

J. S. Mill's Political Thought

A Bicentennial Reassessment

Edited by

NADIA URBINATI

Columbia University

ALEX ZAKARAS

University of Vermont



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Method of Citation

All page references to the writings of J.S. Mill are to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (33 volumes), John M. Robson, General Editor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991). They are written as follows: CW XVIII: 266, for *Collected Works*, Volume XVIII, page 266.

Mill and the Imperial Predicament

Karuna Mantena

I

In the late pamphlet titled “England and Ireland” (1868), J. S. Mill perceptively noted the tenuous grounds underlying even the most confident presumptions of liberal imperialism in nineteenth-century Britain. Written during a period of intense Fenian activity in Britain and Ireland – when popular perceptions of Irish political resistance were less than sympathetic – the pamphlet contained pointed reflections on the root causes of the deteriorating political situation in Ireland as well as Mill’s most searching analysis of the fraught dynamics of imperial power and ideology. Of English attitudes towards its civilizing project in Ireland, he wrote,

we, or our ruling classes, thought, that there could be no boon to any country equal to that of imparting these [English] institutions to her, and as none of their benefits were any longer withheld from Ireland, Ireland, it seemed, could have nothing more to desire. What was not too bad for us, must be good enough for Ireland, or if not, Ireland or the nature of things was alone in fault. (CW VI, 511)

In marking the ways in which the project of imperial liberal reform when faced with resistance or disappointment shifted the burden of responsibility for this failure onto colonized societies themselves, Mill’s critical portrait exposed a fragility at the heart of the liberal imperial project. In its disavowal, in locating responsibility solely with “Ireland or the nature of things,” liberal imperialism revealed at once the limits to its own discourse of ethical rule and its persistent blindness to these limits.

Mill himself was not immune to accusations of blindness, and, despite his occasional misgivings on aspects of British imperial policy, Mill consistently defended the empire and the prestige it conferred to be “a great advantage to mankind” (CW XVII: 767). Indeed, Mill’s defense of empire, one that remained remarkably consistent throughout his writings and political career,

has been seen as the apotheosis of “liberal imperialism” itself. Mill’s account represented an important and articulate justification of liberal imperialism but it also, in its internal tensions and elaboration, contained some key and characteristic vulnerabilities of the discourse of liberal empire, vulnerabilities that would become increasingly apparent in the changing political and intellectual climate of Victorian Britain.

One of the most important features of late Victorian debates about empire is the degree to which the vision of liberal empire enunciated by Mill (and his predecessors) had ceased to carry the political weight it had previously enjoyed. In the wake of a series of imperial crises, the most important of which were the Indian Mutiny (1857–9) and the Morant Bay rebellion (1865), the liberal discourse of empire became subject to mounting suspicion. Liberal imperialism, as a distinctive theory of imperial legitimacy, was founded on a specific link between a project of liberal reform or improvement and the ends of empire. This idiom of improvement (or civilizing project), which had formed the ethical horizon of liberal imperialism, became precisely the main target of criticism. In questioning both the practical and theoretical possibility of a genuine project of improvement and modernization, late Victorian critics of liberal imperialism provoked a broad-ranging transition in imperial ideology. From a “universalist” stance in which imperial rule was seen as necessarily imbued with a transformative dimension, a new emphasis on ingrained cultural and racial differences became ever more decisive in imperial debates. Moreover, this profound shift in attitudes was enabled, in part, by an opening up of the fissures of liberal imperialism itself, exposing the internal tensions in the theoretical claims of liberal imperialism and the tenuous grounds of liberal imperial confidence, both of which were increasingly exploited by liberal empire’s sharpest critics.

Although this chapter focuses specifically on the vulnerabilities of liberal imperialism in nineteenth-century Britain, I hope to also highlight a more general dynamic common perhaps to all forms of universalist defenses of empire. At the peak of imperial confidence in nineteenth-century Britain, when the project of liberal reform encountered resistance, its universalism easily gave way to harsh attitudes about the intractable differences between people, the inscrutability of other ways of life, and the ever-present potential for racial and cultural conflict. When the moral vision of civilization was challenged, when it produced consequences that do not fit neatly into its singular vision of progress, the error was understood to lie less with structure of imperial power than in the nature of colonized societies themselves. Resistance, especially political resistance, when refracted through the imperial

lens, was interpreted as a deep-seated cultural intransigence to universal norms of civilization. The ways in which liberal confidence and capaciousness could slide into moral disavowal, disillusionment, and an unforgiving stance towards others, I would argue, reveals an instability internal to the structure of imperial ideology. And the oscillation between universalist justifications and culturalist alibis, between viewing colonized societies as either amenable or resistant to transformation, may prove to be a necessary and general feature of the political logic of empire.

Mill's views on empire, especially in recent times, have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Sullivan 1983; Zastoupil 1994; P. Mehta 1996; Habibi 1999; U. Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005; Schultz and Varouxakis 2005). Two conundrums continue to animate interpretations of Mill's justification of empire. The first pertains to a more general concern with how Mill's liberalism, his defense of liberty and representative government, can be reconciled with his arguments for the necessity of imperial rule over non-European peoples, especially with respect to British rule in India. Rather than seeing these positions as anomalous, commentators instead have emphasized the ways in which Mill's views of empire were fundamentally consistent with his larger moral, philosophical, and theoretical commitments. Mill's conceptualization of and investment in hierarchical conceptions of civilization and progress, in particular, have been singled out as the theoretical terrain upon which Mill simultaneously enunciated his ideals of liberal democracy at home as well as justified forms of imperial despotism abroad. If the justification of empire was in large part compatible with the theoretical core of Mill's liberalism, this consistency raises a number of important and pressing questions about the nature and potential limits of liberal political theory (Parekh 1994; Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005).

