

CONFLICT, SOCIALISM, AND DEMOCRACY IN MILL

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ABSTRACT

Mill's socialism and democratic theory have led some scholars to accuse him of trying to eliminate conflict from political life. Whereas Graeme Duncan has averred that Mill's socialism aims to institute a completely harmonious society, James Fitzjames Stephen has contended that Millian democracy sought to evacuate conflict from political discussion. This article reconstructs both critiques and argues they are imprecise. Even if disputes motivated by redistribution of material goods would no longer exist in an egalitarian society, conflicts driven by resentment over social reputation would keep the flame of conflict burning in a Millian socialist community. Moreover, a close reading of *Considerations on Representative Government* shows that Mill knew that no amount of political discussion is able to make conflicting opinions disappear. According to him, conflict is unavoidable in democratic politics because citizens analyse political issues from different social perspectives. Mill's goal was not to eliminate conflict, but rather to regulate it in such a way as to bring about its attendant benefits, namely, progress and self-development.

Keywords: John Stuart Mill; socialism; democracy; conflict; James Fitzjames Stephen; Graeme Duncan.

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ABSTRACT

La teoría socialista y democrática de Mill han llevado a algunos académicos a acusarlo de tratar de eliminar el conflicto de la vida política. Mientras que Graeme Duncan ha afirmado que el socialismo de Mill apunta a instituir una sociedad completamente armoniosa, James Fitzjames Stephen ha sostenido que la democracia milliana trató de eliminar el conflicto de la discusión política. Este artículo reconstruye las críticas y argumenta que son imprecisas. Incluso si las disputas motivadas por la redistribución de bienes materiales ya no existieran en una sociedad igualitaria, los conflictos provocados por el resentimiento acerca de la reputación social mantendrían encendida la llama del conflicto en una comunidad socialista milliana. Además, una lectura atenta de *Consideraciones sobre el gobierno representativo* muestra que Mill sabía que ninguna discusión política puede hacer desaparecer opiniones conflictivas. Según él, el conflicto es inevitable en la política democrática porque los ciudadanos analizan los problemas políticos desde diferentes perspectivas sociales. El objetivo de Mill no era eliminar el conflicto, sino más bien regularlo de tal manera que produjera los beneficios que éste conlleva, a saber, el progreso y el autodesarrollo.

Keywords: John Stuart Mill; socialismo; democracia; conflicto; James Fitzjames Stephen; Graeme Duncan.

1. INTRODUCTION

John Stuart Mill has been accused of being unable to grasp the pivotal role played by conflict in collective existence. More than forty years ago, Graeme Duncan criticised Millian socialism for seeking to institute a completely harmonious and conflict-free society. The charge of obliterating conflict's fundamental role has also been pressed against Mill by James Fitzjames Stephen. According to him, Mill's defence of parliamentary democracy is based upon a Pollyannaish view of political deliberation. Stephen argued that Mill expected political deliberation to wither disagreement and conflict. Moreover, he contended that Mill's expectation was unwarranted, for conflict in real life is an ineradicable feature of politics. According to Stephen, Mill

mischaracterised the *modus operandi* of parliamentary democracy as a deliberative process that produced unanimity and, accordingly, neglected to mention that when representatives from different social groups confront one another in the assembly, they hardly ever recognise the goodness of their opponents' proposals.

Though decades have passed since Duncan and Stephen formulated their critiques, no one thus far has attempted to respond to them. In what follows, I reconstruct their critiques and argue that, although isolated passages from Mill's oeuvre give textual support for Duncan's and Stephen's criticisms, a more holistic approach to Millian political philosophy brings to the fore the partiality of their interpretations. Rebutting Duncan's and Stephen's critiques is worthwhile because it forces us to underscore one aspect of Millian socialism and one aspect of Mill's political philosophy that are usually overlooked: (i) conflict can be triggered not only by material inequality but also by resentment over social reputation; (ii) conflict is unavoidable in a truly democratic community because citizens analyse political issues from different social perspectives.²

This article is organised in the following way: first, Mill's high regard for conflict is examined in order to dispel the impression that he somehow wanted it to disappear once and for all. Section two shows that Mill justified his praise for conflict with two arguments. The first argument, which he inherited from the *Bildungstradition*, was that conflict is salutary to the extent it is conducive to self-development. The second, which he developed mainly by reading Guizot's historical writings, was that conflict is important for politics because it produces progress and wards off stagnation.

Having clarified Mill's conception of conflict and its intellectual sources, the article reconstructs in section three Duncan's critique of Millian socialism and argues that a proper understanding of Mill's socialism lays to rest Duncan's critique. In *Chapters on Socia-*

² I add the word 'truly' because, according to Mill, when democracy degenerates into 'the tyranny of the majority', homogeneity increases and conflict tends to disappear (CW XVIII, 176). Following common practice among Mill scholars, references to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* are written as follows: CW VII, 313, for *Collected Works*, volume VII, page 313. On Mill's distinction between 'true' and 'false' democracy, see *Representative Government* (CW XIX, chap. 7). Unless otherwise noticed, whenever I deploy the word 'democracy' in this article I refer to the type of democracy that Mill defended, and not to the degenerate form of democracy he criticised.

lism, Mill makes clear that the socialism he defends would eliminate only conflicts motivated by material inequality. Conflicts revolving around issues of social reputation would keep the flame of conflict burning in a Millian socialist community. Put differently, though a Millian socialist community would not have conflicts motivated by redistribution of material goods, it would have conflicts triggered by resentment over social recognition.

