

43 **THE PURSUIT OF INDIVIDUAL SOVEREIGNTY:**

A Critical Analysis of Class Division in the Works of Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill

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Abstract

This paper examines the works of Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill and their respective accounts of class relations. While the authors' analytical frameworks differ, with Marx taking an economic focus on the capitalist mode of production and Mill focusing on the influence of the dominant class's sentiments, the paper demonstrates how both thinkers share a desire for society to turn away from class division. The paper analyzes imagined conversation between Marx and Mill when engaging with their critiques of class relations and the role of liberty. Through the analytical concept of individual sovereignty, the paper argues that Mill's conception of liberty and autonomy can expand Marx's analysis. Ultimately, we see that individual sovereignty can be a means for Marx to achieve his end goals for society.

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Introduction

The concept of class relations, particularly the division between classes, plays a critical role in the works of Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill. An examination of Marx's and Mill's respective works reveals that both thinkers critique the power and influence of the dominant class in society. However, the authors differ in their modes of analysis: Marx takes an economic focus on the capitalist mode of production, whereas Mill explores the influence of the dominant class's sentiments and morals. Despite these differences, both authors share the desire for society to develop away from the class divide. Ultimately, I argue that Mill's account can broaden Marx's analysis through showing how individual sovereignty can help achieve Marx's end goals for society.

I begin by examining Marx's analysis of class relations found in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, where he presents his critique of the capitalist mode of production and alienated labour. To examine Mill's views, I explore his discussion of the dominant class's morals and sentiments in *On Liberty*.¹ Lastly, I employ the

¹ I give specific attention to Mill's "Introductory" and "Applications" chapters of *On Liberty*; however, it is valuable to note that Mill presents further analysis of economic relations in his other works, which go beyond the scope of this paper.

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concept of individual sovereignty to examine how the thinkers might engage in dialogue regarding class divisions, namely how Mill will utilize individual liberty to expand Marx's view. As an analytical concept, individual sovereignty borrows from Mill's conception of independence and liberty: when a person is free from the control of the dominant class and holds independence "over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign."²

Karl Marx

Class struggle is a central theme for Marx throughout his manuscripts, where he critically analyzes the capitalist system. In the latter half of his passage on alienated labour, Marx delves into an extensive discussion regarding the class divide by examining the relationship among labour, the worker, and the capitalists.³ Marx argues that the externalized, alienated labour of the worker is rooted in the capitalist mode of production, which is controlled by the capitalist or bourgeois class.⁴ Under this system, the capitalist exerts control over the worker's labour and the commodities that the worker produces.⁵ As a result, the worker's freedom is restricted, leading to alienation from his labour, from the commodities he creates, and from his species being.⁶ Marx further emphasizes this point by stating that the worker "feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions," suggesting that labour under capitalism is not voluntary, but rather

² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, ed. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen (Oxford University Press, 2015), 13.

³ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Hackett Publishing Company, 1966), 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

coerced.⁷ Consequently, the worker finds himself estranged from his overall humanity and, in return, perpetuates a sense of a meaningless and futile human existence.⁸

Private property, according to Marx, is the product of alienated labour and a “necessary consequence of externalized labour.”⁹ In a capitalist economy, private property is owned and controlled by the capitalists. They reap the benefits of capitalism by selling a product for profit, at the expense of the working class. The class divide is perpetuated by alienated labour, and as a direct result, ensures workers remain reliant on wages rather than benefiting from the products of their work. Marx argues that the alienation not only affects individuals at work but permeates all aspects of life. For Marx, true freedom and liberty cannot coincide with the capitalist structure, as any perceived freedom outside of work is rendered meaningless if the worker continues to produce “marvels for the wealthy” while simultaneously being deprived themselves.¹⁰ Given that Marx understands society in the sense of the collective, the capitalists are able to claim collective wealth as their own only when ideology fosters class divisions – as exemplified in the case of private property. The capitalist mode of production, therefore, forms the foundation of Marx’s analysis of class division, wherein the capitalist class is favoured and benefits, while the working class remains estranged.