The second related conundrum focuses more narrowly on how to make sense of the totality of Mill's political positions on different facets of imperial policy. Evaluations of Mill's views of empire can be remarkably different depending on whether one lays emphasis on his positions on slavery and abolition, the situation in Ireland, and the Eyre controversy in Jamaica or on his views of non-European societies and his defense of East India Company rule in India (Miller 2005; Varouxakis 2005). Concentrating on the former often reveals a more principled, progressive Mill, more in line with the received view of his overall politics and political theory. By contrast, focusing on Mill's work as a Company servant and his vision of world divided between civilized and barbarian peoples produce an altogether more parochial Mill. Both aspects of Mill's work, however, were tied together by a set of core ideas about the purpose of imperial rule and ethics of empire. This is not to

downplay the differences between Mill's view on India and Ireland. Rather, what rendered Mill's positions on Eyre and Ireland admirable is the way in which they stood out against a changing political climate that was increasingly turning against such ethical discourses. And to make sense of these "two Mills" requires an attention to the nature of that shift as one that can be understood from within the theoretical fissures of the liberal project itself. In other words, Mill's articulation of a liberal defense of empire was in a sense both the apotheosis and denouement of the project of liberal imperialism. As the political critique of liberal imperialism gained ground, what became clear was that the theoretical tensions and instabilities internal to Mill's formulation itself could be usefully exploited to undermine and eclipse the ethical core of his arguments. In this regard, Mill stands as a crucial transitional figure in the transformation of imperial ideology from a "universalist" to a "culturalist" stance by the end of the nineteenth century.

In this sense, whereas many interpreters and critics of Mill have importantly investigated the relationship between Mill's liberalism and his defense of empire, I am here more interested in the instabilities inherent in his account of legitimate imperial rule itself. Mill's account of the grounds of liberal empire attempted to conjoin an ethical discourse of improvement towards self-government and with a philosophy of history which, at the same time, revealed the precarious and slow nature of progress towards civilization. The distance between these two aspects, that is, the gap between the theoretical commitment to improvement and the practical account of the limitations to progress in barbarous societies, would be exploited by critics of liberal empire to both sever the link between empire and duty of reform as well as to insist on the radical difference between civilized and barbarian societies as the permanent ground of imperial rule. In this way, Mill's particular characterization of civilized and barbarian societies which undergirded his justification of empire was itself complicit in shifting the burden of imperial legitimation (and responsibility) onto colonized societies themselves. Thus, the ambiguity I hope to highlight is less about an inherent tension within liberalism per se but rather something more specific about the kinds of theoretical and political conundrums that transformative, universalist discourses of empire necessarily encounter.

II

Mill's most famous formulation of his justification of empire appeared in the introduction to *On Liberty* (to be repeated in similar terms in *Considerations on Representative Government* two years later): "[d]espotism is a legitimate

mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end” (*On Liberty*, CW XVIII, 224).¹ In emphasizing “improvement” as the legitimate goal of imperial rule, Mill’s account rendered the foundations of empire ethical in a specific sense. Since the assumption of British rule in India, there existed amongst leading commentators such as Edmund Burke and James Mill a common attempt to frame these debates in ethical terms, specifically in terms of a higher moral standard of duty and responsibility concomitant to the status of the ruling power as a free, civilized people. Similarly, for the younger Mill, however difficult it was to attain such an ideal,

unless some approach to it is, the rulers are guilty of a dereliction of the highest moral trust which can devolve upon a nation: and if they do not even aim at it, they are selfish usurpers, on par in criminality with any of those whose ambition and rapacity have sported from age to age with the destiny of masses of mankind. (*Considerations on Representative Government*, CW XIX, 567–8)

Building on the work of an earlier generation of liberal imperial reformers, including that of his father, Mill understood the ethical horizon of empire to be bounded specifically by a liberal educative or reform project, a civilizing mission in which subject societies would be reshaped along modern (English) models, which included incremental training towards self-government. Not only would arguments for imperial rule in terms of augmenting domestic prestige or wealth be, in principle, unjust, in orienting the project of empire towards the future telos of civilization and eventual self-government, liberal imperialism was also premised on the disavowal of conquest and force as legitimate sources of imperial authority. In the arguments of Burke, James Mill, and Charles Grant, for example, this link between the morality of empire and the critique of conquest was elaborated most often in critical portrayals of early Company rule as resting on a nexus of criminal acts. Indeed, many argued for a liberal framework of imperial rule precisely as a way to compensate and atone for the original injustice and resultant burdens of imperial conquest. For many early reformers, what was needed to overcome these precarious and illegitimate beginnings was “good government,” that is, the creation of a form of rule that would work towards the improvement of the subject race, thereby intertwining the moral defense of empire with a platform of liberal reform.

¹ In *Considerations*, Mill writes, “This mode of government is as legitimate as any other if it is the one which in the existing state of civilization of the subject people most facilitates their transition to a higher stage of improvement,” 415 (CW XIX: 567).

Although the centrality of the idiom of improvement importantly tied Mill's views to the ethical horizon of an older discourse of empire, there were, however, important modifications in Mill's own articulation that distanced his position from these earlier variants. Indeed, the idea of improvement, or progress, was an even more fundamental feature of Mill's political philosophy and one that profoundly shaped his theories of liberty and representative government. For Mill, utility as a principle of evaluation must be understood in "the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as progressive being" (*On Liberty*, CW XVIII: 224). Likewise, a good government worked to improve the character of its subjects, that is, to create the proper conditions to support progressive improvement. This theory of government entailed an intensely reciprocal relationship between political institutions and the character of a people: not only is the institutional competence of a government dependent on the right character of its subjects – their virtues and intelligence – but, more important, the institutions themselves had to be so modified as to suit the specific demands that peoples in various "states of society" and "stages of civilization" required for progressive improvement (*Considerations*, CW XIX, chaps. 1–3).

