

## **John Stuart Mill, *socialiste***

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The second, 1849 edition of John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* contained the judgement that Fourierism presented 'in every respect the least open to objection, of the forms of Socialism' a verdict that can seem peculiar to those who recall the eccentricities of Charles Fourier's system.<sup>1</sup> In her fine new book Helen McCabe argues that '[b]y the mid-1840s, Mill viewed himself as a socialist', but notes that '[h]e did not endorse any particular contemporary form of socialism: he was not a Marxist, or an Owenite, or even a Fourierist or Saint-Simonian' (4). If we nevertheless ask why Mill in 1849 did align himself more closely with the Fourierists than with any of the other extant varieties of socialism we may find that *John Stuart Mill, Socialist* is not especially illuminating, and this for two reasons. First, the book is organised thematically, and one of the characteristic disadvantages of thematic organisation is that it can occlude chronology, a difficulty that risks becoming acute in the case of Mill, whose later writings such as the 1873 *Autobiography* or the posthumously published 'Chapters on Socialism' can be used to cast a retrospective light on much earlier decades. Second, to think about Fourierism after 1848 is plausibly to take seriously the idea that socialism in the first half of the nineteenth century is a distinctively French body of ideas, yet McCabe's book makes it harder to get to grips with the Frenchness of early socialism, not only through its keenness to document Mill's early engagement with the Owenites and his later interest in the co-operative movement in Britain, but also because McCabe's own more extended treatment of Fourierism and its French context does not in fact appear within the book's pages at all, but rather in a separate article she has published in *Global Intellectual History*.

In that article, McCabe explores the idea that the way was paved for Mill's post-1848 interest in Fourierism by his earlier interest in Edme-Jean Leclaire's profit-sharing Paris house-painting operation and by his adoption in the *Principles of Political Economy* of the distinctive language of workers' 'association'.<sup>2</sup> This is all interesting, to be sure, but it may not quite help us to pin down a distinctive affinity with Fourierism, to the extent that, as McCabe concedes, on the one hand, Mill may not himself have known that Leclaire was a Fourierist at all,<sup>3</sup> and that, on the other hand, the discourse of 'association' was shared across various socialist currents, and not the unique property of the Fourierists.<sup>4</sup> In these remarks I will attempt to get to a similar conclusion by a slightly different route, saying a little more than McCabe does about Auguste Comte. It is not that Comte is entirely absent from McCabe's optic. He is not. But her spotlight on Mill's relationship with more ostentatiously socialist contemporaries risks nudging Comte back into the shadows, where I am not quite sure that he belongs. My question, then, is to ask what we notice when we hold our attention specifically on Mill's engagements with the French, including Comte, in the period leading up to 1848?

MCCabe is a sure guide to the start of the story. Gustave d'Eichthal introduced Mill to both the literature of the Saint-Simonians and to Comte's *Traité de politique positive* in 1829; he was persuaded of elements of their philosophy of history; and although Comte then rather dropped off his radar screen for a bit he continued to read the Saint-Simonians, absorbing much of their critique of the political economy on which he had been brought up (25). But Comte later returned to Mill's attention. He had been reading the *Cours de philosophie positive*, as its volumes became available, and the two corresponded between 1842 and 1847.<sup>5</sup> What I think comes through if we look at Mill, the Saint-Simonians, and Comte together is a striking pattern of agreements and disagreements. Put schematically, Comte and Mill were anti-utopians in a certain respect, but the Saint-Simonians were not; Mill and the Saint-Simonians were feminists, but Comte was not; and the Saint-Simonians and Comte sought government by industrialists, accompanied by an organised 'spiritual power', but Mill did not. Let me unpack each of those at slightly—but only slightly—greater length.

