

Mill's Influence on Nineteenth Century American Thought

I propose to consider Mill's analysis of American political institutions and the American reactions to Mill's writings. As part of a larger project analysing the extent of the influence of English utilitarianism on the political and legal thought of the United States, this paper will situate Mill within this larger context.

While the broad focus I expect to be on the concept and practice of representative democracy, Mill's criticism of slavery and his writings on the American Civil War and the so-called Slave Power of the entrenched political establishment are the most obvious starting points for such an analysis because of the centrality of the issues to postbellum American political and social transformations. Thus, the paper will discuss American reaction to, inter alia, the Mill-Carlyle debate over the Negro question by using varying sources of public and legal opinion from the 1850s and 1860s.

Americans also reviewed Mill's publications on political economy, law reform, religion and other topical issues. But to what extent did Americans, on either side of these debates, appreciate the secular utilitarian foundations of Mill's views? Because the empiricism associated with Mill's writings ascended in American social thought by the end of the nineteenth century in the formulation of American Pragmatism, we might expect to find its early roots in the antebellum abolitionist movements. For example, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who began as a secular abolitionist, later became the most articulate exponent of anti-foundational jurisprudence. The depth and consistency of this type social thought is what I am most interested in uncovering here.

In short, this paper will seek to analyse Mill's thought on American democracy and its connection with slavery and then to understand how nineteenth-century American intellectuals reacted to and absorbed his ideas.

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