Mill's account of his theoretical advance over Bentham's theory of motivation also emphasized his more detailed attention to ways in which government served as the one of the great means of forming national character, "of carrying forward the members of a community towards perfection or preserving them from degeneracy" ("Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," CW X: 10). One of Bentham's blind spots, according to Mill, was that

it never seems to have occurred to him to regard political institutions in a higher light, as the principle means of the social education of a people. Had he done so, he would have seen that the same institutions will no more suit two nations in different stages of civilization, than the same lessons will suit two children of different ages. (CW X: 10)

Thus, the central error of Bentham's theory of government was its austere universalism, its tendency to assume "that mankind are alike in all times and all places," (CW X: 10) an error that Mill thought was common to the political theories "of the last age . . . in which it was customary to claim representative democracy for England and France by arguments which would equally have proved it the only fit form of government for Bedouins or Malays." For Mill, what marked "the main point of superiority in the political theories of the present" was the recognition of an important and fundamental truth, that governing "institutions need to be radically different, according to the stage of advancement already reached" (*Considerations*, CW XIX: 393–4).

Mill's insistence that governing practices and institutions demanded radical alterations depending on the virtues and intelligence of its people, or in his terms the "state of society" or "stage of civilization," was of paramount importance to his defense of imperial despotism.² Indeed, in Mill's framework, the specific contrast between civilized and "backward states of society" was crucial in justifying the exclusion of savage, barbarous, and semi-barbarous peoples from the norms of liberty and self-government. For Mill, liberty was not an unqualified benefit in all times and for all peoples and specifically did not apply to "any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" (*On Liberty*, CW XVIII: 224).

What, then, made despotism, rather than free institutions, more appropriate for savage or barbarous societies? Mill's accounts of the various historical stages of civilization, and the sociological and psychological portraits attached to them, were never carefully elaborated. Although Mill's characterizations were at times loosely reminiscent of the four-stage theory formulated by the Scottish theorists of the previous century, his portraits not only lacked their precision but also were motivated by very different concerns. Unlike his predecessors, Mill rarely linked the terms of "savage" and "barbarian" with specific social structures, property relations, or modes of subsistence (Haakonsen 1996; Pitts 2005). Rather, the portraits themselves were more psychologically or behaviorally oriented, which, when taken in sequence, yielded a precarious, developmental logic that swung between the twin poles of excessive liberty and extreme slavery. Thus savage/barbarian societies were construed as too independent, lacking the ability to obey, whereas barbarian/stationary societies (and former slaves) were seen as suffering from dependence on custom and therefore lacking the instincts for self-government and spontaneity.

In an early essay titled "Civilization," Mill distinguished most straightforwardly the central features of savage/barbarian society, and thus obliquely

² It was also one of the central lessons he had learnt from James Mill's *History of British India* in which the elder Mill argued, "[n]o scheme of government can happily conduce to the end of government, unless it is adapted to the state of the people for whose use it is intended. . . . If the mistake in regard to Hindu society, committed by the British nation, and the British government, be very great, if they have conceived the Hindus to be a people of high civilization, while they in reality made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization, it is impossible that in many of the measures pursued for the government of that people, the mark aimed at should not have been wrong." In James Mill, *The History of British India* (New Delhi: 1990), I, 456.

delineated the substantive preconditions for the exercise of liberty. Mill outlined the main features of civilized life as the “direct converse or contrary of rudeness or barbarism.” He wrote,

a savage tribe consists of a handful of individuals, wandering or thinly scattered over a vast tract of country: a dense population, therefore, dwelling in fixed habitations, and largely collected in towns and villages, we term civilized. In savage life there is no commerce, no manufactures, no agriculture: a country rich in the fruits of agriculture: commerce, and manufactures, we call civilized. . . . Wherever, therefore, we find human beings acting together for common purposes in large bodies, and enjoying the pleasures of social intercourse, we term them civilized. (CW XVIII: 120)

In moving from the sociological to the psychological traits of both forms of social life, Mill deduced what he saw as the fundamental feature of civilized life, namely, the power of co-operation. For Mill, what makes the life of the savage materially poor and fragile is his inability to compromise, to sacrifice “some portion of individual will, for a common purpose” (CW VIII: 122). The savage was pure ego, a selfish will that did not know how to calculate beyond *immediate* impulses. This portrait would reappear in later writings as one of the principle reasons for why barbarous societies fall outside the community of nations and norms of international law. As Mill wrote,

the rules of ordinary international morality imply reciprocity. But barbarians will not reciprocate. They cannot be depended on for observing any rules. Their minds are not capable of so great an effort, nor their will sufficiently under the influence of distant motives. (“A Few Words on Non-Intervention,” CW XXI: 119)

Thus a savage or barbarous society, unable to either suppress immediate instincts or conceptualize long-term interests were thus fundamentally incapable of the organization and discipline necessary for the development of the division of labor, for commerce and manufacture, and for military achievement – in short, for civilization. In such a state, according to Mill, a “vigorous despotism” would be the form of government ideally suited to teach the lesson of obedience (*Considerations*, CW XIX: 394, 567). Moreover, discipline, or “perfect co-operation” – the central attribute of civilized society – was also deemed something that could only be learnt incrementally through practice and thus this training in obedience required a vast length of time, perhaps even centuries, to render discipline an unconscious habit.

