

J. S. Mill, Progress, and Liberal Reform

Following the death of his father in 1836, John Stuart Mill took sole charge of the *London and Westminster Review*. For the first time in his life, he felt free to write and publish articles that would have irked his censorious father. "I resolved henceforth," as he later put it in his *Autobiography*, "to give full scope to my own opinions and modes of thought, and to open the Review widely to all writers who were in sympathy with Progress as I understood it." In many ways, this comment defines the project of Mill's subsequent career as a politician and intellectual: to further the cause of Progress (or Improvement) as he understood it. But how precisely did Mill understand Progress? And what role did it play in his efforts to reform domestic society? These questions are of central importance to the understanding of Mill's political thought.

A project of liberal reform grounded in a conception of progress remains, at least from the perspective of contemporary liberal theory, a controversial and problematic endeavor. "Progress," whether conceived as an empirical truth or as a useful myth, has fallen out of favor for at least three reasons. One, the idea of progress presupposes some conception of a single, substantially better way of life a claim that pluralists (amongst others) find unacceptable. Two, the idea of progress encourages more "progressive" societies to deprecate, control, and subjugate "backward" societies a tendency that anti-imperialists (amongst others) criticize. And three, the idea of progress encourages us to believe that ethical, technological, and material advances go together a belief that realists (amongst others) dismiss as a modernist delusion. Whatever we might think of the merits of Mill's own conception of liberal reform, his account of progress--unduly neglected by many contemporary commentators--affords us an opportunity to reconsider these three familiar objections.

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