

John Stuart Mill on the Antipodes: Settler Violence against Indigenous Peoples and the Legitimacy of Colonial Rule

KATHERINE SMITS

Department of Political Studies, University of Auckland

J.S. Mill's support for colonialism and empire has attracted recent critical attention in the context of debates about his status as a modern egalitarian liberal, and liberalism's historical justification for empire. While Mill defended imperialism for most of his life on the grounds that it brought progress and civilization to historically backward peoples, his later correspondence reveals that he became increasingly concerned that settler violence against subordinated populations, notably in New Zealand, India and the West Indies, undermined the civilizing mission. Mill had been a strong advocate for settler societies in Australia and New Zealand, but came to fear that colonial abuses of power over indigenous peoples would vitiate the utilitarian benefits of colonial self-rule.

In July 1834, John Stuart Mill reviewed in *The Examiner* Edward Gibbon Wakefield's recently and anonymously published *The New British Province of South Australia*. Together with his father and his mentor, Jeremy Bentham, Mill had joined Wakefield's Colonization Society when it was formed the previous year, and his review was unsurprisingly positive. After endorsing Wakefield's praise for the climate and soil of the proposed new colony, Mill described with approval the proposed plan for settlement, which would, unlike past colonial projects, "transplant an entire society, and not a mere fragment of one [...]. This colony will be a civilized country from the very commencement."¹

Mill's support for colonies and empire has recently attracted considerable critical attention, in the light of two interconnected historical debates.² The first centres on current reassessment of the historical relationship between liberalism and imperialism. Critics of liberalism argue that its fundamental commitments to individual freedom, autonomy and government by consent are historically intertwined with and compromised by European assumptions of racial superiority, and the imperial power relations they underpinned. The second debate, which emerged in the lead-up to the bicentennial of his birth in 2006, focuses on Mill's status as a model for modern liberals. Martha Nussbaum has argued that Mill's critique of power and hierarchy and

¹ John Stuart Mill, "Wakefield's *The New British Province of South Australia*" in volume XVIII of *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 volumes, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto, 1963-1991), pp. 738-9. Mill's collected works are hereafter cited as *CW*.

² See for example: Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford, 1994); Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton, 2005); essays by Georgios Varouxakis, David Theo Goldberg, J. Joseph Miller and H.S. Jones in Bart Schultz and Georgios Varouxakis, eds, *Utilitarianism and Empire* (Lanham, MD, 2005); Margaret Kohn and Daniel O'Neill, "A Tale of Two Indias: Burke and Mill on Empire and Slavery in the West Indies and America," *Political Theory*, Vol. 34, 2 (April 2006), pp. 192-228.

his conception of happiness, particularly as demonstrated in his feminism, suggest a paradigm for modern progressive liberal thinking — including about ethnicity and race.³ Critics of this position nevertheless look to Mill's writing about race and empire for evidence of the limits of his — and that of Victorian liberalism more broadly — commitment to egalitarianism. David Goldberg examines Mill's writings on “the Negro question” and Jamaica to conclude that he is guilty of a “Euro-centric racism” more subtle and dangerous than the vituperative and overt racism of his interlocutor, Thomas Carlyle.⁴

Most critics of Mill's views on empire have focused on his writings on India, and to a lesser extent, on the West Indies. Mill served, as his father James Mill had done, as Examiner of Correspondence for the British East India Company, from the 1830s to the Company's dissolution in 1858. In both his professional work and his political writings, he defended British rule on the grounds that it brought improvement and enlightenment to the supposedly less advanced and “barbarian” peoples of India, who were incapable, he argued, of self-rule. Jennifer Pitts has argued that Mill and his father James Mill represented a shift in liberal attitudes towards more enthusiastic support of empire, away from the opposition of earlier Utilitarians such as Bentham, because of their belief in the historical ranking of civilizations, and the duty of more “advanced” societies to improve the “backward”.⁵ Mill has consequently been seen, as Eileen Sullivan argues, as one of the most prominent of the nineteenth century defenders of empire, and a key influence on later generations of liberal imperialists who followed him.⁶ Even his opposition to colonial misrule, in the Jamaica case, discussed below here, has been interpreted as reinforcing his endorsement of a more “benign” imperialism.⁷

Mill's attitudes towards colonial settlement in the Pacific have been treated as a separate and less significant matter — the product of his analysis of capitalist development, rather than deeply held convictions about race and progress. I argue here, however, that Mill's growing unease with the violent treatment of indigenous people by settler societies in the Pacific, combined with his condemnation of the British response to the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857, and Governor Eyre's brutal suppression of an uprising in Jamaica in 1865 led him, towards the end of his life, to change his views about the civilizing mission of imperialism. Mill's realization that the practice of imperial rule inevitably subverts what he saw as its progressive potential emerges predominantly in his correspondence during the 1860s, although we see suggestions for it in the last chapter of *Considerations on Representative Government*, published in 1861.

³ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Mill on Happiness: The Enduring Value of a Complex Critique” in Schultz and Varouxakis, *Utilitarianism and Empire*, pp. 107-24. I make a similar, if more historically oriented claim in “John Stuart Mill and the Politics of Identity,” *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 25, 2 (2004), pp. 298-324.

⁴ David Theo Goldberg, “Liberalism's Limits: Carlyle and Mill on ‘The Negro Question’” in Schultz and Varouxakis, *Utilitarianism and Empire*, pp. 125-35.

⁵ Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 133-46.