John Stuart Mill

Although Mill does not overtly focus on economic dynamics, I argue that he would align with Marx’s analysis

⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61.

and critique of how capitalists use their class status and associated privileges to wield power over the worker. This claim is supported by Mill's examination of the dominant class's influence over the morals and sentiments of society. Mill posits that a "large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interest," suggesting that societal morals and beliefs have been shaped by the interests of the ascendant class.¹¹ He further contextualizes this point by illustrating real-world class structures and relations: inter alia, nobles and roturiers, princes and subjects, and men and women.¹² Additionally, Mill observes that members of the dominant class have "occupied themselves ... in inquiring what things society ought to like or dislike," rather than questioning whether such preferences should be imposed as law upon individuals.¹³ Through this influence, the dominant class's sentiments are reflected in both law and social norms, shaping the broader societal structure.¹⁴

Through my interpretation of Mill's critique of class relations, I argue he would support Marx's analysis of alienated labour. As previously discussed, Marx contends that the bourgeois class maintains its influence by reinforcing the capitalist system, within which alienated labour is rooted. Similarly, Mill examines humankind's servility, meaning that people tend to be subservient to their "temporal masters," or in the context of Marx's work, the dominant class.¹⁵ Due to the capitalists' preeminence in society, workers are confined to lower-class status with

¹¹ Mill, *On Liberty*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

little freedom or autonomy.¹⁶ Notably, alongside Mill, Marx also critiques the “human servitude ... involved in the relation of worker to production.”¹⁷ To challenge these entrenched class divides, Mill encourages individuals to question “likings and dislikings of society” rather than blindly following the dominant class.¹⁸

Mill’s Account of Capitalism on the Grounds of Liberty

As a utilitarian, Mill rejects the notion that rights are pre-existing or inherent. Instead, he argues that rights and moral laws are contingent upon their context, and justified based on their ability to promote overall utility. Despite this view, Mill contends that it is beneficial to treat individuals as though they possess these rights, as doing so will result in the greatest overall utility. Notably, as seen in the harm principle, Mill argues that individual liberty can be limited: “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”¹⁹

Before examining how Mill may further Marx’s account, it is important to highlight Mill’s analysis of trade and competition, which are often taken to be his account of capitalism. In the capitalist economy, Mill argues, “an individual, in pursuing a legitimate object, necessarily and therefore legitimately causes pain or loss to others.”²⁰ Mill suggests that harm is an inevitable byproduct of capitalist activity, as capitalism is woven with harm for those who

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” 67.

¹⁸ Mill, *On Liberty*, 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

49 are unsuccessful. Similar to individual rights, Mill asserts that it is more advantageous to treat individuals as if they have economic rights. This is grounded in his belief that free markets, as opposed to planned economies, will result in more utility and enable society to flourish. In this context, Mill argues that the “cheapness and the good quality of commodities” are most effectively provided “by leaving the producers and sellers perfectly free.”²¹ He then states that, when feasible, it is preferable to leave individuals to themselves, as opposed to “controlling them.”²²

While Mill is often regarded as a firm defender of free trade, which contrasts with Marx’s views, I argue it is essential to recognize the nuances within Mill’s argument, particularly his overt focus on achieving maximum overall utility. Throughout his writing, Mill assumes that a capitalist economy will result in the greatest utility for society. However, if it was proven that capitalism is not the prime method to promote utility, his argument would no longer stand, as he remains committed to the utilitarian assessment when choosing the best course of action. In such a case, I contend that Mill would agree with Marx in recognizing that reform to the capitalist economy is needed, on the basis that it produces more harm than benefit to society. Moreover, even if the capitalist system were to produce the greatest wealth of utility, I argue that Mill’s analysis and seeming support of capitalism does not prevent an engagement with Marx. Instead, I point to how Mill, in alignment with his utilitarian view, notes that there is no absolute right that ensures pure economic, capitalist relations. As such, when required to prevent harm, Mill would support intervention and restrictions from

²¹ Ibid., 92.

²² Ibid., 92.

government, such as those “to protect workpeople employed in dangerous occupations.”²³ Therefore, the initial assumption that Mill is an unwavering proponent of individualism and capitalism is more nuanced than commonly perceived.