Although the lesson of obedience was the first and necessary condition for government, and the indispensable step towards future improvement and

civilization, for Mill, it was also only a partial advance and one that could easily solidify into an unwieldy form of societal stagnation. Even previously progressive societies, such as the civilizations of Egypt, India, and China fell prey to this kind of immobility, where “the springs of spontaneity” and individuality are emasculated in the vast “despotism of Custom” (*On Liberty*, CW XVIII: 272; *Considerations*, CW XIX: 567). In this case, however, the governmental form most appropriate to break the bonds of unquestioned obedience was less clear. An ordinary, native despotism would only teach a lesson “only too completely learnt” (*Considerations*, CW XIX: 567) and thus the solution must be sought in either the extraordinary appearance of a good despot, in “an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate to find one” (*On Liberty*, CW XVIII: 224) or under the tutelary despotism of an advanced people, who through guidance rather than force can “superinduce from without” the improvement a stationary or slavish people cannot muster themselves (*Considerations*, CW XIX: 395). Moreover, in the age of empire, Mill noted, it was becoming “the universal condition of the more backward populations to be held in direct subjection by the more advanced” (CW XIX: 568). Fortunately, an advanced, civilized people, was able, in principle, to provide a constant supply of good despots and could thus counteract the potential evils of imperial subjection. For an advanced people, having already treaded the path of civilization, had the knowledge and foresight to provide a form of government conducive to “future permanent improvement” (CW XIX: 568).

Mill never specified in great detail what kinds of policies would educate a subject population towards greater individuality. Even in his defense of the East India Company and the superiority of rule through an apolitical and expert bureaucracy, Mill rather offered a predominately institutionalist account of the appropriate mechanisms of imperial governance (CW XIX: 568–77). Mill then compounded his somewhat indistinct prescriptions for improvement in societies yoked to the sway of custom by insisting that the threat of stagnation and appeal of custom affected even the most advanced societies. In *On Liberty*, Mill describes the precarious dynamic between custom and individuality, between the love of liberty and tendency towards (mental) slavery, which had hitherto shaped human history, as a permanent condition of even the most progressive states of societies. In doing so, Mill’s analysis raises the theoretical question of why the expansion of the sphere of liberty, the promotion of free institutions, and the relaxation of governmental authority as mechanisms of improvement – that is, liberal institutions – were not considered equally applicable to both advanced and stationary societies.

III

Mill's reliance on the historical contrast between barbarism and civilization as the central pivot of his defense of imperial despotism, coupled with the ambiguities in his specific characterization of the stages and dynamics of civilization, exposed a number of internal tensions in Mill's theoretical project, tensions which provided critics the resources for questioning the viability of the project of liberal imperialism itself. In Mill's theoretical framework, the temporal contrast between the civilized and the barbarian functioned to exclude the latter from the benefits of liberty and self-government as well as an equal status in the community of nations. As Mill writes in the introduction to *On Liberty*, the doctrine of liberty

is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age at which the state may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason, we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage. (*On Liberty*, CW XVIII: 224)

Conceptually, Mill's recurrent analogy between the immaturity of children and the immaturity of barbarous societies reveals a characteristic vulnerability of liberal universalism. The political exclusion of children is a consistent and thorny issue for liberal political theory for it implies what Uday Mehta names a disjuncture or gap between the foundations and actualization of liberal universalism (Mehta 1999, 46–77). For Mehta, universalism in liberalism is derived from a minimalist philosophical anthropology, that is, from the articulation of a minimum set of characteristics and capacities taken to be common to all humans. In the liberal tradition, these common, universal, characteristics are often construed as natural freedom, moral equality, and the inbuilt capacity to reason. The political actualization of these universalist premises – for example, to be included in the political constituency of the Lockean social contract or to be capable of permanent improvement in the Millian sense – is nevertheless mediated by the real capacity of potential citizens to properly exercise their reason. This capacity, which Mill calls intellectual maturity, turns out to be empirically conditioned, and thus not-quite or not-yet universal. In this sense, the paradox of the child born free but not-yet-able to practice liberty is thus particularly revealing of how “behind the universal capacities ascribed [by liberalism] to all human beings exist a thicker set of social credentials that constitute the real bases of political inclusion” (Mehta 1999, 49). Mill projects the paradox of the child onto a

scale of civilization and in so doing expands and heightens, in cultural and historical terms, the requirements for political inclusion.

In moving away from Bentham's strict universalism, Mill had already committed himself to a more diversified account of character, one more thoroughly conditioned by custom and society. By tightly binding the benefits of liberty and representative government to civilizational development, Mill further circumscribes the possibility of political liberty with the imperatives of culture and history. In limiting the applicability of liberalism in this manner, Mill's ethical justification of empire itself displaces the burden of legitimation onto to the terrain of empirical (cultural and historical) arguments about the nature of subject populations. If the question of how imperial rule ought to be structured is thus subordinated to a primary and prior question about colonized societies themselves, the responsibility for the imperial project becomes inextricably tied to questions about the empirical and theoretical possibility of progress in these societies.

Although Mill's theory of civilization in principle was premised on the inherent potential of all peoples to improve, in his substantive characterization of savage and barbarous states of society, Mill emphasized both the unpredictable, arduous development of civilization, everywhere threatened by potential degeneracy and stagnation, and the potentially limitless time-horizon needed for such advancement. Furthermore, Mill characterizes the process of civilization – this training that is the condition of possibility for progress – not only in terms of an incremental process of learning but also one that is collective in nature. In doing so, Mill exposed a deep theoretical tension between the commitment to liberal reform and improvement and the practical impediments for the realization of the progressive transformation of peoples. Thus, the sharp contrast between barbarism and civilization, when grounded in this particular philosophy of history, appeared more and more like a permanent barrier.