⁶ Eileen Sullivan, “Liberalism and Imperialism: J.S. Mill's Defense of the British Empire”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 44, 4 (1983), p. 605. For a similar argument about Mill's status as the doyen of liberal imperialism, see Bhikhu Parekh, “Decolonizing Liberalism” in Aleksandras Shtromas, ed., *The End of 'Isms'? Reflections on the Fate of Ideological Politics after Communism's Collapse* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 85-103.

⁷ See for example Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 150-59.

In the 1830s and 40s Mill was an enthusiastic advocate of colonization schemes for South Australia and New Zealand. He wrote in support of them, contributed money, and bought land in New Zealand. Like Wakefield and other Radicals, he saw settler colonies as arenas to both absorb surplus labour and capital and to allow for capital and market growth.⁸ His early support of colonial settlements in the Pacific developed into advocacy of the rights of these new colonies to self-government. But in light of the reports of colonial brutality against Australian and New Zealand indigenous peoples, Mill expressed increasing concern about race relations in the colonies. As evidence of settler violence and genocide mounted from the middle of the century, his enthusiasm for both the civilizing potential of the imperial project, and the unmitigated good of settler self-rule, gradually cooled. His correspondence during the 1860s suggests that Mill feared that settler violence compromised the progressive promise of imperialism, and challenged the utilitarian benefits of self-rule.

As I show here, Mill's writings on the Australian and New Zealand colonies warrant more critical attention than they have received, and demonstrate important shifts in his thinking about empire and civilizational hierarchy. While critics have treated his views on settler colonies and imperial rule over subordinated people as driven by distinct philosophical and political commitments, this distinction is broken down in Mill's later writings, as he considers the plight of indigenous peoples in the settler colonies. Where settlers were forced into contact with those they believed to be inferior (a qualification Mill used himself in his later writings) the very materialist drive for economic independence which justified immigration paradoxically overwhelmed the moral sense which characterized civilized societies, and the civilized reverted to barbarism themselves.⁹

Mill's concerns about the practical failures of imperialism, and their consequences for the legitimacy of empire would go on to influence later liberal anti-imperialist thinking, against the wave of pro-imperialism which dominated the late nineteenth century. The relationship between liberalism and imperialism is in fact more contingent than recent critics have suggested. While neither Mill nor later liberals abandoned their belief in the historically advanced status of western — particularly British — civilization, they expressed increasing skepticism that civilizational progress and good government could be transferred from one society to another via imperial rule. In the twentieth century, concerns about the practical effectiveness of even benign colonial rule were linked with Millian arguments for representative government and went on to form the basis of liberal support for decolonization.

Mill's ambivalence about imperialism does not suggest that his views on the equality of western and non-western societies should serve as a model for modern liberals. Recent debates about whether he or other figures in the history of political thought really were or were not racist inevitably collapse over whether any philosopher can fully escape the ideological assumptions of their age. Mill's arguments for equality and autonomy provided both a contingent justification for benign imperial rule, and the grounds for a critique of actually-existing imperialism. What is arguably most salutary to modern liberalism in the shift in Mill's thinking I trace here is his argument that

⁸ For a discussion of the economic arguments for colonization see Bernard Semmel, "The Philosophical Radicals and Colonialism," *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 21, 4 (1961), pp. 513-525.

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for AJPH for pointing out the correspondence in Mill's thought between political liberalism and civilization on the one hand, and economic liberalism and barbarism on the other.

ideal theory must be modified by practice, and his conviction that violence and brutality are inimical to the progressive self-development of both perpetrators and victims.

The Utilitarian Project and the Settler Colonies

Mill's early enthusiasm for the establishment of settler colonies in Australia and New Zealand was widely shared in the 1830s by Radicals and Utilitarians, for whom the arguments in favor of these colonies were relatively straightforward. Imperial rule more generally elicited a range of responses: Utilitarians' involvement at all levels of British government in India is well documented,¹⁰ but Bentham had publicly denounced the French and Spanish empires, in the pamphlets "Emancipate Your Colonies!" and "Rid Yourselves of Ultramarina", published in the 1790s. Bentham believed that colonial administration, however well-intentioned, was fatally susceptible to corruption and brutalization. Eli Halevy describes him as a life-long opponent of the colonial system, and Jennifer Pitts argues that there were deep differences on the issue between Bentham and his Utilitarian disciples.¹¹ Nevertheless, not only did Bentham support Wakefield's colonization scheme, he also drew up a Charter for South Australia — a colony designed, as he put it, with the utilitarian purpose of transferring "persons of indigence to persons of affluence".¹²

Both Bentham and Mill assumed the distinction commonly made in this period between settler colonies and dependent societies of subordinated peoples.¹³ As Mill put it in the last chapter of *Considerations on Representative Government*, there is a difference between "dependencies whose population is in a sufficiently advanced state to be fitted for representative government" — British settler societies — and those whose population will still benefit from benevolent colonial rule.¹⁴ The key difference here was the assumption propounded by Wakefield, that the lands in the Australasian colonies were *terra nullius* — unowned in any sense recognizable to the British.¹⁵ Their supporters took for granted that settler colonies could be constructed both to satisfy the needs of capital expansion and to implement Utilitarian principles, free of the need to accommodate and reform already-existing communities and social structures.¹⁶ In the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill advocated government support for colonization, arguing that the extension of civilization was the chief benefit of colonization, rather than economic considerations: "But even with a view to those considerations alone, the removal of the population from the overcrowded to the unoccupied parts of the earth's surface is one of those works of eminent social

¹⁰ See Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959).

¹¹ Eli Halevy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (London, 1972), p. 510; Pitts, "Jeremy Bentham: Legislator of the World?" in Schultz and Varouxakis, *Utilitarianism and Empire*, p. 57.

