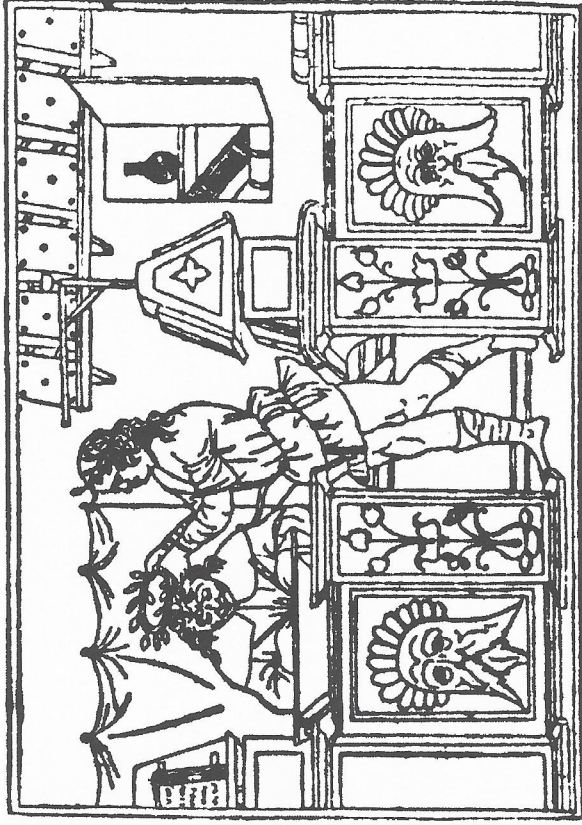


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## BOOK REVIEWS



arguably constitutes an existential threat to anyone and everyone. That move thus puts 'economic and ecological devastation' into the frame, and points out that this is 'largely wrought by the hegemonic and wealthy states of the world' (p. 167). Much of the discourse of the anthropocene, and thus of the humanity vs the planet, and of the 'species' vs itself, thus dissolves. That universalization simply disguises the extent to which humans are already fractured, not just into nation-states — however they might be ranked on a civilizational or 'developmental' scale — but into the class inequalities and struggles through which Westernized, Europeanized settler societies have mobilized their aggressive commercialisms. In Graf's words the collective subject is not 'humanity'; it is 'modern capitalist civilisation with its imperial constitution and constitutive inequalities' (p. 181).

That concluding discussion nicely aligns with Graf's overarching methodological strategy: moving away from what 'humanity' is to what humans *do*, and very importantly, who *does* what to whom. There are indeed universal crimes that offend and disadvantage all humanity, but humanity is not a universalized equality of victimhood that validates authoritative allocations of power to some at the expense of others, in whatever ways that that paternalistic and patronising moral egalitarianism is wrapped up. Rather Graf is arguing that reasoning like a planet requires thinking like a Marxist. Or anyway a strategy for critical thinking outside the too familiar and too comfortable terms of liberal-minded individualism and property-minded jurisprudence.

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**Helen McCabe**, *John Stuart Mill, Socialist* (McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal, 2021), 368 pp., \$39.95 CAD, ISBN 9780228005933.

Helen McCabe states that the purpose of her book 'is to bring to the world something previously unseen — Mill the socialist' (p. 17). Such endeavour might seem odd to those who came to know Mill as the paragon of (market) liberalism and individuality. Yet McCabe claims that even though Mill 'was undoubtedly a champion of liberty . . . he was also fundamentally committed to utility, progress, security, equality, and fraternity'. She therefore seeks to demonstrate that Mill's self-characterization of being 'under the general designation of Socialist' (p. 4) was justified and met with disbelief only because of a narrowing reception which privileges *On Liberty* over the vast rest of Mill's political writings. It is because of such selective reading that previous scholars considered Mill to be either inconsistent or prone to the insinuations of his (socialist) wife. But according to McCabe, such allegations become moot once we realize that 'Mill built all six of his core principles into a consistent, nuanced, and socialist whole' (p. 5).



The author makes her case in five carefully crafted and meticulously researched chapters. The first chapter sets the stage by detailing how Mill's estrangement from philosophic radicalism in the wake of his mental crisis and his alignment with the Saint-Simonians made him reassess the feasibility and desirability of socialism. McCabe argues that the contact with Saint-Simonian thought brought about decisive changes in Mill's philosophy of history and political economy. Specifically, the Saint-Simonian differentiation between organic and critical periods offered Mill a new outlook on civil progress, which strengthened his view of philosophic radicalism as something transitory he consequently sought to replace. The subsection on Mill's political economy will be of great interest to scholars of history of economic thought as it delineates the foundation of Mill's famous differentiation between the laws of production and the laws of distribution of wealth. McCabe demonstrates how this observation developed from Mill's new philosophy of history, which made him see distributive outcomes as 'the product of a particular stage of human progress. A feudal society is bound by the same basic fecundity of land as a modern society . . . how a given society distributes the resources gained from that same land must vary as greatly as its political organization does' (p. 32). In sum, McCabe underlines that Mill's appropriation of Saint-Simonian elements opened up a new 'conceptual "space" for his own form of socialism to develop' (p. 40).

Chapter 2 dwells on Mill's criticism of capitalism to set straight previous (mis-)conceptions of Mill as *the* spokesperson of economic liberalism. McCabe underlines that Mill 'had concerns about the existing regime of individual property, and about such regimes more broadly' (p. 44). He was hence aware not only of problems of contemporary capitalism but also of more fundamental issues which he thought would arise under *any* system of private property, like rising inequality or the limited freedom of wage-labourers. McCabe establishes Mill's gradual alignment with socialist thought via a close comparative reading of the different editions of Mill's *Principles*. This, in combination with her careful assessments of both Mill and previous Mill scholarship, makes a fascinating reading.

