

**Joseph Persky.** *The Political Economy of Progress: John Stuart Mill and Modern Radicalism.* Oxford University Press 2016. 272 pp. \$78.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190460631).

Mill studies are currently experiencing a renaissance in progressive scholarship. In Gregory Claeys's book, *Mill and Paternalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), Mill is interpreted as a coherent defender of cooperation who thinks that progressives should balance individual independence ('self-dependence') against group commitments ('collective independence') while embracing the state's power to shape economic equality and to control population. David Brink's 2013 book, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, argues that humans' evolving social conscience leads them to develop the secondary principles appropriate to progressive beings. In the vein of these authors, Persky interprets Mill as a coherent economic radical whose progressivism largely depends upon the increasing cooperative control of the means of production.

Progressives such as Claeys and Persky use Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* and related texts to re-center scholarship on the material basis of a cooperative and egalitarian society. Another generation of authors will surely restore *On Liberty* to its jewel-in-the-crown status, if, at least, a progressive consensus develops. In the meantime, the progressives provide a new and at times surprising account of liberal utilitarianism.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I provides an overview of utilitarianism informed by the Smithian system of natural liberty. Part II anchors progressivism in structural reforms of political economy (inheritance, land ownership, poverty, public education, and cooperatives). Part III extends that radical program through encounters between Mill's thought and Marx, Fabian socialists, Rawls, and luck egalitarians.

As the title and subtitle of the book correctly indicate, this is not only or predominantly a book about Mill. Organized in thirteen chapters, Mill is the main character in four chapters (Chapter 5, 6, 9, and 13), an important cast member in two others (Chapter 7, 8), and less central in the other seven. Below, in addition to summarizing the main themes of the book's three parts, I evaluate four controversial claims central to Persky's defense of Mill's coherent economic radicalism. They are: a) laissez-faire capitalism is a merely transitional economic system; b) cooperative production can create a new, egalitarian society of workers; c) Mill is a restricted materialist; and d) Mill is a proto-luck-egalitarian.

Part I explores the implications of two Enlightenment principles, equality and progress. Combining these principles with an emphasis on liberty results in the 'liberal triumphalism' of Smith (laissez-faire, with some exceptions) and Bentham (full laissez-faire in his earlier works). Utilitarianism in this era provides a thin defense of property rights, and is conservative in its application of the principle of equality. Persky cleverly puts Mill's famous break with Smith and Ricardo over the stationary state at the core of Mill's optimism about the prosperity of the greatest number (85). For Persky's Mill, falling rates of profit do not have to hurt laborers so long as wages are rising.

Part I concludes with two observations: Mill could have been more radical than he was, but capitalism, a transitional system, should run its course before employing redistributive taxation and other ways of managing the surplus to favor workers. The limits of Mill's radicalism are further explored in Part II, but it is worth noting that even Persky recognizes that the 'fullest statement of the radical program to refashion the institutions of production' is defended by Mill 'within a market context' (148). Laissez-faire capitalism is replaced by cooperative production, but—and this is crucial for Part III—joint ownership is largely adopted through a 'spontaneous process'—not state intervention. Persky's reader is not entirely certain how interventionist Mill is, and the reader who

wants to know should probably refer to Claeys's *Mill and Paternalism* (61-98). Persky does not provide a sustained account of interventionism, leaving the 'how' of capitalism's transitional status somewhat open.

Persky himself wants Mill to favor redistributive policies. Instead, Persky finds that Mill advocates reorganization rather than land redistribution (chapter 6), remains ambivalent about state support for the poor (chapter 7), and is 'reluctant' to require state support for public education (chapter 8). After these middle chapters, the reader may be forgiven for asking what is 'radical' about Mill's political economy. Persky provides answers in the Prologue and in a three-page addendum (217-9), but does not overstate his case for Mill. Mill's radicalism is coherent but ambivalent, 'tentative,' and ultimately 'too confining' (76, 77, 218).

Persky does an excellent job of maintaining focus on Mill's 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual context. Major and minor English philosophers are given helpful introductions. The French *philosophes'* egalitarianism is usefully explored, as are the doctrines of the Simonians—although Persky does not mention Mill's telling criticism of their emphasis on production (*Collected Works* XII: 36-7). Mill's highly critical remarks on Comte and altruism are mostly elided. Tocqueville does not appear, but might have helped on the subject of estates and democratization.

Persky correctly sees that Mill's crucial improvement to capitalism lies in his defense of cooperative economic association. This is the bridge to Part III. Crucially, it is workers' cooperatives that *make* Mill's radical agenda coherent and represent Mill's 'deepest reform' (148, 218). However, any number of scholars have pointed out that workers do not seem to *want* to join them. If Mill is right to emphasize cooperatives, then it would be natural to expect that their theory and practice after Mill would be revisited in Part III. Instead, there is a short discussion of worker-managed firms (196-8). But answering these questions—whether workers must be incentivized to join cooperatives, and whether workers are transformed by cooperation when they do—forms the whole difference between wishful thinking and the development of conditions conducive to workers' freedom.

Part of Persky's confidence that the historical transformation of capitalism into cooperativism can be managed lies in his attribution of a restricted materialism to Mill. A more typical view is that Mill's theory of historical development is idealistic. Religion continues to matter in social explanation, and the cause of historical transformation is moral and intellectual. Persky is well aware that his is the minority view (158-9, 185), but his emphasis is thought-provoking. Case studies from Mill's writings on property and cooperation might have helped him to make his point more securely. The Irish case, briefly analyzed (105-6), is a tailor-made example where Mill is avowedly materialistic (the problem with Ireland is structural poverty created by a faulty land tenure system, not Fenianism, or in Mill's mature writings, Catholicism), and radical (the system must change) in just the sense that Persky wants.

Persky needs Mill to be a predominant/restricted materialist. While Persky does not expect Mill to beat Marx at his own game, he hopes that Millian radical economics outperform that of later thinkers, whose abstraction from actual relations of production justifies his book (xv-xx). This is the subject of Part III.

In Part III, Persky shows contemporary radicals how to get from Marx and Mill, through the Fabians, to Rawls and luck egalitarians, and why, after making this trip, they should return to Mill again. Not only is laissez-faire capitalism a transitional system, as it turns out, so is Rawlsian democratic equality. Persky concludes that the future lies in luck egalitarianism. This exciting, self-contained section of the book stands the best chance of being taught in the undergraduate social and political philosophy classroom. But is Mill really a proto-luck-egalitarian? Persky's Mill is

once again ambivalent and unsure (203). Persky correctly argues that Mill considers undeserved inequalities to be unjust in theory, and recognizes that Mill's pre-Darwinian theory of equality may overestimate the power of education and progress and underestimate genetic difference. It would have helped Persky to turn from the *Principles of Political Economy* to other sources; for example, the luck egalitarian discussion of 'natural inequalities' in Mill's review of Dupont-White ('Centralisation' in *Collected Works* XIX).

The book is written in a remarkably lucid style. One might wish that Persky had more clearly defined the terms he uses ('triumphal liberal;' 'radical;' 'laissez-faire capitalism;' 'progress'), as he does in the case of 'materialism.' In Part II, for example, Persky slips back into the familiar language of classical liberalism, even though his Mill is not a classical liberal (106, 109).

Hopefully, Persky's approach reaches scholars beyond his 'favored audience' of progressives (xiii). As Persky observes, a key to Rawls's success was his contretemps with Nozick to his right (201). Mill is just the thinker to stimulate engagement between libertarians, progressives, classical liberals, and conservatives. That dialogue is a truly radical project!

**Chris Barker**, Southwestern College