¹² Jeremy Bentham, Bentham papers, University College, London. Folder 8, 1831, p. 149.

¹³ For a summary discussion of the different uses of "colonialism" and "imperialism", see Duncan Bell, "Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 49, 1 (2006), p. 282, fn. 1. As Bell shows, neither colonialism nor imperialism as terms was widely used until the later part of the Victorian empire to refer to system of colonial settlement.

¹⁴ J.S. Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government" in John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford, 1991), p. 453.

¹⁵ Wakefield distinguishes settler colonies from "great dependencies" such as India. See "Letter IV in 'The Art of Colonization'", *The Collected Works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield*, ed. M.F. Lloyd Prichard (Auckland, 1969), pp. 766-7.

¹⁶ Note that Michael Levin reproduces the assumption that the Australasian colonies were settlements, rather than imposed rule upon indigenous peoples, and thus could be defended upon Utilitarian grounds. Michael Levin, *J.S. Mill on Civilization and Barbarism* (London, 2004), p. 43.

usefulness, which most require, and which at the same time best repay, the intervention of government.” Colonization, he concluded, “is the best affair of business, in which the capital of an old and wealthy country can engage”.¹⁷

While Mill emphasized in his review of Wakefield the desirability of establishing a model civilization along Utilitarian lines, his support for “systematic colonization” was mainly the product of economic concerns. As Bernard Semmel has shown, the support of Radicals for colonization of “unoccupied lands” was driven by their proto-socialist views on the new industrialization and the relationships it produced between master and worker.¹⁸ As industrial development gathered steam in the early nineteenth century, the polarization of wealth and the entrenchment of classes meant that smaller capitalists were driven out of business and into the working classes. In these circumstances, colonization promised not only to prevent social unrest in England, but to expand the class of small capitalists and land-owners. Mill concluded that colonies were essential to the healthy functioning of advanced economies, as they allowed capital both to expand and to be distributed more equally, and prevented the “stationary state”.¹⁹

Wakefield made almost no reference to the situation of indigenous peoples in South Australia, but by the time he launched his New Zealand plan, he confronted considerable opposition to his plan from both the Colonial Office and missionary groups alarmed at the effects of colonization upon the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. In 1837, the Report of the Commons Committee on Aborigines recommended that large-scale colonization schemes should be opposed until their impact upon indigenous peoples had been considered by Parliament. Wakefield — forced to acknowledge the Maori at least as occupiers — characterized them as “not savages, but a people capable of civilization”.²⁰ He took pains to persuade the Colonial Office and the newly formed Aborigines Protection Society that a positive relationship would develop between Maori and settlers, one which would improve upon the situation in Australia.²¹

Mill had nothing to say in the course of his advocacy of colonial settlement in the 1830s and 40s about its effects upon indigenous peoples — his writings on South Australia in particular and the economic benefits of colonization in general all refer repeatedly to “unoccupied lands”. He does not attempt to justify the scheme in terms already being applied to imperialism in India — the duty to bring improving rule to the uncivilized. In fact, despite his enthusiasm for the Australasian colonies in this period, when Mill set out his views on civilizational advancement and “savagery” in the essay *Civilization*, in 1837, he makes no reference to their indigenous peoples.²² The situation of the “savage” was still a matter of abstract speculation to him, rather than a colonial reality. Any “backwardness” in the colonies was presumed to reflect the manners and morals which resulted from large numbers of working class immigrants (whom

¹⁷ Mill, “Principles of Political Economy”, *CW* III, p. 963.

¹⁸ Semmel, “The Philosophic Radicals and Colonialism”, p. 521.

¹⁹ Mill, “Principles of Political Economy”, *CW* III, pp. 748-9, 752.

²⁰ Edward Gibbon Wakefield, letter to Charles Torlesse, 12 May 1837, quoted in Philip Temple, *A Sort of Conscience: The Wakefields* (Auckland, 2002), p. 190.

²¹ See the discussion in Peter Adams, *Fatal Necessity: British Intervention in New Zealand, 1830-1847* (Auckland, 1977).

²² This suggests that the influence of the conjectural histories of the Scottish Enlightenment on Mill’s “Civilization” is even more fundamental than Kohn and O’Neill suggest; “A Tale of Two Indias,” p.210.

Wakefield compares to “barbarians”).²³ Both Wakefield and Mill thought that the best emigrants for the new colonies were Chinese, or “hard-working and thrifty” Scotch peasants, rather than the Irish, escaping brutalized poverty.²⁴

Mill’s silence about the situation of indigenous peoples in the new colonies reflects in part his dislike of missionary activity and is typical of Radicals in the period.²⁵ What public interest there was in Britain about the issue reflected mobilized evangelical concerns; while there was active lobbying by groups such as the Aborigines Protection Society on the rights of native peoples in the period, public concern, as Patrick Brantlinger has shown, was mitigated by the “consoling belief” that such peoples were in any case self-extinguishing and not likely participants in the future of the colonies.²⁶ Mill had several Australian correspondents and retained an interest in the colonies there, for the rest of his life. But it is notable that he never directly commented on the plight of indigenous people in Australia, and made no reference to the New Zealand case until the 1860s.

The “Civilizing Mission”

The imperial project in India, in which Mill was so closely involved, required a different rationale from the settler colonies; here he advocated rule over subordinated peoples on the grounds of civilizational improvement. Any problem this might pose given his famous defence of liberty and self-determination, was nullified by his assumptions about the process of historical development; as we see in *On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government*, he advocates imperial rule over “barbarous” peoples, on the grounds that subordinated peoples had not yet reached the historical stage of civilizational development which would allow them to benefit from self-government.²⁷ Representative government as a value is subordinate to utility, and thus, liberty and self government are restricted to peoples who are:

in the maturity of their faculties [...] [W]e may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered in its nonage [...] Liberty as a principle has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne.²⁸

Anglo-Saxons are more historically advanced than other “races”, which cannot benefit from guarantees of personal liberty in the same way. Backward peoples could best be served by “enlightened despotism”.