In his interest in character formation and improvement as the principle end of governance, Mill emphasizes the ways in individual character is dependent on and shaped by national character. Indeed, understanding the precise and formative interplay between individual and national character was to be the great theme of his proposed science of "ethology" (*Science of Logic*, CW VIII: 860–74). Although some consider Mill's concern with the diverse forms of national character and his reference to psychologized portraits of the differences between, for example, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Asiatic characters – and we could add, the savage and the barbarous mind – to be signs of an underlying racism, it is clear that Mill never thought of character as biological determined. Rather, Mill emphasizes the extraordinary

variety of character within similar states of society and its malleability, impairment, and perfectibility over time. In his famous reply to Carlyle's racialized provocations, Mill was clear that any analytical investigation into "laws of the formation of character" would correct "the vulgar error of imputing every difference which he finds among human beings to an original difference of nature" ("The Negro Question," CW XXI: 93). At the same time, however, Mill also insisted that the improvement of character, especially "spontaneous" or internally generated improvement was "one of the rarest phenomena in history" and depended on an extraordinary concatenation of accidents and advantages.

But if Mill's concept of character was not a racial one, when conjoined with an emphasis on the group as the bearer of civilizational improvement, it functioned as an analogue of race as a principle of sociological and anthropological explanation. In other words, although Mill objected to racial theories of human diversity, his theory of character formation was meant in part to explain and account for these same, entrenched differences in collective terms. Furthermore, in Mill's reflections on the principle of nationality, collectivities – specifically, the nation – were endowed with a moral character. For Mill, the nation was not only the site for "the growth and development of a people," it was itself a form of cultural achievement, equivalent in normative status to civilization. Thus, barbarian societies were not true nations, indeed for them "nationality and independence are either a certain evil, or at best a questionable good" ("Non-Intervention," CW XXI: 119). Nationality not only functioned as the means of justifying the exclusion of barbarous societies from norms of international law; more important, it revealed the extent to which, for Mill, civilization and barbarism were only ever features of collectivities.

With the focus on the collective nature of learning and cultivation, Mill's theory of civilization here (as well as Mill's proposed science of ethnology) anticipates the anthropological theory of culture, which also emphasizes the cultural and historical determination of behavior in the context of ongoing processes of social integration and collective learning. In Mill's characterization of civilization as both precarious and collective in nature, then, we begin to see the turn to culture as a mode of differentiation emerging from within the trajectory of liberal imperialism itself. Mill's ascription of collective characteristics to societies and peoples poses a number of specific challenges to the discourse of liberal empire. On one hand, it sharpens the contrast between civilization and barbarism in a such a way as to make the eventual transition from the one state to the other seem exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, obstacles to improvement, or indeed

failures in achieving this transformation, are effectively re-described as cultural impediments or cultural resistance to the norms and institutions of civilization. The emphasis on the group as the bearer of improvement thus also marks subject societies as the displaced site of imperial legitimation, as collectively responsible for the necessity of imperial rule.

A number of these tensions in Mill's portrait of civilization made the liberal project of empire vulnerable to critics who increasingly sought to emphasize the theoretical and practical obstacles to improvement. In Mill's work, the basic commitment to an idea of human nature as malleable and infinitely perfectible had seemingly lost its purchase when linked to a philosophy of history and a theory of character formation that at the same time emphasized the precarious and incremental development of progressive societies in human history. Critics would emphasize the latter aspect over the former, concluding either that models of perfectibility needed to be abandoned or that moral reform required a great deal more coercion than liberals could countenance. And as the modernizing transformation of native peoples was deemed suspect in this manner, which was increasingly the case in the late nineteenth century, empire quickly lost its most salient ethical justification.

IV

These criticisms revealingly came to the fore in the most prominent public debates on empire in late nineteenth century. In key imperial scandals – for example, the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the Governor Eyre controversy of 1865, and the Ilbert Bill crises of the 1883 – the theoretical fissures in the edifice of liberal justifications of empire would be effectively exploited by opponents to undermine liberal positions. Here, I begin with the Eyre controversy, not least because John Stuart Mill himself played a prominent role in this public debate. Moreover, the anxieties about race, colonial violence, and domestic unrest which infused the debate pointedly and dramatically exposed the tenuous nature of liberal confidence in its civilizing agenda.

The public controversy began in 1865 upon news from Jamaica of a “rebellion” in Morant Bay and its suppression by the then Governor of Jamaica, Edward John Eyre (Dutton 1967; Semmel 1976; Holt 1992; Hall 2002). As reports of the extent and brutal nature of the rebellion's suppression came to light, Mill (now a Liberal MP for Westminster) joined the Jamaica committee, which was formed initially to lobby the government for an official inquiry, and then (when it was clear that the government would do no more than dismiss Eyre from his post) to bring criminal charges against Eyre and

his deputies. As the Jamaica committee's chair and leading spokesman, Mill made the case for Eyre's criminal prosecution on the grounds that Eyre's abuse of martial law, most egregiously in the military trial and execution of George William Gordon (a well-known mixed-race MP in the Jamaican assembly), was akin to state-sponsored murder. This amounted to a frontal assault on the rule of law itself, which for Mill was a principle that necessarily reached across the empire, for it was the duty of advanced, ruling countries to impart this "first necessity of human society" to subject races. If Eyre's actions were excused as the regrettable but understandable excesses of power endemic to the colonial situation (which was the basic gist of the Royal Inquiry into his actions), the liberal imperialist model of benevolent despotism that Mill thought was genuinely possible would be radically undermined. This possibility no doubt fueled Mill's vehement commitment to Eyre's prosecution, which after three years, came to nothing (Pitts 2005, 150–60).