Section four revisits Stephen's critique of Millian parliamentary democracy. According to Stephen, Mill thought the goal of democratic deliberation was to substitute compulsion with discussion. However, as chapter five of *Considerations on Representative Government* demonstrates, Mill was cognisant of the fact that parliamentary debates (almost) always leave a residue of conflict and disagreement.³ He knew that dissenting minorities (almost) always remain in place and that what leads them to accept the final decision reached by the assembly is the fact that, before representatives voted on the measure, minorities had the chance to express their perspectives and voice their disapproval. Dissenting minorities accept the decision enacted by the assembly not because they are entirely persuaded of the truth and rightness of the opponents' proposal, but because they know that the rules of the game were respected. For Mill, conflict is unavoidable in democratic politics because citizens' perspectives on public issues vary according to their social background. The article thus concludes that Mill's socialism and democratic theory both recognise the fundamental role of conflict in political life.

2. MILL'S PRAISE FOR CONFLICT: ITS ARGUMENTS AND INTELLECTUAL SOURCES

Mill adduces two arguments to justify his high praise for conflict. The first one is that conflict fosters self-development: 'Every one who knows history or the human mind is aware that powerful intellects and strong characters are formed by conflict' (CW XXV, 1106). The second is that conflict safeguards progress: 'the antagonism of influences . . . is the only real security for continued progress' (CW XIX,

³ I use the word 'almost' because Mill does not rule out the possibility of having a few topics on which political representatives would unanimously agree.

397).⁴ In order to clarify both arguments, this section will scrutinise the intellectual sources of each of them.

2.1 THE INFLUENCE OF THE *BILDUNGSTRADITION* AND THE ANCIENT GREEKS

Mill's argument that conflict is conducive to self-development comes from two different historical sources: the ancient Greeks and the *Bildungstradition*. The influence of the latter over Mill's philosophy has been studied by several scholars (Audard, 2009, 86-92; Collini, 1985, 38; Devigne, 2006, 92-3; Habibi, 2001, 31; Kahan, 1992, 102; Merquior, 1983, 91 and 1991, 49; Smith, 1992, 84). Some have even affirmed that 'self-development', an expression that Mill uses countless times, is his translation for *Bildung* (Capaldi, 2004, 253; Thorlby, 1973, 101). Both concepts, to be sure, express the same idea, *viz.* 'that "the end of man . . . is the highest . . . development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole"; that, therefore, the object "towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts . . . is the individuality of power and development"' (CW XVIII, 261).

Mill in this passage quotes Humboldt's *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, one of the most conspicuous works of the *Bildungstradition*.⁵ In the second chapter of the book, Humboldt (1854, 11) maintains that liberty and self-development require 'a species of oppression' between the individual and her surroundings. The absence of conflict is deleterious because it entails 'the suppression of all active energy' which is necessary for the development of the self (Humboldt, 1854, 25). Mill's alignment with the *Bildungstradition* reveals that conflict is valuable for him to the extent it vents the potentialities of the self. Needless to say, Mill was not in favour of conflicts that bring about destruction and misery.⁶ Conflict for him was

4 For the sake of concision, I use 'antagonism' and 'conflict' as synonyms through most of this article. Such use is warranted because, as I explain in section 2.2, Mill deployed the term 'antagonism' to refer to a specific type of conflict.

5 On Humboldt's influence over Mill, see Zakaras (2011, 234-38).

6 Mill recognised that conflict not always led people to engage in self-development. In *On Liberty*, for instance, he maintained that conflict can 'exacerbate' sectarianism and immature people in dogmatic positions (CW XVIII, 257). When that happens, conflict is inimical to self-development because it prevents people from refining their cognitive abilities. For Mill, conflict is beneficial insofar as it encourages people to engage in self-criticism.

salutary when it led the individual to engage in self-development. The struggle between two individuals is beneficial when it ‘draws the attention of either to the imperfection of his own type’ (CW XVIII, 273). Conflict has the power to jolt us out of complacency, thus spurring ourselves to challenge and improve our current opinions and attitudes.

The ancient notion of *agon* was another intellectual tradition that influenced Mill. *Agon* was a term used in ancient Greece to denote the regulated conflicts that took place among citizens who wanted to challenge one another and display their greatness in public.⁷ The interpretation that agonism was responsible for the ancient Greeks’ grandeur was common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was endorsed, for instance, by Humboldt (1854, 16) in *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. Comprising almost two dozen volumes and published between 1846 and 1856, George Grote’s monumental *History of Greece* also advanced the thesis that conflict was one of the main causes of the ancient Greeks’ glory. Grote was a close friend of Mill’s family and an active participant in the reading groups ‘organised by John Stuart Mill’ (Hamburger, 1965, 8). When *History of Greece* was published, Mill took it upon himself the task of reviewing Grote’s work for the *Edinburgh Review*.

Mill’s reviews of Grote disclose how deeply he was affected by the thesis that agonism was linked to the ancient Greeks’ grandeur. In both reviews, Mill elaborates his own considerations on Athenian democracy and praises agonism: ‘the passion, universal in the ancient world, for conquest and dominion . . . was most beneficial’ for the Athenians because it made them develop themselves (CW XI, 321). Like the ancient Greeks in general, the Athenians were ‘full of animal spirits and joyousness; [they] revell[ed] in the fun of hearing rival orators inveigh against each other’ (CW XI, 316). Agonism imbued them with ‘that habitual love of fair play, and of hearing both sides of a case, which was more or less a quality of the Greeks generally, but had so firm a hold on the Athenians that it did not desert them under the most passionate excitement’ (CW XI, 325). Their system of education consisted mainly in preparing students for such battles, for the Athenians’ conviction was that, far from weakening the development of the polis, the agonistic passion promoted the public good.