The argument that societies were arrayed according to their stages on a civilizational ladder was increasingly common in Britain and France from the early to mid-19th century. Belief in a civilizational hierarchy did not necessarily justify empire — several critics of empire, such as Burke, argued that it was impossible to export ideas and structures to alien civilizations. Ironically, it was abolitionist discourse which, when grafted to civilizational hierarchy, tended to provide a liberal justification for imperial

²³ Wakefield, “A View of the Art of Colonization” in *Collected Works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield*, ed. Lloyd Prichard, pp. 837-839.

²⁴ Mill, letter to John Pringle Nichol, 30 August 1834, *CW* XII, p. 232.

²⁵ Mill, “Considerations on Representative Government”, p. 457.

²⁶ Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930* (Ithaca, 2003), p. 118.

²⁷ J.S. Mill, “On Liberty”, in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. Gray, pp. 14-15; *idem*, “Considerations on Representative Government”, pp. 453-4.

²⁸ Mill, “On Liberty”, pp. 14-15.

rule: abolitionists tended to see the white English in a paternalistic role, dedicated to helping the weaker subordinated peoples.²⁹ James Mill, following earlier Scottish thinkers, had argued that all societies could be ranged in a historical and moral hierarchy, and that British rule in India must be designed for a people who have “made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization”.³⁰ His son adopted the Saint-Simonian view of history as a dynamic and progressive process, and enthusiastically endorsed Guizot’s analysis of the historical development of European civilization which, he argued, had remained dynamic, while Asian civilizations had stagnated.³¹ In his early essays on “The Spirit of the Age”, and “Civilization”, he distinguishes “civilization” from “barbarism” and “savagery”. Civilized societies are first of all, those in which there is a significant degree of social cooperation which enables members to unite to repel external threats, and to foster social improvement and respect for law. Savage and barbarous societies, by contrast, were marked by extreme individualism, lack of concern with the public good, and individual and selfish action unrestrained by law.³²

The particular nature of Mill’s commitment to the “scale of civilizations” has been subject to special scrutiny lately, in the debate over Mill’s (and other liberals’) complicity in Victorian racism. Critics claim that Mill’s scale of civilizations is based upon notions of cultural superiority and inferiority which depend at some level upon racialized essential characteristics.³³ Jennifer Pitts has argued that John Stuart Mill’s concept of the scale of civilization is heavily influenced by his father’s; both, she claims, adapted older ideas to produce a less-sophisticated approach to the ranking of civilizations, that dismissed “less developed” societies as inferior, and tended in effect to essentialize race. Influenced by his father, Pitts contends, John Stuart Mill also rejected the complex recognition of different historical circumstances in favor of a crude dichotomy between savage and civilized.³⁴ He was thus more inclined to make evaluative judgments about different societies than were earlier thinkers. In both the Mills’ versions of the stages of civilization thesis, there is a new emphasis upon a single scale, and the distance of other societies from the high point on that scale — the van-guard society.³⁵ Moreover, Pitts argues, Mill emphasized the role played by the cognitive abilities of members of a society in determining where on the historical scale it fell. This, she asserts, led him to ignore the particularity of “uncivilized” societies, and to define them entirely in terms of the capacity of their members to understand the importance of diversity and the drive to social improvement.³⁶

While Pitts does not accuse Mill directly of racism, she suggests that he foreshadows the biological racist doctrines popularized in the later nineteenth century. In fact, Mill increasingly opposed these doctrines as they became more widespread. In his earlier writings, he vacillated to some degree on racial difference: he

²⁹ See Catherine Hall, “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains [...] to Africa’s Golden Sand’: Ethnicity, Race and Nation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England”, *Gender and History*, Vol. 5, 2 (Summer, 1993), p. 218.

³⁰ James Mill, *The History of British India* (London, 1848), vol. 2, p. 107.

³¹ J.S. Mill, “De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]”, *CW XVIII*, p. 197.

³² Mill, “Civilization”, *CW XVIII*, p. 120.

³³ See, notably, David Theo Goldberg, “Liberalism’s Limits: Carlyle and Mill on ‘The Negro Question’” in *Utilitarianism and Empire*, pp. 125-135.

³⁴ Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, p. 133.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-1. This is a similar argument as that made by Shirley Letwin concerning Mill’s analysis of internal differences in society, in *The Pursuit of Certainty* (Cambridge, 1965).

³⁶ Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 142-3.

assumed it as a fact, ascribed it largely to historical factors, but reserved some explanatory weight to inherent difference. In a letter to d'Eichthal written in 1839, Mill speaks approvingly of his friend's Saint-Simonian work, which argued for essential differences (which he saw as complementary) between the white and black races.³⁷ He asserts racial differences again in his review of Michelet's *History of France* in 1844, when he argues that alleged similarities between the French and the Irish cannot be explained by history and social circumstances alone, as these are so diverse in these two cases, but must be due to something inherent.³⁸ But Mill goes on in the same review to comment on Michelet's assessment of the success of Germanic tribes over French Celts: "We think that M. Michelet has here carried the influence of Race too far, and that the difference is better explained by diversity of position, than by diversity of character in the Races."³⁹ In the *Logic*, Mill proposed a new science of ethology, to investigate the range of social circumstances upon both national and individual character (a project that he never fulfilled).⁴⁰