That McCabe's book is no appropriation of one of modern capitalism's most cherished thinkers becomes clear in Chapter 3, which details Mill's assessment of contemporary forms of socialism. McCabe stresses that 'Mill was not an uncritical advocate of any of the forms of socialism extant in his day' (p. 94). In fact, he found both socialists critiques of capitalism and socialist schemes *per se* lacking. This made him develop a quite unique form of socialism — or did it? McCabe informs us that seeing Mill as a dyed-in-the-wool liberal relies on equating socialism merely with Marxism. But given the immense variety in socialist thought, 'Mill had no more serious differences with contemporary socialists than they had with one another' (p. 127). This becomes evident especially in Mill's attitude towards competition: he

argued against Blanc and Owen that competition is far from being 'a system of extermination' (p. 104), as it increases wages in the long run. McCabe shows that Mill shares this and similar convictions with other notable socialists of his day to conclude that Mill's reservations about *some* socialist claims do 'not separate him from *all* contemporary socialists' (p. 106); and although Mill considered the economic reasoning of most socialists faulty, he found socialism *per se* normatively attractive as it addressed many issues he considered inherent to capitalism.

Chapter 4 addresses McCabe's initial claim that Mill built his core principles 'into a consistent, nuanced, and socialist whole' (p. 5). McCabe aligns with scholars like Oskar Kurer, Piers Norris Turner and Joseph Persky in claiming that it was Mill's commitment to progress that led him towards socialism. But she pursues a novel account insofar as she aims 'to further recent debate regarding the nature of Mill's egalitarianism'. Additionally, McCabe wants 'to emphasize something that is missing from existing accounts: Mill's commitment to social harmony, to "fraternity," and to a particular social ethos that is not just tolerant and open, but communal, and concerned with the common good' (p. 140). This is achieved by means of an extensive and careful analysis of Mill's five 'secondary principles' that lie at the heart of his political philosophy: progress, security, liberty, equality and fraternity. The subsections on Mill's secondary principles offer a nuanced and amazing account of how their implementation bring about a society that is essentially socialist in nature. McCabe continues to challenge previous readings of Mill by declaring that especially 'Mill's commitment to liberty caused him to move away from the view he is traditionally seen as endorsing — that of *laissez-faire* capitalism and a solely "negative" understanding of freedom — toward a kind of liberty that was not only compatible with socialism but required socialism for its realization' (p. 146).

In Chapter 5, McCabe seeks to accomplish the seemingly impossible task of sketching Mill's own utopia. After all, we 'do not find a detailed blueprint for future societies in Mill, of the kind beloved by many of his socialist contemporaries' (p. 6). Yet McCabe holds that we do find sufficient clues from which to infer Mill's social ideal. Her following detective work draws on *Principles of Political Economy* (including its famous chapter 'On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes' from the 1852 edition), *Autobiography*, *Considerations of Representative Government*, but also on less-than-usual suspects like *Claims of Labour* and *Three Essays on Religion*. McCabe shows that Mill's utopia is not limited to the economy but also embraces political and governmental institutions: Mill envisioned a society where people worked in cooperative associations, enjoyed state provision of those goods and services which 'tended to monopoly' (p. 205), and were egalitarian also in their family life. His socialism is hence no aberration but the natural result of his economic and feminist thought. McCabe's qualification



that 'Mill remained a decentralized socialist who preferred local, small-scale, communal arrangements to state provision' (p. 206) reminds the reader once again that there might be more things between Marxism and *laissez-faire* than there are usually dreamt of in Mill scholarship.

The book's *Conclusion* bears its name somewhat inappropriately as it far exceeds the usual summary in addressing three remaining concerns that readers might still have about Mill's socialism. Firstly and secondly that it was either short-lived or owed to his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill. Both objections build on the idea that Mill had given up his socialism by 1859 — the year of the publication of *On Liberty*. This leads to the third concern McCabe rightly identifies as the focal point of the discussion, namely that 'people resist the idea of Mill's socialism largely because they either cannot believe or do not want to credit that a socialist could have written the foundational textbook of liberalism' (p. 243). McCabe skilfully refutes all three of these concerns by means of a close comparative interpretation of key passages in works like *Principles* and *Chapters on Socialism* to show that Mill's socialism was neither temporary nor inconsistent. Regarding Mill's authorial relationship with Harriet Taylor, McCabe rightly states that a 'much more accurate understanding of their political philosophy, and of their writing relationship, poses an interesting challenge to scholars and also to politicians and citizens: Mill and Taylor were *both* socialists — and they both wrote *On Liberty*' (p. 252). According to McCabe, we should take this as a starting point for re-evaluating our views of both Mill and socialism. She concludes that *On Liberty* is compatible with Mill's socialism insofar as his 'commitment to liberty informed and shaped his commitments to equality and fraternity . . . just as those commitments shaped and informed his concept of liberty' (p. 255). Maybe this is precisely what makes Mill's political philosophy so unique and hence difficult to categorize: his is a socialist utopia that seeks to enhance rather than curb individuality.

But *John Stuart Mill, Socialist* does more than provide a fresh perspective in a long-lasting feud. McCabe emphasizes that challenging received perceptions of Mill is only one task of her book, the other being to introduce 'a vision of the future that I think has much to recommend it but that has been forgotten and overlooked by generations of reformers since Mill's *Autobiography* was first published and his self-identification first dismissed' (p. 268). In dissolving the supposed contradictions in Mill's thought and questioning the usual conceptualization of socialism, McCabe's remarkable book offers a powerful and convincing argument not only for seeing Mill as a socialist, but also for rethinking our political categories. Especially for its careful treatment of the relation between Mill's secondary principles, this book is highly relevant for both historians of ideas and political philosophers, whether with or without socialist leanings.

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