Individual Sovereignty

Through my interpretation of Mill’s work, I argue his perception of the pursuit of liberty can help further Marx’s conception of class relations. Mill asserts that for a society to be composed of sovereign individuals, it must demand “liberty of conscience ... liberty of thought and feeling ... absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects.”²⁴ Mill further emphasizes that “individual spontaneity is entitled to free exercise” of autonomy, provided that the individual does not harm or infringe upon the rights of others.²⁵ Through this line of thought, I contend that Mill would argue that Marx’s account of capitalism neglects to address the importance of pursuing individual expression and autonomy over one’s own opinions and choices. I suggest that Mill would respond to Marx by highlighting how the pursuit of individual freedom can serve as a means to dismantle the class divide through

²³ Ibid., 92.

²⁴ Ibid., 15.

²⁵ Ibid., 75.

51 recognizing how individual sovereignty is a necessary tool in challenging the status quo.²⁶

Although Marx may be skeptical of individualism, particularly when viewed through an economic lens, Mill's approach accounts for the resulting benefits of the sovereign individual. For instance, Mill argues that individual sovereignty – and by extension, the individual's opinions and interests – can serve as a means to challenge and dismantle the hegemonic influence of the dominant class. In response, Marx may reiterate his view that acting collectively through revolution is necessary to dismantle the class divide and achieve a communist society. I argue Mill would challenge this limited perspective, asserting that the sovereign individual can harness their own autonomy and liberty to enable the lower classes to challenge the dominant class. When Marx argues that communism promotes collective welfare and facilitates overcoming alienation to achieve a true resolution of conflict between the classes, I propose that Mill would contend that for such an outcome to materialize, individuals must be sovereign and free from the constraints of the capitalists. Furthermore, Marx presents a more narrow argument that people regain their human essence within communist societies where the means of production are collectively owned. I argue that, in response, Mill would extend Marx's

²⁶ It is important to note that Marx's analysis may cast doubt over the concept of individual liberty, given the fact that Marx views self-interest and competition as inherently individualistic tendencies that, in his view, are ultimately harmful to society. From the perspective of an orthodox Marxist framework, the pursuit of such liberty would likely exacerbate class divisions and perpetuate the exploitation of one individual by another, rather than promoting the collective good. While I recognize the importance of this general account of Marx, it does not undermine the value of examining how Mill may respond to Marx. A more nuanced exploration of Mill's ideas can shed light on how individual sovereignty could, in fact, contribute to achieving Marx's ultimate vision for society.

point by emphasizing that sovereign individuals will also have the ability to realize their full potential as humans. Most notably, in light of the preceding discussion, my analysis suggests the possibility that Mill would agree with Marx regarding the rights of the collective and the rejection of innate individual rights.

Additionally, through Marx's critique of alienation and the rejection of the capitalist system, he advocates for dismantling the structures that separate workers from the means of production and fostering a society where individuals can live freely outside of these constraints. Both Mill and Marx would argue that individuals should not be forced to conform to the capitalists' ideology; however, Mill would stress that individual sovereignty acts as a means for people to challenge the limitations of freedom set out by the dominant class. In this regard, Mill would connect Marx's conceptualization of class relations to individual sovereignty through demonstrating how collective ownership of the means of production is possible only if individuals have autonomy and sovereignty over their labour, commodities and lives. Thus, I argue Marx would, to a certain extent, agree with the pursuit of individual sovereignty as a means to achieve his desired ends of a collective-based, communist society. The worker would be able to reject the capitalist modes of production, while harnessing their newfound sovereignty to help move society towards a system where the class divide no longer prevails. In advocating for the liberation of the worker from the capitalist system, I contend that Marx's argument aligns with Mill's in the sense that, for a society to be free from class relations, individuals must be able to exercise greater autonomy over their lives.

Conclusion

Despite their contrasting theoretical frameworks, both Mill and Marx effectively express similar critiques of the dominant or capitalist class – especially with regard to the class’s influence over society. While their approaches diverge, Mill is able to further Marx’s analysis by demonstrating how the pursuit of individual sovereignty can serve as a means to dismantle the oppressive nature of class relations. Through analysis, it is evident that Mill’s theoretical framework effectively illustrates how liberty can lead to erosion of the class divide. Consequently, Marx would likely align, to some extent, with the pursuit of individual sovereignty, even if his end goals for society differ. Ultimately, by recognizing where the authors converge and diverge in thought, this analysis creates space to explore how individual sovereignty can act as a method for achieving a society without the restraints and limitations of class relations.

References

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