As the popularity of racialist discourse grew in the mid-nineteenth century, Mill distanced himself from explaining national or individual character in terms of race, and increasingly minimized the influence of race in comparison to social circumstances. Georgios Varouxakis suggests that this shift was the result of Mill's realization of the uses to which racialist theories were being put.⁴¹ His views attracted public attacks from well-known exponents of racialism who, following Gobineau, claimed that racial characteristics determined character, and placed unavoidable limits upon what individuals could achieve.⁴² But they were consistent with Mill's positions since the mid 1840s. In his 1848 *Principles of Political Economy*, he writes: "Of all the vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effects of social and moral influences on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences."⁴³

While Mill did distinguish between different levels of mental development in assigning societies to the different stages of civilization, he insisted (increasingly, as I show below), that mental development was the product of historical circumstance, rather than inherent in race. This is why some civilizations — China is Mill's most developed example — had been once progressive, but had "stagnated" once plurality and diversity were crushed.⁴⁴ Indeed, Mill could hardly have feared that the same fate would befall Europe and the United States if he did not believe that social circumstances could profoundly affect the mental development of citizens. This distinction between racial essentialism and contingent historical development that Mill maintained would become crucially important in his later thought, when he considered violent colonial encounters, in which supposedly "backwards" peoples challenged the claims of the colonizers.

³⁷ Mill, Letter to d'Eichthal, *CW* XIII, p. 404.

³⁸ Mill, Review of Michelet's *History of France*, *CW* XX, p. 235.

³⁹ Mill, Review of Michelet's *History of France*, *CW* XX, p. 236.

⁴⁰ Mill, "A System of Logic", *CW* VIII, p. 869.

⁴¹ Georgios Varouxakis, *Mill on Nationality* (London, 2002), p. 47.

⁴² Varouxakis, *Mill on Nationality*, pp. 47-48.

⁴³ Mill, "Principles of Political Economy", *CW* II, p. 319.

⁴⁴ Mill, "Guizot's Essays and Lectures on History", *CW* XX, p. 270; "On Liberty", *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. Gray, pp. 79-80.

Colonial Violence and Imperial Legitimacy

Mill's views on the legitimacy of the imperial mission took an important turn from the late 1850s, as a result of three inter-related sets of events: the British response to the Sepoy Rebellion in India in 1857; the Jamaica crisis in the late 1860s; and the New Zealand land wars and what they revealed of treatment of indigenous peoples in the settler colonies. While critics have focused on India and Jamaica, the case of New Zealand forced Mill to reconsider his attitude not only towards settler colonies, but also towards civilizational ranking and improvement.

These events and Mill's responses to them must be seen in the context of changing attitudes towards the colonial mission, which reflected both increased racialism, as we have seen, and the decline in popular sympathy for the abolitionist discourse of racial equality, which Mill refers to himself in his *Autobiography*.⁴⁵ This meant less interest in "improving" subordinated races, and more of a focus on the "racial superiority" of the English, and the necessity of asserting strict colonial control over violent or irredeemably "savage" peoples. At the same time, Mill began to see himself increasingly as a public moralist and controversialist. Stefan Collini describes this last period in his life as a distinctive phase in his career, in which he addressed the political events and debates of the time, and cultivated his own role as a "partisan controversialist".⁴⁶ As he comments in a letter to Henry Chapman on the Maori: "On all these questions I am now under a special public obligation to make up my mind [...]"⁴⁷ His later writings convey a sense of urgent commitment to advancing arguments for justice and equality. It is in this context that we can trace a shift in Mill's thinking about empire and colony, away from their economic benefit to Britain, and towards their moral duties towards subordinated peoples.

In the case of the Sepoy Rebellion (which precipitated an end to his professional involvement with India and East India Company rule), Mill was shocked less by the actions of the rebels, and more by official and settler response to them. He reserved his indignation for the "monstrous excesses" committed in retaliation against the rebels, and the violent passions in Britain that supported these actions.⁴⁸ In this, he ran counter to the tide of public opinion: British newspapers had been full of stories of the vicious attacks and gruesome mutilations and torture supposedly committed by rebels against British women and children. There were immediate demands for revenge. While Mill does not discuss these alleged atrocities (some of which were afterwards found to be grossly exaggerated), he does refer in several letters to the changing attitudes and increased disrespect shown by the British in India towards Indians. In a letter to Charles Dilke he refers to the "insolence of the English, even in India, to the native population", expressing concern that it may threaten colonial administration.⁴⁹ Even apart from the overt violence of reaction to the Rebellion, Mill had been concerned about the iniquitous effects of colonial rule in India over the minds of the English. In his arguments against the handing over of rule in India to the Crown, he argued that colonial rule brought out the worst in British society — the desire to force British

⁴⁵ Mill, *Autobiography*, in *Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Jack Stillinger (New York, 1969), p. 160.

⁴⁶ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford, 1991), p. 142.

⁴⁷ Mill, letter to Henry Samuel Chapman, 7 January 1866, *CW XVI*, p. 1136.

⁴⁸ See for example Mill's letter to William Ireland, June 22, 1867, *CW XVI*, p. 1282.

⁴⁹ Mill, letter to Charles Dilke, 9 February 1869, *CW*, p. 1560.

ideas, particularly Christianity, upon the Indian population, and to advance the interests of the British community in India over the native population.⁵⁰

Mill's misgivings about the effects of imperial rule upon colonizers were reinforced by the Governor Eyre case, in which he took a highly public and controversial role. This case touched directly on the settler colonies: Edward Eyre, who presided as governor over the bloody suppression of a riot in Jamaica in 1865, had had extensive colonial service. He had served as Protector of Aborigines in South Australia, where he acquired a reputation for paternalistic attitudes towards the Aboriginal people, whom he believed to be in fast decline under colonial rule.⁵¹ After Australia, Eyre served from 1847 as lieutenant-governor of the South Island of New Zealand, where he continued his paternalist and accommodating policies towards the Maori, working under Governor Grey.