In one of Mill's earliest letters to Comte, he explains how he was 'quite cured, and this by your work, of all leanings toward the utopian doctrines, which try to entrust the

government of society to philosophers, or even to make it depend on high intellectual capacity such as it is most commonly understood'.<sup>6</sup> In China, he wrote, 'the structure of government comes perhaps as close as possible to Saint-Simon's theory, and with what result? A government most opposed to any kind of progress'.<sup>7</sup> He called such a government a 'pedantocracy',<sup>8</sup> and Comte was sufficiently impressed by the label that he repeated it approvingly back to Mill in each of his next three letters.<sup>9</sup>

As McCabe discusses (129-30), Mill agreed with the Saint-Simonians' feminism across a number of dimensions, and disagreed sharply with Comte. Comte insisted that biology 'firmly establish[ed] the hierarchy of sexes' and that 'the female sex constitutes a sort of state of radical childhood'.<sup>10</sup> Mill replied that he knew that 'not only in the muscular and cellular system but also in the nervous system and quite probably in their brain structure, women are less removed than men from the organic nature of children' but he insisted that 'that is far from decisive for me': 'To make it so, one would have to prove that the inferiority of children as compared to men depends on the anatomical differences of their brain[s]' rather than, as he thought, "on the lack of training".<sup>11</sup> (Harriet Taylor, who reviewed the correspondence, thought Comte a 'dry sort of man', 'not a worthy coadjutor & scarcely a worthy opponent'.<sup>12</sup>)

Mill was persuaded by the significance of the distinction the Saint-Simonians and Comte both drew between temporal and spiritual power, but he parted company with them on two related points. First, as he remarked in a letter to Gustave d'Eichthal in 1829 he opposed their shared view that 'the business of government must be placed in the hands of the principal *industriels*, the *pouvoir temporel* at least, & the *pouvoir spirituel* in the *savans* & *artistes*', and he went on to comment that in England, 'these three are the very classes of persons you would pick out as the most remarkable for a narrow & bigoted understanding, & a sordid & contracted disposition as respects all things wider than their business or families', with Mill consistently preferring a model of elected, representative government as an alternative.<sup>13</sup> Second, in another 1829 letter to Eichthal, he wrote that

I object altogether to the means which the St Simonists propose for organising the *pouvoir spirituel*. It appears to me that you cannot organise it at all. What is the

*pouvoir spirituel* but the insensible influence of mind over mind? The instruments of this are private communication, the pulpit, & the press.<sup>14</sup>

This is the opinion of a young man, to be sure, but there is no reason to think that Mill ever abandoned it, or judged that it did not apply to Comte, too. The same theme is sounded extensively, for example, throughout the much later book on *Auguste Comte and Positivism*.

Finally, then, to the Fourierists, to whom Mill would pay serious attention after 1848. From these short remarks we can already see just how much common ground they occupied. Both subscribed to a recognisable variation on the Saint-Simonians' feminism, and in contrast to the centralised 'pedantocracy' that stood in the way of progress they both favoured a decentralised model of local experimentation; indeed, Mill's interest in Fourierism didn't especially touch on temporal power at all. And in this light the verdict from the *Principles of Political Economy* that the Fourierists were less 'open to objection' than any of the other socialists comes to seem much less surprising, but rather practically over-determined.

A coda: McCabe rightly notes that 'Mill certainly did not think that Fourierism was open to the same concerns regarding individuality as communism (121) and she quotes part of his remark from the *Principles* that a 'real equality, or something more nearly approaching to it than might at first be supposed, would practically result: not, from the compression, but, on the contrary, from the largest possible development, of the various natural superiorities residing in each individual'. Neither Charles Fourier nor Karl Marx were themselves ever especially enamoured of the language of equality, of course, and this is a very nice reminder that the subsequent socialist fixation on egalitarianism—which has since spread across so much liberal political philosophy—may owe more to Fourierism than to Fourier, to Marxism than to Marx; and perhaps also, surprisingly—but very much in the spirit of Helen McCabe—to John Stuart Mill.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, Appendix A, in J. M. Robson, ed. *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* 3 (Toronto, 1965), 982.

<sup>2</sup> Helen McCabe, 'John Stuart Mill and Fourierism: "association", "friendly rivalry" and distributive justice', *Global Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (2019): 38-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>5</sup> The correspondence can be found in the original French scattered across Francis E. Mineka, ed. *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848*, vol. 2, which is *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 13 (Toronto, 1963), and in English translation in Oscar A. Haac, ed. *The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte* (New Brunswick, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Haac, ed. *Correspondence*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 51-2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 56, 65, 71; also p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> Haac, ed. *Correspondence*, 179, 180.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>13</sup> Francis E. Mineka, ed. *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848* 1, which is *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* 12 (Toronto, 1963), 37 (#27).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 40-1 (#28).