⁷ See Kalyvas (2009, 18). Henceforth I will use ‘agonism’ and ‘agonistic’ to refer to regulated conflict.

By making citizens compete with one another to see who could better serve the community, the Athenians utilised and converted the narcissist passion of each individual for the good of the whole.

Seeking to emulate them, Mill held that, rather than denying citizens' 'agonistic passion' for personal recognition, modern democracies should deploy the drive for individual distinction in such a way as to make it socially useful (Urbinati, 2002, 61). The pleasure the Athenians felt when they heard 'every sort of question, public and private, discussed by the ablest men of the time, with the earnestness of purpose and fullness of preparation' descended from the Hellenic idea that conflict was the prime site for identifying the best politician, athlete *et al.* (CW XI, 324). Mill's espoused such idea, and thus his political theory can be linked to 'perfectionist agonism', a philosophical doctrine that 'prescribes contestation as a means to open up possibilities for the proliferation of forms of human excellence [and] embraces the valorisation of creative possibilities of the self, of a democracy that produces self-constituting subjects in proud diversity' (Wingenbach, 2011, 53).⁸

2.2 THE INFLUENCE OF FRANÇOIS GUIZOT

Besides the ancient Greeks and the *Bildungstradition*, Guizot's historical works shaped Mill's views on conflict to a significant degree. Mill met Guizot when the latter resided in London in 1840 after becoming the ambassador of France to England (Reeves, 2007, 195-96).⁹ In his writings, Guizot puts forward an interpretation of European history that shows how progress requires a specific type of conflict, which he calls 'antagonism'. In a review of Guizot's work published

8 On the association between Mill and perfectionist agonism, see also Fossen (2008, 388) and Owen (2013, 80). Following Fossen, Owen, and Urbinati, I describe Mill as an agonistic philosopher in order to highlight his indebtedness to the ancient Greeks, and not to imply that he should be read as a post-structuralist thinker. On the differences between ancient and contemporary agonism, see Kalyvas (2009). For interpretations that highlight the positive role Mill ascribed to political conflict, see Ashcraft (1989), Bobbio (2006, 83), Collini, Winch, and Burrow (1983, 159), Dalaqua (2018a), Finlay (2002), Girard (2015), López (2016, chap. 2), Pollitzer (2016, part III), Turner (2010) and Urbinati (2002). Urbinati (2002, 45) claims that Mill defended the regulation of conflict in order to promote 'a republican or civic vision of politics'.

9 On the similarities between Mill's and Guizot's conceptions of historical conflict, see also Pollitzer (2015).

in 1845, Mill adumbrates some views on the relationship between progress and antagonism that are further elaborated in *On Liberty* and *Representative Government*:

No one of the ancient forms of society contained in itself that systematic antagonism, which we believe to be the only condition under which stability and progressiveness can be permanently reconciled to one another. . . . We believe with M. Guizot, that modern Europe presents the only example in history, of the maintenance, through many ages, of this co-ordinate action among rival powers naturally tending in different directions. And, with him, we ascribe chiefly to this cause the spirit of improvement, which has never ceased to exist, and still makes progress, in the European nations. At no time has Europe been free from a contest of rival powers for dominion over society (CW XX, 269-70).

Following Guizot, Mill claimed that European history was characterised by a ‘perpetual antagonism’ (CW XX, 270). Though Mill does not define the term, his writings suggest that, albeit related, ‘antagonism’ and ‘conflict’ are not exactly the same. Whereas the latter signifies any type of disagreement that may exist between individuals, the former is used by Mill to designate a specific type of conflict that descends from wider social divisions.¹⁰ Put differently, though antagonism always designates a conflictive relationship, not every conflictive relationship qualifies as antagonistic. When two individuals disagree because of idiosyncratic reasons, their relationship is conflictive but not antagonistic. When the reason why they disagree is not merely idiosyncratic and reflects wider divisions – such as, say, national divisions – their ‘conflict’ classifies as ‘antagonism’.

Guizot claimed that, since no European nation managed to dominate all others, Europeans were forced to deal with antagonism on a constant basis, which in turn made them more ‘progressive’. Almost fifteen years later, this thesis would reappear in chapter three of *On Liberty*:

What has made the European family of nations an improving, instead of a stationary portion of mankind? Not any superior excellence in them, which, when it exists, exists as the effect, not as the cause; but their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals, classes, nations, have been

¹⁰ The distinctive feature of ‘antagonism’ can be observed in Mill’s correspondence with Comte (see CW XIII, 508). On Mill and Comte’s intellectual relationship, see Barker (2018, chap. 3), Kremer-Marietti (1995), Rosen (2013, chaps. 5-6) and Winch (2009, 38-41, 71-2).

extremely unlike one another: they have struck out a great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable; and although at every period those who travelled in different paths have been intolerant of one another, and each would have thought it an excellent thing if all the rest could have been compelled to travel his road, their attempts to thwart each other's development have rarely had any permanent success, and each has in time endured to receive the good which the others have offered. Europe is, in my judgment, wholly indebted to this plurality of paths for its progressive and many-sided development (CW XVIII, 274).¹¹

The forced coexistence between different political groups was productive for Europe because, far from arresting their development, the exposure to diversity enriched the singularity of each group. Mill's reading of European history shows that the conflict he values is *productive*; conflict is good inasmuch as it *produces progress*. To clarify the relationship between conflict and progress, Mill examines the history of one European nation that epitomises remarkably well the power antagonism has to produce progress, namely, England. His excursus on English history summarises important claims from Guizot's *Histoire des origines du gouvernement représentatif en Europe*.¹² To flesh out the consistence of the concept of progress that Mill associated with political conflict, a brief analysis of Guizot's voluminous work is thus in order.