Indeed, the vocal public campaign proved to be, in important respects, counterproductive. For the long campaign to publicize Eyre's abuses galvanized an even stronger opposition to the civilizing ideals of liberal imperialism. The widespread opposition to the prosecution of Eyre was, to say the least, multifaceted. As Stefan Collini writes, "this was one of those great moral earthquakes of Victorian public life whose fault lines are so revealing of the subterranean affinities and antipathies of the educated classes" (Collini 1984, xxvi). Prominent members of the Jamaica committee included Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, Charles Lyell, and T. H. Green. On the other side, vocal supporters of Eyre included Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, A. L. Tennyson, Charles Dickens, and Matthew Arnold. On the one hand, the sharp polarization between the supporters and critics of Eyre intersected with and intimated the growing divide between the proponents and critics of liberal democracy. The Eyre controversy coincided with the public agitation and debate about the Reform Bill, and fear of unrest in the empire was necessarily intertwined with anxieties about the growth of popular government and mass democracy. The public support for Eyre revealed an increasingly unsympathetic view of subject peoples, for the Morant Bay rebellion, coming on the heels of the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857, signaled for many an ingratitude on the part of Jamaicans and Indians for the emancipatory and civilizing character of colonial rule. The fact of rebellion itself also seemed to call into question both the possibility and the practicality of an agenda of liberal reform in the colonies. The reform and improvement of native customs and morals seemed not only to be limited in effect but also potentially dangerous to the stability of empire. Thus, the reactions to the

events of Morant Bay, like responses to the Indian Rebellion, were marked by hardening of racial attitudes and a distancing away from the universalist and assimilationist ideals of liberal imperialism.

Like the public debates unleashed by the Governor Eyre controversy, the Ilbert Bill crisis (1883) also exemplified and exposed important paradoxes in liberal justifications of empire. But whereas the Eyre controversy was instigated by the dramatic display of colonial violence which at times shaped the tenor of the debate, the Ilbert Bill crisis was peaked by a relatively minor piece of colonial legislation. In 1883, Courtney Ilbert, as Law Member of the Viceroy's Council, introduced a seemingly innocuous amendment to the Indian Criminal Procedure Code, extending the right to try cases involving Europeans to certain classes of native magistrates in rural districts (Hirschmann 1980; Dasgupta 1995; Sinha 1995). But in attempting to remove this minor "anomaly" to procedural universality, Ilbert unknowingly instigated widespread protest among the non-official British population in India and, thus, propelled the Government of India into a general crisis. For those British Indians, the bill's attempt to equalize the authority of British and native judges also implicitly advocated a philosophy of reform that sought to undermine any special rights, privileges, and protections that the British settlers now enjoyed. In doing so, the bill was clearly grounded in a basic commitment and belief in the equality between Indians and Britons, a principle that most British Indians of the time were loathe to admit. In the face of such widespread opposition, the bill in its original form could not pass the Legislative Council, and instead a watered down version of the bill was finally passed after two years of intense criticism.³

As criticism of the bill mounted in both Britain and India, it became increasingly clear that what was at stake was less the status of British Indians per se than the very grounds of a liberal philosophy of British rule in India. Lord Ripon, the Liberal Viceroy appointed by Gladstone and under whose watch the bill was introduced, articulated in the clearest of terms the "great question" that was now so openly debated. The question, according to Ripon, was not about the particular provisions supported by the bill,

but the principles upon which India is to be governed. Is she to be ruled for the benefit of the Indian people of all races, classes, and creeds, or in the sole interest of a small body of Europeans? Is it England's duty to try to elevate the Indian people,

³ When it was clear that the bill in its original form would not pass, a compromise version was adopted in 1884. This bill allowed European settlers in the rural districts to appeal for jury trials (comprising Europeans) to compensate for their acceptance of the jurisdiction of native judges.

to raise them socially, to train them politically, to promote their progress in material prosperity, in education, and in morality; or is it to be the be all and end all of her rule to maintain a precarious power over what Mr. Branson⁴ calls “a subject race with a profound hatred of their subjugators”? (Hirschmann 1980, 70)

Ripon thus articulated and defended the basic premises of a liberal justification of empire, one in which the purpose of imperial government must be the moral education and betterment of the subject people, rather than the benefit of the home country or some faction therein. In practical terms, the aim of the Government of India would be the timely introduction of and expansion of liberal principles in the central institutions of education, law, and government. For British and native supporters of the Ilbert Bill, the bill represented precisely the logical fruition of the liberal agenda, for it was due to the success of these policies that native judges qualified for promotion existed at all. The vehement contestation of the principle of legal equality that was at stake in the Ilbert Bill thus struck the very core of the transformative and educative project of liberal imperialism.