His transition in the public mind from paternalist defender of "helpless" indigenous people to enforcer of order against a "horde of remorseless savages"⁵² reflects the broader changes in British views of the purpose of imperial rule over the period from the 1830s to 1860s. By the time Eyre was appointed to Jamaica, attitudes towards colonized peoples had changed, as we have seen — in part in response to the Sepoy Rebellion, and also the New Zealand wars. "Natives" became seen as "irreclaimable savages",⁵³ and Eyre arrived in Jamaica primed to regard Jamaican blacks as hostile and potentially dangerous. When a minor riot broke out amongst free blacks in 1865, due mainly to the decline of the island's sugar economy, he treated the incident as the beginning of a widespread rebellion, sent in troops and declared military law. British troops executed and flogged several hundred people, and the mixed-race leader representative in the local legislature was hanged.⁵⁴

Controversy broke out in Britain over whether Eyre had been justified in enacting martial law and in the brutal suppression of the "rebellion" and the Jamaica Committee was formed to "uphold the obligation of justice and humanity towards all races beneath the Queen's sway", as well as to vindicate "the great legal and constitutional principles which have been violated in the late proceedings [in Jamaica] and deserted by the Government".⁵⁵ Mill was a founder member of the Committee, the Chair of which he assumed in 1866, and led the campaign to pursue criminal charges against Eyre (which were ultimately unsuccessful.) Supporters of Eyre invoked the recent Sepoy Rebellion, and the need to establish law and order to protect the British white settlers. Popular debate focused on whether black Jamaicans had the same rights and protections as the European British. The Liberal weekly *The Spectator* published an analysis of the issue in 1868, after Eyre was eventually pardoned, arguing: "The upper and middle classes of the English people [...] especially the latter [...] are positively enraged at the demands of negroes for equal consideration with Irishmen, Scotchmen and

⁵⁰ Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government", p. 457.

⁵¹ Edward John Eyre, *Journals*, quoted in Hall, *Civilizing Subjects*, p. 40.

⁵² Editorial, *The Times*, 30 January 1866, p. 8.

⁵³ See the Wellington *Independent*, 10 September 1868: "Modern history teaches us that irreclaimable savages, who rendered colonization impossible, and the lives of peaceful settlers insecure, have been, in the interests of society, exterminated [...]". Quoted in James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians; or The Black War of Van Diemen's Land* (New York, 1870), p. 77.

⁵⁴ For an account of these events, see Bernard Semmel, *Jamaican Blood and Victorian Conscience* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), pp. 46-55.

⁵⁵ In Mill, Appendix E, *CW XXI*, p. 423.

Englishmen.” It concluded that Eyre had been pardoned despite the official acknowledgment that he had made mistakes, because only “negroes” had suffered.⁵⁶

The importance Mill attached to this case is clear in his parliamentary speeches and letters, all of which refer to the fundamental principles firstly, that officers of the Empire must be bound by its laws, and secondly, that British subjects were entitled to constitutional protections regardless of race. Critics have argued that Mill opposed Eyre’s actions only as a singular case of the abuse of an otherwise benign system of colonialism.⁵⁷ But in fact, he saw the Jamaica disaster as the product of colonial rule, linked to other practical failures of the imperial dream of progress. In a letter written in this period, he refers, as in his *Autobiography*, to the Eyre case as concerning the rule of law, and goes on to draw connections between it and: “the atrocities perpetrated in the Indian Mutiny and the feelings which supported them at home. Then came the sympathy with the lawless rebellion of the Southern Americans in defence of an institution which is the sum of all lawlessness, as Wesley said it was of all villainy [...]”⁵⁸ He had long been critical of settlers in the West Indies, on whom much of the blame rested for British middle-class support for the South.⁵⁹ As in the case of India, it is the attitudes of local Britons who make enlightened colonial rule impossible.

The Sepoy Rebellion and the Eyre case were public catalysts for the development of Mill’s opinions on colonial rule, but it is in the case of the New Zealand colonies that he most directly confronted the contradictions between his earlier support for colonialism, and the realities of colonial rule, and its potential for improving government.⁶⁰ By the 1860s, Mill had come to see the question of “what to do with the Aborigines” as “the universal colonial question”.⁶¹ Early missionaries to New Zealand had, like Wakefield, regarded the Maori as eminently “civilizable”, and susceptible to improvement,⁶² but while the early Maori-British relationship was collaborative, the British assumption that they would inevitably gain total control over the islands, and the demand for more land for settlers, fuelled by schemes like Wakefield’s, meant that this could not continue.⁶³ From 1840, the scale of British immigration meant that Europeans could challenge the Maori assumption of shared control, and assert full sovereignty. The Northern War, fought in 1845-1846, and other skirmishes left neither side with a clear victory. The ensuing relative peace lasted from 1860, but warfare broke out again. It was not until the Waikato War of 1863-4 that the British managed to defeat the combined Maori tribes, although the Maori continued to retain control over some areas of land.

Until the late 1840s, British writers on New Zealand had tended to share Wakefield’s position on the Maori: they ranked them high on the various race hierarchies — although, of course, below whites. They remarked on their capacity for

⁵⁶ Quoted in Semmel, *Jamaican Blood*, p. 171.

⁵⁷ Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 153-8.