In the second tome of his work, Guizot (1851, 4) offers 'a careful examination of the origins of this government [sc. the representative one] in England, the only country where it developed without interruption and with success'. He notes that English history provided a fertile soil for the consolidation of representative institutions because, unlike other European countries, 'absolute power never managed to set its foot' in England (Guizot, 1851, 43). The division of power between the barons and the king, and between the Normans and the Saxons, was continuous in England. '[T]he Saxon institutions were

11 For a comprehensive analysis of Mill's notion of 'the stationary state' that traces the historical sources that influenced his understanding of 'stationariness', see Eisenberg (2018, chap. 6).

12 Mill's reading of English history also resembles Coleridge's theory on the genesis of British political institutions, which was advanced in *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, a work Mill read almost fifteen years before reviewing Grote's work. According to Coleridge (1830, 17), the continuous struggles between the different antagonistic social powers in Britain gave birth to the country's political institutions. On the influence of Coleridge over Mill, see Turk (1988).

never suffocated by the Norman institutions; they were associated and ended up changing the character of each' (Guizot, 1851, 43). The antagonism between both groups produced 'an amalgam' that yielded 'more developed and stronger' institutions (Guizot, 1851, 44). In addition, 'the forced rapprochement between the two peoples [sc. the Saxons and the Normans] . . . fertilised them and generated the liberties of England' (Guizot, 1851, 45).

Guizot contends that the struggle between the barons and the king sheds light on the productive power of political conflict. In contradistinction to continental Europe, the association between the barons in England was steady enough to resist the king: 'on the one hand, [there was] the royal power, and on the other, the bodies of the barons' (Guizot, 1851, 74). English history was shaped by a 'struggle' between these two powers, which did not end because none of them was strong enough to destroy the other (Guizot, 1851, 74). According to Guizot (1851, 75), the English owe deep gratitude to that struggle, for it was upon it that 'the first elements of a free government, that is to say, public rights and political guarantees' were built. The power of the barons and the opposition they set up against the king were for Guizot (1851, 77-8) the features of English political history that explained the emergence and consolidation of representative institutions.

This rapid sketch of Guizot's oeuvre suffices to state that the progress he associated with political conflict was first and foremost related to the stability of representative institutions and their attendant protection of citizens' liberties. Guizot's understanding of progress would be endorsed by Mill and is present in chapter two of *Representative Government*, where Mill claims that stability is 'a part and means of Progress itself' (CW XIX, 388).¹³ Conflict forces a plurality

13 For Mill even the most central beliefs of a progressive society should be contested, for contestation is what safeguards a lively apprehension of the meaning of our beliefs (CW XVIII, 247-48). This is worth highlighting because there is one passage in *On Liberty* where Mill claims that as mankind progresses, 'the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase' (CW XVIII, 250). This sentence could be invoked to justify the interpretation that Mill's commitment to the notion of progress was linked to the idea that conflict and popular contestation should gradually disappear. Such interpretation, however, does not survive a complete examination of *On Liberty*, for in this work Mill insists that if there are no people objecting mainstream social beliefs, 'it is indispensable to imagine them and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skilful devil's advocate can conjure up'

of political groups to tolerate one another and to design institutions that allow them to negotiate their rivalries without appealing to physical violence. By doing so, conflict sustains the conditions necessary for citizens of all groups to pursue their life plans and experiments in living. It is in this regard that conflict is conducive to progress.

3. DOES MILL'S SOCIALISM SEEK TO INSTITUTE A SOCIETY WITHOUT CONFLICT? A REPLY TO DUNCAN

As I noted earlier, different writers have accused Mill of being unable to grasp the pivotal role played by conflict in human existence. Such allegation has been built on two grounds, the first of which revolves around Mill's socialism.¹⁴ This section aims to rebut Duncan's interpretation that Mill's socialism sought to implement a completely harmonious and conflict-free society.

Duncan's (1973, 237) book *Marx and Mill: Two Views of Social Conflict and Social Harmony* asserts that, their differences notwithstanding, Marx and Mill had similar visions of what they considered to be 'the ultimate social state'. According to the book, both philosophers sought to institute a harmonious society without conflict. Duncan (1973, 238-39) avers that, by defending a socialist society where material inequality would diminish to a large extent, Mill subscribed to a conception of history where 'the environment in which men acted – and clashed – was to change . . . Violent and insatiable demands would disappear, and the major sources of conflict would wither away peacefully'.¹⁵

(CW XVIII, 245). It is one thing to argue that progress will increase the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed over time, and yet another to claim that progress requires eliminating conflict altogether.

14 A significant body of literature has sought to evaluate Mill's socialist credentials by comparing it with other types of socialism (Claeys, 2013, especially 162-72; Robson, 1968, 268-71). For the sake of concision, I here focus solely on the relationship between Millian socialism and conflict and seek only to rebut Duncan's critique so as to emphasise an aspect of Mill's socialism that is often overlooked by Mill scholars. For a broader account that traces the historical genesis of Mill's views on socialism, see McCabe (2010).

15 Duncan (1969, 70 and 1973, 238) also claimed that Mill was unable to recognise the ineradicableness of conflict because he espoused a 'rational' view of politics. The charge that Mill's emphasis on reasoned deliberation led him to deny the importance of conflict is analysed in the next section.