The most eminent spokesman for the opposition was James Fitzjames Stephen, who had also briefly served as Law Member of the Viceroy’s Council under Lord Mayo. Stephen not only opposed the adoption of a similar bill under his tenure but, in the midst of the current crisis, published a provocative letter in the *Times* warning that the passage of such a bill would undermine the very foundations of British rule. As Stephen wrote,

[i]t has been observed that if the Government of India have decided on removing all anomalies from India, they ought to remove themselves and their countrymen. Whether or not that mode of expression can be fully justified, there can, I think, be no doubt that it is impossible to imagine any policy more fearfully dangerous and more certain in case of failure to lead to results to which the Mutiny would be child’s play, than the policy of shifting the foundations on which the British government of India rests. It is essentially an absolute government, founded, not on consent, but on conquest. It does not represent the native principles of life or of government, and it can never do so until it represents heathenism and barbarism. It represents a belligerent civilization, and no anomaly can be so striking and so dangerous as its administration by men who, being at the head of a Government founded on conquest, implying at every point the superiority of the conquering race, of their ideas, their institutions, their opinions and their principles, and having no justification for its existence except that superiority, shrink from the open, uncompromising,

⁴ Branson was one of most vocal opponents of the bill. In fact, his inflammatory speeches against the bill did much not only to fan the flames of settler rebellion but in polarizing the debate along racial lines, his speeches also instigated and emboldened a coordinated native opposition (one that eventually led to the creation of the Indian National Congress). See Hirschmann 1980.

straightforward assertion of it, seek to apologize for their own position, and refuse, from whatever cause, to uphold and support it. (Stephen 1883a, 8)

The corollary to the unabashed assertion of superiority, for Stephen, was unapologetic authoritarian rule in the colonies. For Stephen, liberal imperialists – and here his chief target was Mill – had confused good government with representative government and, in doing so, assumed that absolute or authoritarian government could only be justified “as a temporary expedient used for the purpose of superseding itself, and as a means of educating those whom it affects into a fitness for parliamentary institutions” (Stephen 1883b, 551). But, for Stephen, absolute government was not the same as arbitrary or despotic rule, and for the purpose of promoting the welfare of native subjects, it had “its own merits and conveniences.”

Despite brashness of his rhetoric, Stephen was not merely a jingoistic defender of empire.⁵ Stephen thought of himself as defending a more robust and consistent utilitarian liberalism, and indeed his argument for vigorous authoritarianism in India differed little from Mill’s pronouncements on the need to inculcate habits of discipline in barbarous societies. Stephen’s argument for absolute rule as form of legitimate and good government was premised on a theoretical account of the necessity of coercion as a mechanism for the improvement of native society. For Stephen, the most important mechanism, in this regard, was the implementation of a sound system of laws based on English principles that would induce peace and security and thereby effect a change in moral and religious practices. Without law and order, which was Britain’s great export, India would dissolve into the chaos and anarchy in which it was found. For Stephen, coercion was a necessity for Britain’s “great and characteristic task is that of imposing on India ways of life and modes of thought which the population regards, to say the least, without sympathy” (Stephen 1883b, 558).

This minimal commitment to substitute English civilization for Indian barbarism, however, was not conceived of as a moral duty, less still as a kind of atonement or apology for the sins of conquest. Rather, it was a sign of and the means by which to express England’s virtue, honor, and superiority. As

⁵ Whereas Eric Stokes considered Stephen’s authoritarianism to be closed tied to the general trajectory of utilitarian thinking on India, I would argue that his justification of empire deviates quite sharply from the ethical horizon of the early utilitarian interest in and engagement with India. Two aspects of this ethical horizon which Stephen consciously distances himself from was (a) eventual self-government as the end of empire and (b) the critique of conquest. See Stokes 1959.

such it was in principle a permanent and not temporary enterprise (as Mill and the liberal imperialist camp proposed) and ought to be justified as such. Stephen straightforwardly criticized the view of empire as resting upon “a moral duty on the part of the English nation to try to educate the natives in such a way as to lead them to set up a democratic form government administered by representative institutions” (Stephen 1883b, 561). And it was here that Stephen veered away from Mill’s imperial arguments, indeed he dramatically inverted them. By exploited Mill’s tenuous distinction between civilized and barbarian societies, Stephen would argue that not only was self-government unfit for India, it was only a qualified benefit for England itself.

According to Stephen, it was his “Indian experience” which confirmed his belief in the dangers of “sentimental” liberalism of the Millian kind for both England and her empire. *Liberty, Fraternity, Equality*, Stephen’s famous polemic against Mill, written furiously on his return voyage from India, was a wholesale attack on the philosophical basis and political and social consequences of Mill’s moral commitment to the idea of liberty, as it was enunciated in *On Liberty*. For Stephen, Mill’s proposition that self-protection could be the only grounds for coercion or compulsion was unsustainable and illustrative of a deeper set of commitments which Stephen found to be both philosophically untenable and practically objectionable. On one hand, Mill’s attempt to delineate a sphere of free action, for Stephen, revealed Mill’s illegitimate prioritizing of the principle of liberty over that of utility, revealing an absolute and independent commitment to the value of liberty. For Stephen, valuing liberty in this private, individual sense was as amoral as it was incoherent, for it undermined law as well as all systems of morality and religion. Indeed, for Stephen, what Mill claimed to be the practical effects of liberty in history – that is, the expansion of freedom of speech and discussion and the concomitant shift from compulsion to persuasion as the vehicle of moral improvement – was a misreading of the actual source of moral progress, namely, moral and legal coercion.

