive as possible, or recognise as desirable'

### **Imperialism and it's impact on political theory**

Mill's philosophy of history underlying both his political and his international theory, however, is itself rooted in the experience and practice of colonialism. Mill develops the unequal political relationship between colonial power and colonized population into a general philosophy of history which underlies, in turn, his international and political theory. He shares with other Enlightenment authors the assumption of cultural development for all of humankind and the ranking of existing as well as extinct societies on a scale of civilisation<sup>49</sup> – a literature with which he was well acquainted. Such philosophies of history had, moreover, been used for centuries to justify the exclusion of internal as well as external 'barbarians' – that is, women, children, slaves, workers and non-European peoples who were not deemed to have the necessary qualified reason to enjoy equal rights of liberty. Yet, there are two aspects which distinguish his theory from those of his predecessors. Firstly, he directly links different stages of development to different forms of government. Consequently, secondly, the principle of liberty is for Mill not universal but only valid for modern civilisation. Subsequently, with his father's help, James Mill himself is employed at India House and spends the next 35 years, until the abolition of East India Company rule, with the administration of the government of India. He reports in his Autobiography that working at India House added a good sense of the difficulties of practical politics to his training as a speculative writer.<sup>56</sup> And this work, as Sullivan demonstrated, strongly influenced Mill's

philosophical and political writings. Furthermore, whatever contradictions or inconsistencies are found in Mill's writings in general, there can be no such doubt about his position concerning the rule of India through the East India Company; it was in his opinion the best possible rule which he defended to the day it was abolished by parliament

## Conclusion

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 James 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.

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