Duncan is obviously forced to acknowledge that Mill did accord some importance to conflict, if only because the passages in which the British philosopher is encomiastic about conflict are legion. Nevertheless, though he concedes that '[c]onflict or antagonism' are 'vital to [Mill's] social progress', Duncan (1973, 264) is adamant that, ultimately, Mill's conceptions of progress and history long for a society bereft of conflict. 'Mill envisaged Parliament as an institution . . . where conflict should not merely be institutionalised, but overcome' (Duncan, 1973, 267). In Mill's socialism, conflict would be the starting point, and harmony, the final stop.

More than forty years have passed, and yet no one thus far has offered a direct response to Duncan's criticism of Mill.¹⁶ The idea that Mill advocated socialism because he wished to eliminate conflict and wanted all of us to lead a completely harmonious and conflict-free social existence is imprecise.¹⁷ The first step to invalidate such misreading is to recall that for Mill self-development – which is nothing less than the leitmotif of his philosophy (Dalaqua, 2018b) – requires conflict. Mill's concern with self-development was actually one of the reasons he criticised capitalism and supported socialism (Baum, 2007, 100; Claeys, 1987, 145; Ruiz Resa, 2005, 188; Stafford, 1998, 336; Ten, 1998, 394; Zakaras, 2009, 25).¹⁸ Now, how

16 Though McCabe (2010, 254–60) does not address Duncan's (1973) criticism of Mill's socialism directly, her work can be invoked to refute Duncan's critique because she shows that a Millian socialist community would have conflicts provoked by the competition between different cooperatives.

17 I add 'completely' because, to the extent that it would make conflicts motivated by acute material inequality disappear, Mill did expect socialism to produce some harmony (CW III, 791–92). In a Millian socialist community, conflicts concerning the distribution of material goods would indeed be eliminated because the distribution of such goods would be 'performed according to rules laid down by the community' (CW V, 738). That does not mean, however, that Mill thought conflict would disappear altogether in a socialist community.

18 By invoking self-development as a justification for socialism, Mill once again pays tribute to the *Bildungstradition*. As Lukács (2006, 591) submits in his essay on Goethe, the *Bildungstradition* gestures towards the idea that 'a fully developed personality presupposes a new social order: socialism'. The idea that socialism should be implemented because it was conducive to self-development was not unusual in late nineteenth-century Europe and was endorsed by writers as different as Bernstein (1993, 147) and Wilde (1912). Marx's defence of communism was also animated by a conception of self-development (see Audard, 2018; Marx and Engels, 1998, 83–4; Parekh, 1982, 35; Smith, 2005, chap. 10).

could Mill claim at the same time that socialism fosters self-development and eliminates conflict?

The second step to invalidate Duncan's interpretation is to demonstrate that it is at odds with a complete understanding of Mill's socialism. The idea that Millian socialism sought to evacuate conflict from social life can become tenable only by focusing on isolated statements of Mill's oeuvre, such as the ones below:

[Capitalism] is grounded on opposition of interests, not harmony of interests, and under it every one is required to find his place by a struggle, by pushing others back or being pushed back by them. . . . Under the present system hardly any one can gain except by the loss or disappointment of one or of many others. In a well-constituted community every one would be a gainer by every other person's successful exertions; while now we gain by each other's loss and lose by each other's gain (CW V, 715-16).

This passage could doubtless serve to justify the assertion that Millian socialism aimed at a completely harmonious and conflict-free society. At first glance, one could infer from it that Mill's repudiation of capitalism and penchant for socialism were premised on the idea that, whilst the former stimulated conflict because it produced material inequality, the latter eliminated conflict completely insofar as it diminished material inequality.

Such inference, however, would be wrong. For one thing, Mill himself imputes to communism the charge that Duncan presses against him. Communists believe that with the abolishment of private property and the fulfilment of the revolution, social concord would ensue.¹⁹ However,

[t]hat concord would, even in the most fortunate circumstances, be much more liable to disturbance than Communists suppose. The institution provides that there shall be no quarrelling about material interests; individualism is excluded from that department of affairs. But there are other departments from which no institutions can exclude it: there will still be rivalry for reputation and for personal power (CW V, 744).

19 On the differences between Millian socialism and communism, see Feuer (1949, 297-303). According to Mill, one of the main differences between his socialism and communism is that, while the latter seeks to abolish private property, the former does not. Mill's definition of socialism is given in CW V, 738.

The domain of economics does not exhaust the agonistic impetus that pervades human existence. Even in the absence of economic inequality, reputation-driven disputes would continue to fuel the flame of conflict in a socialist polity. In the socialist community envisaged by Mill, there will be no conflicts motivated by material inequality between citizens from different social classes, but there will be conflicts regarding issues of reputation and social recognition. The blind spot of Duncan's analysis is that, by contending that Millian socialism would institute a completely harmonious society, Duncan supposes that conflict can only be motivated by economic issues. When he claims that in a Millian socialist community 'the major sources of conflict would wither away peacefully' because material inequality would disappear, Duncan (1973, 239) neglects to mention that conflicts aroused by the concern with reputation were for Mill a major source of conflict. As chapter three of *On Liberty* makes clear, a significant amount of social and political conflicts arises out of the clash among 'different experiments of living' (CW XVIII, 261).

Mill not only affirms the ineradicableness of conflict, but also praises the persistence of discord that the socialist society he defends would have:

It is needless to specify a number of other important questions . . . on which difference of opinion, often irreconcilable, would be likely to arise. But even the dissensions which might be expected would be a far less evil to the prospects of humanity than a delusive unanimity produced by the prostration of all individual opinions and wishes before the decree of the majority (CW V, 745).