⁵⁸ Mill, letter to David Urquhart, 4 October 1866, *CW XVI*, p. 1206.

⁵⁹ Mill, “The Contest in America”, *CW XXI*, p. 129.

⁶⁰ J. Joseph Miller argues that Mill’s opposition to Eyre stemmed from his belief that imperialism was only legitimate in so far as it brought good government to the subordinated. See “Chairing the Jamaica Committee: J.S. Mill and the Limits of Colonial Authority” in *Utilitarianism and Empire*, pp. 155-78.

⁶¹ Mill, letter to Chapman, 7 January 1866, *CW XVI*, p. 1136.

⁶² See for example, Samuel Marsden, *Letters and Journals*, ed. John R. Elder (Dunedin, 1932), p. 122.

⁶³ James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland, 1986), pp. 302-304.

improvement, their acceptance of Christianity, their eagerness for European contact. This was largely to attract support for missionary work and to encourage settlers (who would otherwise be interested in North America or Australia).⁶⁴ But once warfare began in earnest, and the Maori scored some significant successes, it was hard to maintain this “positive” image. By the 1860s, Maori resistance tended to be seen as evidence that the “civilizing mission” was doomed to fail. Many “humanitarians” deplored continued Maori resistance and violence, and supported the Waikato War and confiscation of Maori land.⁶⁵ The conflict in New Zealand, which was regularly reported in the British press, was uppermost in popular commentary when the Jamaica crisis broke out, and helped to justify the widely-held view that Britain had to be strong and militarily decisive in putting down unruly “natives”.

At this point, the relationship between the British and indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand had come to embody the exploitative power relations guaranteed by the discourse of racial superiority, against which Mill had set himself. At the same time, he was drawn by his associates in New Zealand to comment on the move towards full self-government in the colony — which he had seen as an appropriate end from its beginnings. In the final chapter of *Considerations on Representative Government*, he remarked that Britain should have allowed the settler colonies self-government through representative institutions, but had refrained from doing so because of the pernicious view that colonies should be captive markets for the industrial production of Britain. Only in the wake of Lord Durham’s Report has Britain recognized the need to grant colonies the fullest measure of self-government of which they are capable.⁶⁶

But self-government would mean that management of settler relations with the Maori was entirely in local hands — a prospect which, given the record in the West Indies, caused Mill (and the Colonial Office) great concern. In a letter written to the New Zealand jurist Henry Chapman in 1866, he considered the question of “what to do with the Maori”. He had hoped that this would be less of a problem in New Zealand than Australia because of the “civilizability” of the Maori, and their “higher qualities”. But this hope, he commented, had been defeated by the demands of colonists for more land (not, as opinion had it in New Zealand, by the “primitive savagery” of the Maori). So: “here is the burthen on the conscience of legislators at home. Can they give up the Maoris to the mercy of the more powerful and constantly increasing, section of the population? Knowing what the English are, when they are left alone with what they think to be an inferior race, I cannot reconcile myself to this.”⁶⁷ Mill goes on to comment: “Perhaps the proofs which the Maoris have given that they can be formidable enemies may have produced towards them in the colonists a different state of mind from the overbearing and insolent disregard of the rights and feelings of inferiors which is the common characteristic of John Bull when he thinks he cannot be resisted.”⁶⁸

In another letter around this time, Mill expresses the same point except to reject outright the judgment of colonized peoples as inferior. If the New Zealand colonists are not disposed to be unjust towards indigenous peoples, Mill writes, they are “the only ‘Englishmen under new conditions’ who do not think any injustice or tyranny whatever

⁶⁴ Belich, *The New Zealand Wars*, p. 327.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁶⁶ Mill, “Considerations on Representative Government”, pp. 447-9.

⁶⁷ Mill, letter to Chapman, 7 January 1866, *CW XVI*, p. 1136.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

legitimate against what they call inferior races [...]”.⁶⁹ This correspondence took place before the events in Jamaica — after which his pessimism about colonial rule only increased. In a letter written in 1869, he comments: “[...] the common English abroad — I do not know if in this they are worse than other people — are intensely contemptuous of what they consider inferior races, and seldom willingly practise any other mode of attaining their ends with them than bullying and blows.”⁷⁰ As racialist theories increased in popularity in the 1860s, Mill emphasized more and more that less influence should be ascribed to race, and more to historical circumstances. He criticizes Dilke, in a letter written in 1869, for ascribing too much influence to race and climate in explaining national character. In fact, education, legislation and social circumstances are “of prodigiously greater efficacy than either race or climate or the two combined”.⁷¹

The bind in which Mill finds himself over support for independence for the settler colonies — a legacy of his early support for colonialism on economic and utilitarian grounds — and his growing belief in the impossibility of enlightened imperial rule of indigenous peoples, is in fact in evidence as early as *Considerations* in 1861. Uday Mehta has described this chapter as “a striking instance of the embattled commitments of someone who was profoundly invested in liberty and representative government in the face of colonialism”.⁷² In Mehta’s view, the conflict Mill faces is between his desire to argue for representative government for the white colonies, and his commitment to maintaining imperial control in Britain’s political and economic interests. But as I argue here, it can also be read at a deeper and more deconstructive level as a conflict between Mill’s commitment to self-government on the grounds of justice and utility, and his fear that the very qualities which should guarantee self-government are undermined by the brutalizing experience of direct rule over subordinated peoples.⁷³

Mill begins by advocating self-government for the settler colonies, and then launches into a critique of direct governmental rule in India, which leads to injurious interference with the customs of indigenous peoples. Such interference is driven by the political influence of local English settlers, who have “friends at home, have organs, have access to the public [...] any complaint by an Englishman is more sympathetically heard”. Mill goes on:

Now, if there be a fact to which all experience testifies, it is that when a country holds another in subjection, the individuals of the ruling people who resort to the foreign country to make their fortunes, are of all the others those who most need to be held under powerful restraint.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Mill, letter to Robert Pharazyn, 21 August 1866, *CW* XVI, p. 1196.