For Stephen, the benevolent despotism of imperial rule proved emphatically that liberty was not a necessity for the purpose of good government. For Stephen, man was not by nature a progressive being, but one who was at heart selfish and unruly and therefore needed to be continuously compelled to live peaceably and morally in society. Thus, Mill’s tenuous distinction between civilized and barbarous societies could be reversed: what was deemed appropriate for barbarians was equally suitable for civilized society (or at least certain classes therein). Here is a characteristic passage of

Stephen's that turns on the inversion of Mill's distinction between barbarism and civilization;

[y]ou admit that children and human beings in "backward states of society" may be coerced for their own good. You would let Charlemagne coerce the Saxons, and Akbar the Hindoos. Why then may not educated men coerce the ignorant? What is there in the character of a very commonplace ignorant peasant or petty shopkeeper in these days which makes him a less fit subject for coercion on Mr. Mill's principle than the Hindoo nobles and princes who were coerced by Akbar? (Stephen [1873] 1991, 68–9)

Stephen pointedly questioned Mill's attribution of the status of civilization and barbarism only to societies and not to individuals therein. And if the collective nature of the classification of stages of civilization was undermined, for Stephen, the principles of imperial government, as a model of for moral and legal coercion, could no longer be held off at the water's edge; they could indeed be equally well suited for a rapidly democratizing Britain. As Stephen writes, "[i]t seems to me quite impossible to stop short of this principle if compulsion in the case of children and 'backward' races is admitted to be justifiable; for, after all, maturity and civilization are matters of degree" (Stephen 1991, 69).

Stephen's arguments exemplify the ways in which debates about empire often reflected and helped to consolidate a growing illiberal or anti-liberal consensus, specifically fueled by domestic anxieties about the growth of mass democracy. The divisions intimated in the Eyre controversy would peak with the debate on Irish Home Rule (1886), and the abandonment of the Liberal Party by its more conservative members. But although the conservative critique of mass democracy in the end did not stem the tide towards universal suffrage in Britain, this illiberal turn had distinct and enduring effects in the transformation of imperial policy.

V

Stephen's critique of the aims and premises of liberal imperialism served to retain the underlying model of despotic rule elaborated by Mill, now severed from its ethical horizons. No longer justified as a temporary mechanism for improvement towards eventual self-government, empire became a permanent enterprise. The collapse of liberal imperialism thus signaled the eclipse of ethical discourses of empire and the concomitant shift in the language of justification towards more straightforwardly realist and pragmatic claims for legitimacy. At the level of ideologies of rule – that is, in terms of imperial governing practices and policies on the ground – the transition itself,

however, was deeper and with broad-ranging consequences. For it was in this sphere that the universalist premises of the liberal idiom of improvement gave way to culturalist arguments about the permanent and intractable differences between peoples (see Mantena, forthcoming).

In turning to the decline of liberal ideologies of imperial rule, the focus of inquiry inevitably turns to the history of British India. For British rule in India not only represented the longest instance of a dependency under continuous foreign rule, but India also proved to be a testing ground for models of rule which were to become, in the period of high empire, transportable in many key respects. In British India, the central crisis which precipitated the shift away from liberal models of rule was the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857. In response to the rebellion, the Crown assumed direct responsibility over the East India Company's former Indian territories. And in its first official act, it explicitly put forth a doctrine of non-intervention as the directive principle of British rule:

[w]e declare it to be our royal will and pleasure that none be in anywise favoured, none molested or disquieted, by reason of their religious faith or observances, but that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law; and we do strictly charge to enjoin all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure. (Philips, et al. 1962, 11)

Moreover, it was determined "that generally, in framing and administration of law, due regard be paid to the ancient rights, usages and customs of India." For many contemporary observers, the outbreak of rebellion was a glaring sign of the failure of liberal reform to either transform native habits and customs or lend security to the imperial enterprise. The non-interference principle thus expressed both the difficulty of reforming the native and, indeed, the political danger that attempts at transformation could entail.

In one sense, political rebellion in Jamaica and India provoked harsher and more racialized attitudes towards native populations; Indians and the ex-slave population of Jamaica were construed as acting from "inscrutable" motivations. In India, this inscrutability was attributed to deep-seated cultural and religious sentiments that seemed to be resistant to change and reform. In this sense, and this was particularly the case for India, resistance was read as a sign of the rigidity of native customs, beliefs, and institutions. In this context, the anthropological theory of culture, which was only implicit in Mill's view of civilization, came to the fore as the dominant framework through which to understand the nature of native society, the mechanisms that ensured its stability, and the impact of colonial rule on these institutions.

In attributing to native society a new kind of stability and intransigence to reform, anthropological and sociological accounts of native society would buttress methods of rule that sought to harness and incorporate these native energies to ensure order and stability. Unlike liberal ruling strategies which construed “traditional” social structures and customs, such as those relating to caste and certain religious formations, as impediments to the project of improvement and thus good and moral governance, the new ideologies of rule stressed the need for reconciliation with native institutions and structures of authority. In India, what began as a principle of non-intervention into native societies in the wake of 1857 had, by the turn of the century, metamorphosed into an array of arguments for the protection and rehabilitation of native institutions, culminating in its elaborate articulation in the theory and practice of “indirect rule” in colonial Africa.

In contrast to liberal ideologies of rule, the emergent imperial strategies were founded in a deep skepticism about the possibility that native society could be rapidly and radically transformed. The appeal to non-intervention imagined the native as stubbornly tied to customs and beliefs and hence resistant to reform, conversion, education – in short, civilization. In this sense, the rethinking occurring in the wake of 1857 not only radically reversed the main tenets of the liberal, civilizing mission of the colonial state, conceived of as a wholesale project of transformation of native society, it also rendered the native a slave to custom. As modes of justification became more tentative in their moral and political aspirations, late imperial ideologies of rule were presented less in ideological than pragmatic terms, as practical responses to and accommodations of the nature of “native society.” Under this cover, social, cultural, and racial theories entered through the backdoor, as it were, to explain and legitimate the existence of empire; they functioned less as justifications than as alibis for the *fait accompli* of empire.