In Mill's view, besides being naive, communism's hope that the abolishment of material inequality would make unanimity prevail is dangerous. The putative unanimity that everybody would approve of, in reality, would be nothing but the result of violent censorship and smothering groupthink. For Mill, total unanimity is perforce the outcome of coercion and a symptom of the absence of liberty. When citizens are allowed to develop themselves freely, it is unavoidable that 'human nature [will] expand itself in innumerable conflicting directions' (CW I, 259). Far from lamenting it, Mill cherished the persistence of conflict, for without it progress and self-development would decay.

4. DOES MILL'S DEMOCRATIC THEORY SEEK TO INSTITUTE A SOCIETY WITHOUT CONFLICT? A REPLY TO STEPHEN

Mill's democratic theory was also indicted for being unable to recognise the ineradicable character of conflict in politics. Published in 1873, Stephen's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* argues that Mill's conception of parliamentary democracy presumed that conflict could be eliminated from politics. Stephen's book cites Mill some 125 times, which means that Mill's name appears roughly once every two pages. Indeed, the entire book could be read as a critical parsing of Mill's philosophy, something that Stephen (1993, 4) himself suggests in the first chapter. In this section, my aim is to juxtapose Stephen's critique to Mill's writings so as to highlight a thesis advanced therein that refutes Stephen's criticism, namely, the thesis that conflict is unavoidable in democratic politics because the ways in which citizens see public issues vary according to their social background.

As Stuart Warner (1993, xxii) warns in the foreword to *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, 'Stephen misconstrues Mill's doctrines, heedless of the nuances to be found there'. In the wake of Harold Bloom's (1973) antithetical approach, one could say that the fear of not being 'original' enough is what lurks behind Stephen's misappropriation of Mill. Stephen (1993, 4) writes that for a long time he was Mill's 'disciple', but that as time went by, he came to realise that Mill's philosophy was 'repugnant'. Throughout the book, he claims that Mill went astray in his reflections and that the objective of *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* is to correct them. Since a complete reconstruction of Stephen's critiques would lead us too far afield, this section will focus only on his criticism of Mill's view of parliamentary democracy and thus will not address his animadversion of Millian utilitarianism.²⁰

Stephen's main criticism regarding Mill's democratic theory is that it supposes that conflict can be eradicated once and for all:

Mr. Mill . . . thinks otherwise than I of men and of human life in general. He appears to believe that if men are all freed from restraints and put, as far as possible, on an equal footing, they will naturally treat each other as brothers, and work together harmoniously for their common good. I believe that . . . between all classes of men there are and always will be real occasions of enmity and strife, and that even good men may be and often are compelled to treat each other

20 For a fuller account of Stephen's criticism of Mill, see Julia Stapleton's (2017) introduction to *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*.

as enemies either by the existence of conflicting interests which bring them into collision, or by their different ways of conceiving goodness (1993, 169).

According to Stephen, Mill thought that coercion and restraint would no longer be necessary in a democracy, for any polity where citizens are all equally free will be completely harmonious. Contra Mill's view, Stephen (1993, 20) insists that a democratic debate where every citizen is open to participate on a par with others does not substitute 'compulsion' by 'discussion'. He claims it is naive to expect democratic deliberation to replace force by persuasion, for 'persuasion and force . . . are neither opposed to nor really altogether distinct from each other. . . . Persuasion, indeed, is a kind of force' (Stephen, 1993, 76). Democracy

is simply a mild and disguised form of compulsion. We agree to try strength by counting heads instead of breaking heads, but the principle is exactly the same. It is not the wisest side which wins, but the one which for the time being shows its superior strength . . . by enlisting the largest amount of active sympathy in its support. The minority gives way not because it is convinced that it is wrong, but because it is convinced that it is a minority (Stephen, 1993, 21).

The next two paragraphs of the text indicate that Stephen has *On Liberty* in mind when reproaching Mill's putative naiveté. According to Stephen (1993, 21), Mill's essay on liberty affirms that, when citizens deliberate with one another about political affairs, they achieve mutual understanding and eliminate the disagreements and conflicts that used to divide them. Stephen's interpretation finds textual support in chapter two of *On Liberty*, where Mill maintains that when citizens discuss 'all the . . . antagonisms of practical life', their different viewpoints merge and produce what he calls 'truth' (CW XVIII, 254):

Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites and it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners. . . . only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a chance of fair play to all sides of the truth (CW XVIII, 254).

This passage lends credence to Stephen's critique. Mill here seems to conceive of politics as an epistemic game in which conflicting opinions reconcile with one another and form a new discourse that ers-

while opponents can recognise as truthful and entirely appropriate. The expression of conflict in political deliberation weeds out inaccurate information, exposes falsehood, and in the end makes everybody pleased with the decision taken. It is as if Mill only tolerated conflict because, in the existing state of human intellect, it was by means of it that error was eliminated and truth emerged. Mill's tolerance of conflict was made on pragmatic grounds, and his real wish was to institute a state where citizens' intellect was more advanced and where conflicting political opinions would not even exist (see Stephen, 1993, 179).