⁷⁰ Mill letter to A.M. Francis, 8 May 1869, *CW* XVII, p. 1599.

⁷¹ Mill, letter to Charles Dilke, *CW* XVII, p. 1563.

⁷² Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, p. 70.

⁷³ I should note here the contrast between Mill’s arguments in *Considerations*, and the essay “A Few Words on Non-Intervention”, published two years previously (*CW*, XXI, p. 118). In this latter, Mill reiterates his theory of civilizational development, and claims that “barbarian peoples” need not be treated with the same rules of international morality as “civilized nations”. This is Mill’s strongest statement of the mental inferiority of “barbarian” peoples, and is much relied upon by his critics. It is interesting to note that Mill does not repeat his discussion of the “minds” of subordinated peoples in the later *Considerations* — where he in fact compares the way in which imperial rules appear to the minds of the ruled and rulers, without reference to the superiority of one and the inferiority of the other. Levin argues that the essay should be seen as a less-than-satisfactory first draft of the last chapter of *Considerations on Representative Government*. (Levin, *Mill on Civilization and Barbarism*, p. 49.

⁷⁴ Mill, “Considerations on Representative Government”, p. 458.

Settlers tend to think of colonized peoples as “mere dirt under their feet”. Not only residents, but even young and inexperienced officers of the colonizing government were subject to this attitude. Mill goes on to defend indirect expert rule over colonies, according to the model of the British East India Company. The logic of self-government for the settler colonies held only as long as colonial treatment of indigenous peoples could be ignored — and the impossibility of ignoring this led to Mill’s increasing loss of enthusiasm for settler self-rule. In a letter to Chapman written in 1870, he writes that he would not oppose self-government for New Zealand, but would do nothing to encourage it.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Mill’s comments on the treatment of subordinated peoples in the Australasian colonies are confined to letters — he wrote no newspaper articles on the subject, and they do not feature in his philosophical works (all of which were in any case written before the mid-1860s). But it would be wrong to infer from this that they are of minor importance. Settler mistreatment of subordinated peoples is a major concern of Mill’s from the late 1850s, as I have argued, and it is in his comments on the situation in New Zealand in particular that he acknowledges the implications of events not only there, but also in India and the West Indies, for his defence of imperialism. While we can only speculate on the reasons he did not publicly and specifically attack colonial practices in the Australasian colonies, the animosity directed against him for his campaign against Eyre must have been a significant factor. Mill lost his seat in Parliament in 1868 largely as a result of public disapproval of his work on the Jamaica Committee. Without doubt, Mill knew that he was swimming against the tide of public opinion in his critique of imperial practices, and this was particularly the case for the settler colonies, which were held up as major British successes in the late nineteenth century. There is an irony in the fact that, by this time, developments in the colonies were widely understood to confirm Mill’s early optimism for them. The settler colonies came to be seen as laboratories of progress and the best future hope of Britain — a view enthusiastically endorsed in 1883 by J.R. Seeley in *The Expansion of England*.⁷⁶

The trajectory of Mill’s views on the Australasian colonies, from early support on economic and utilitarian grounds, to concern about human rights abuses, traces one of the several paths which liberal political thinking took over the course of this period. Mill was, as his first biographer Alexander Bain commented, a life-long critic of abuses of power,⁷⁷ and established the grounds for a critique of power relations which modern liberals can still deploy. The early Radical concern with equality and democratization was crucially extended outside the bounds of middle-class Englishmen by Mill’s defences both of women’s equality, and the rights of subordinated peoples under empire. This is easy to lose sight of, in the triumphalism of liberal imperialism which dominated late nineteenth century political thinking. But later liberal critics of imperialism reiterate Mill’s concerns that notwithstanding the historically superior status of British civilization, imperial rule in practice fails to advance the subordinated, and in fact leads to the rebarbarization of imperial rulers.⁷⁸ These concerns are

⁷⁵ Mill, letter to Henry Chapman, 14 January 1870, *CW* XVII, p. 1685.

⁷⁶ J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (London, 1931).

⁷⁷ Alexander Bain, *John Stuart Mill* (London: 1882,) p. 130.

⁷⁸ Herbert Spencer uses the term rebarbarization to refer to the effects of imperialism and jingoism upon British society. See: “Rebarbarization,” in Spencer, *Facts and Comments* (London, 1902).

explicitly voiced by New liberals J.A. Hobson and L.T. Hobhouse later in the century, both of whom called for colonies to be handed over to international trusteeship.⁷⁹

The Australasian colonies were critical to Mill's thought, because they expressed clearly the relationship between the right to self-government and liberty on the part of "advanced and civilized" societies, and the realities of racial subordination. In the case of India, Mill had been able to convince himself that at least the supposedly impartial and professional servants of the East India Company were dedicated to ruling in the best interests of local peoples. In Australia and New Zealand, the very peoples on whose behalf he had argued the right to self-government were by their own actions proving themselves incapable of good government over others. By the end of his life, Mill was forced to acknowledge, however briefly, that the realities of power, so passionately documented in gender relations in *The Subjection of Women*, equally subverted any hopes for progress in the paternalistic government of other peoples.

⁷⁹ See J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 2005); L.T. Hobhouse, *Democracy and Reaction* (London, 1904).