For Stephen, such wish can never come to fruition. Conflict in politics will exist permanently, for 'the intimate sympathy and innumerable bonds of all kinds by which men are united, and the differences of character and opinions by which they are distinguished, produce and must forever produce continual struggles between them' (Stephen, 1993, 94). It is citizens' gregariousness – the fact that they are social animals who live in groups – that produces, and will always produce, conflict between them. Our opinions and political views, according to Stephen (1993, 175), necessarily reflect the social group we belong to; 'men are so constituted that personal and social motives cannot be distinguished and do not exist apart'. Political communities are a mosaic of different collectivities, and the constitution of citizens' motives, their understanding of life, the reasons they give when justifying their actions – all these somehow mirror the specific social group they come from. Contra Mill's view that citizens from different groups can forge together a common discourse that makes conflict vanish altogether, Stephen argues that in politics, as in human affairs in general, conflict is inexorable because the social perspectives from which citizens judge public issues are not necessarily reconcilable:

As long as men have any mental activity at all, they will speculate, as they always have speculated, about themselves, their destiny, and their nature. They will ask in different dialects the questions What? Whence? Whither? And their answers to these questions will be bold and copious, whatever else they may be. It seems to me improbable in the highest degree that any answer will ever be devised to any one of these questions which will be accepted by all mankind in all ages as final and conclusive. The facts of life are ambiguous. Different inferences may be drawn from them, and they do not present by any means the same general appearance to people who look at them from different points of view. To a scientific man society has a totally di-

fferent appearance, it is, as far as he is concerned, quite a different thing, from what it is to a man whose business lies with men (1993, 205).

People judge human affairs from different points of view. A scientist and a business man will probably have divergent views when it is time to decide what their polity should do to ameliorate citizens' lives. It is unreasonable to expect them to reach a 'truth' that somehow will resolve their conflicts. The facts of life are ambiguous. Unlike mathematics, collective existence poses problems that can be addressed in different ways, and to claim that there is only one 'correct' and 'truthful' solution for them makes no sense. We all speak from specific perspectives and the solutions we design for political problems, as well as the way we look at the problems themselves, are always tainted by our social background. In international as in domestic politics, people 'are like a pack of hounds all coupled together and all wanting to go different ways. . . . We are thus brought to the conclusion that . . . there is and must be war and conflict between men. . . . There is a real, essential, eternal conflict between them' (Stephen, 1993, 94).

Given Mill's inability to grasp this fundamental feature of human existence, he did not realise that the aim of politics is not to eliminate conflict, but to regulate it. Once the ineradicableness of political conflict is admitted, one understands that what governments should do 'is not to prevent collisions [between citizens], but to surround them with acts of friendship and goodwill which confine them within limits and prevent people from going to extremities' (Stephen, 1993, 94). 'The great art of life lies not in avoiding . . . struggles, but in conducting them with as little injury as may be to the combatants' (Stephen, 1993, 109). Rather than trying to eliminate conflict, what is needed is to regulate it in such a way as 'to let the best man win. If prize-fighters were allowed to give foul blows . . . their relative strength and endurance would be less effectually tested. . . . what is wanted is not peace, but fair play' (Stephen, 1993, 68). Regulated conflict is salutary for the polity because it works as a mechanism of selection that reveals who the best citizen, athlete, politician *et al.* are.

The commentary on Mill's conception of conflict given in section two is enough to cast doubt on Stephen's interpretation. As his reviews of Grote demonstrate, Mill also thought that the practice of agonism – the regulated conflicts the Athenians used to have with one another – was a mechanism of selection of the best (*aristoi*). In fact, Mill's position on conflict resembles Stephen's to a signifi-

cant degree, for both philosophers believed that conflict should be institutionalised, not eliminated. As chapter two of *Representative Government* testifies, the only secure foundation of progress is ‘the antagonism of influences’ (CW XIX, 397).

Mill does not think that democracy substitutes discussion by force. In chapter five of *Representative Government*, he explains that democratic deliberation does not eradicate conflict, for there will always remain dissenting opinions. The final decisions enacted by Parliament, for instance, almost never please the totality of the representatives:

Parliament has . . . to be at once the nation’s Committee of Grievances, and its Congress of Opinions; an arena . . . where every person in the country may count upon finding somebody who speaks his mind . . . not to friends and partisans exclusively, but in the face of opponents, to be tested by adverse controversy; where those whose opinion is overruled, feel satisfied that it is heard, and set aside not by a mere act of will, but for what are thought superior reasons, and commend themselves as such to the representatives of the majority of the nation; where every party or opinion in the country can muster its strength, . . . where the opinion which prevails in the nation makes itself manifest as prevailing, and marshals its hosts in the presence of the government, which is thus enabled and compelled to give way to it on the mere manifestation, without the actual employment, of its strength (CW XIX, 432).

What makes the minority accept the decision chosen by the majority is, *inter alia*, the threat of force; they know that if they defied them, they would lose because they have less people on their side. Parliamentary democracy for Mill is a way for the government to see which social force has more adherents. Even though Mill writes that the minority who participates in the debate feels satisfied with their power to express their disagreement with the majority in public, he never affirms that they change their minds. They feel satisfied with the fact that the rules of the game were respected, that the decision chosen was, after all, the one which the majority of their peers considered to be superior after some time of deliberation. Nevertheless, Mill never said that the minority accepted the outcome of the discussion because they were convinced that they were ‘wrong’ and that the majority was ‘right’. If that was how he conceived of democratic deliberation, then the decisions enacted by Parliament in a representative democracy would always be selected unanimously for him. If the delibera-

tive process would make the minority realise they were wrong, why would they keep voting against the majority? The reason why a ‘truly’ democratic representative assembly is and will always be saturated with conflict and controversy is because both of them are ineradicable features of political life.

Indeed, what distinguishes a ‘false democracy’ from a ‘true’ one is that, while the former diminishes the expression of political conflict in the assembly by allowing only representatives of the majority to be elected, the latter maximises the presence of political conflict by adopting a proportional representation scheme that helps minorities elect their own representatives (CW XIX, 448). If representative government is to be truly democratic, it is imperative that the representative assembly expresses the social perspective of every political group comprised in the *demos*.²¹ A proportional representation scheme respects that imperative because, unlike the first-past-the-post voting method, it does not allow only representatives who collect more than fifty percent of the votes to be elected. The winner-takes-all system leads to a falsified representative democracy in Mill’s view because it offers no guarantee against the tyranny of the majority. Endorsing Pericles’ view of democracy, Mill submitted that, rather than being identified with majoritarianism tout court, democracy should be seen as the regime where the rule of the majority goes in tandem with the recognition and appreciation of human diversity and conflict (see CW XI, 319 and Thucydides, 1982, 109ff).

Why is conflict unavoidable in a true democracy? The answer Mill’s writings give to such question is, once again, similar to Stephen’s views. The idea that citizens’ different social backgrounds is what gives them conflicting opinions on political issues is also present in *Representative Government*:

It is not, however, necessary to affirm even thus much in order to support the claim of all to participate in the sovereign power. We need not suppose that when power resides in an exclusive class, that class will knowingly and deliberately sacrifice the other classes to

21 The association between political representation and social perspective has gained a prominent role in contemporary studies on representation mainly due to Young (2000). The similarities between Young and Mill are interesting, yet analysing them is outside the purview of this article. For a good comparison of both writers, see Donner (2016). For an analysis of the concept of perspective in Mill’s political theory and of Mill’s defence of the necessity of having political representatives of the working class, see Dalaqua (2017).

themselves: it suffices that, in the absence of its natural defenders, the interest of the excluded is always in danger of being overlooked; and, when looked at, is seen with very different eyes from those of the persons whom it directly concerns. In this country, for example, what are called the working-classes may be considered as excluded from all direct participation in the government. I do not believe that the classes who do participate in it have in general any intention of sacrificing the working classes to themselves. . . . Yet does Parliament . . . ever for an instant look at any question with the eyes of a working man? . . . [T]he working men's view . . . ought to be respectfully listened to, instead of being, as it is, not merely turned away from, but ignored. On the question of strikes, for instance, 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 in 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 (CW XIX, 405).

The way citizens judge political affairs is conditioned by their social background. Different social groups have different social perspectives, and that is precisely why members from every social group ought to be present in the representative assembly. Including different and conflictive social perspectives in the representative assembly is salutary because it avoids the absolute 'preponderance' of a given class in politics, something that for Mill constituted an 'evil' (CW XVIII, 196).²²

Allowing all social perspectives to be heard inside the assembly institutionalises conflict. It contributes to the stability of the polity

²² This sentence comes from Mill's second review of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Mill in this passage criticises Tocqueville for having mistakenly affirmed a fault he found in American democracy as a fault that was due to democratic equality. Tocqueville (2012, 250-60, 604-8) claimed that democratic equality was dangerous insofar as it arrested self-development and favoured despotism. Contra Tocqueville, Mill claimed that the problem lied not in democratic equality itself, but in the absence of conflict caused by the preponderance of the middle class in the U.S. (CW XVIII, 196-202). Whenever a given social class is able to rule without having to take into account conflictive perspectives, despotism tends to prevail and citizens' self-development decreases. On the opposition between despotism and self-development in Mill's political thought, see CW XVIII, 266 and Urbinati (2007).

because it dissuades those who are unhappy with the government from resorting to physical violence. This is something that Stephen (1993, 158) failed to grasp when he criticised Mill's association of parliamentary democracy with 'endless discussion'.²³ The fact that the expression of various social perspectives in the representative assembly makes the deliberative process slow should not lead us to crave for a faster and less noisy decision-making mechanism. Such slowness is crucial to the stability of the government, for it gives time for representatives of different social groups to express their judgment and expose in public any shortcoming that the decision under debate might have. The endless discussion among representatives from different social classes that Stephen deplors is a way of institutionalising conflict.

5. CONCLUSION

Mill's socialism and democratic theory have been accused of seeking to institute a conflict-free society. This article has argued that such accusations do not survive a complete examination of Mill's thought. It would be imprecise to claim that a Millian socialist community would exterminate conflict, for material inequality is not the only source of social conflict for Mill. Even if disputes motivated by redistribution of material goods no longer existed, quarrels driven by resentment over social reputation would keep the blaze of conflict burning in a Millian socialist society.

It is equally imprecise to affirm that Mill thought parliamentary democracy should evacuate conflict from political life. An attentive reading of *Representative Government* demonstrates that Mill was aware of the fact that the decision reached by a representative assembly hardly ever pleases all representatives. Conflict for him was an ineradicable feature of a truly democratic community, for any society where citizens were granted equal liberty would incite 'human nature to expand itself in innumerable conflicting directions' (CW I, 259). Far from bemoaning it, Mill thought the persistence of conflict should be commended because it was conducive to progress and

²³ Stephen's (2015, 231) critique of the slowness and inefficiency of parliamentarism is further elaborated in an article he wrote about representative government where he compares 'the progress of a measure through Parliament to the progress of a cab along Fleetstreet on a day when the traffic is unusually heavy'.

self-development. Rather than attempting to suppress social antagonism once and for all, what Mill wanted was to institutionalise and regulate conflict in such a way as to stabilise representative democracy and channel citizens' agonistic passion for personal distinction in a socially useful way.

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