

The work of J.S. Mill shows the danger in eliminating the differences between European nations

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Simon Glendinning writes on the English philosopher John Stuart Mill's views on Europe. He notes that Mill saw Britain as being very much a part of Europe, but that he also recognised important differences between European nations. Far from seeing these differences as a weakness, however, Mill viewed them as part of Europe's strength. While some academics have called for greater integration and the creation of a federal European state, Mill's work suggests that Europe would be stronger as an 'enduring multiplicity' of sovereign nations.



Britain is part of Europe

John Stuart Mill's great essays *Bentham*, *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism* (the only works by Mill I will be considering here) were published in Britain between 1838 and 1863. Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, Mill's Britain, was not only the most industrialised economy in the world, it was also, by far, the most international. Other European countries did not trade as much, and they mostly traded with each other. Britain traded everywhere, and the British Empire was the most extensive in human history. Nevertheless, the unit of human collectivity that Mill regards as historically significant for his own thought is the nation. Moreover, and more surprisingly, while Mill maintains a self-consciously home-nation focus, he does not set Britain apart from Europe. On the contrary, he sets Britain centrally within it, as among Europe's most distinctively European countries.

Given its topic – the elucidation of a moral philosophy – one might think that Mill's essays would deal with rival theories purely theoretically, not historically or nationally. But this is not so. And a contemporary reader could not but be struck by the extent to which Mill's thinking is marked not simply by contrasts to alternative moral philosophies, but by contrasts to moral thought in Britain. Or rather, as Mill consistently says, in "England". It is always "England" – except when he is really pushed in describing the provenance of the thinker who would be of greatest significance for *our* thought (Hume), when it suddenly becomes "England (or rather Scotland)".

This emphasis on the national is not a mere add on to thoughts that could be conceived just as well in a purely theoretical way. Moral questions are irreducibly practical, and the closer one's thinking moves towards prescriptive proposals the more significant its suitability (or not) to the "state of spiritual development" of a particular society becomes. Thus, when discussing "a philosophy of laws and institutions", for example, Mill insists that one that is "not founded on a philosophy of national character, is an *absurdity*".

So the national character of thinking is itself a theme for thinking in Mill. The idea of attempting some kind of delocalised objectivity would not, in his view, be more scientific, it would be simply absurd. Mill's contrasts in moral thinking are thus typically made in relation to other nations – the leading powers in this rivalry being Germany, France, and the United States of America. But his socio-cultural framing is not exclusively national, and one of the leanings of his own island nation introduces a demarcation



John Stuart Mill (Public Domain)

between “English thought” and thought “on the Continent” which would prove fateful for twentieth century English metaphilosophy. (French thought would cut things up differently, holding English and American thought together as “Anglo-Saxon”.)

On the other hand, this reference to the Continent is not a separation of England from Europe but is intended to mark a contrast *within* “European thought”. A remarkable example of Mill’s philosophical map-making, and not one example among others, is found in his reflections on the concept of *sovereignty in the nation*. On this topic Mill regards “Continental Europeans” as holding that “the rulers should be identified with the people”. The precise formulation of his claim is worth attending to closely: the idea that rulers should be identified with the people is a “thought” or “feeling” which is, he states, “common among the last generation of European liberalism, in the Continental section of which it still apparently predominates”.

Mill thinks of himself as belonging to the current generation of European liberalism, though one who holds the distinctively “English” view that “there is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence”. He emphasises that the “political history” of each nation is “peculiar” to it, and *ours*, though unquestionably European, is characterised by a condition in which, while without doubt responsive to the “yoke of opinion”, resists the *domination* of this yoke in its political life: “the yoke of law is lighter than most other countries of Europe”. NB: not most countries of Europe, but most other countries of Europe.

Britain, or “England”, or “England (Scotland)” is a country of Europe, a European country among others. Some ways of thinking are, according to Mill, “limited to the Continent”, some are limited even more thoroughly nationally as, say, distinctively English, or French or German. But in Mill’s spiritual geography Britain is part of Europe.

English, French and German

I have mentioned only three European nations. And though we can suspect there are others, Mill mentions none. None at all. The contrasts he draws displays a very “peculiar” map of the world: in view, along with a Europe of England (Scotland), France and Germany, is America, and also, though far less frequently, Russia, China, and India. In addition to these are three other essential historical-spiritual references: “the Greeks”, “the Romans”, and “the Mahomedans”. And, beyond history, beyond nationality, beyond regionality of every kind, there is, of course, reference to “Man” and “Mankind” – the ultimate world-wide horizon of all this spiritual geography.

Mill is not at all unusual in thinking about Europe with a special focus on England, France and Germany. When Nietzsche thinks about Europe in *Beyond Good and Evil* he only seriously discusses these three. When Lenin conjectured on the European origin of Marxist revolutionary thinking, he also homed in on this same list of “three national sources”: political economy (the English theory of capital), (French) socialism, and idealism (philosophical romanticism, which is German).

The “English theory of capital” was, needless to say, from “England (Scotland)”. But “European thought”, whether in its liberal or its Marxist forms, was conceived of as “European” because it was primarily the work of three “great” nations: England, France and Germany. This may seem a barbaric reduction. No doubt it is. But one thing we can say is that what makes them so significant for so many nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers is *not* that they were all so *alike* (and hence, one might think, equally European) but that they were all quite so *different* – and hence, for just that reason, I want to say, *exemplarily European*.

We Europeans

Mill has a clear criterion for the “greatness” of a nation. Underlying what he calls its capacity to “have a history” at all (“the greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history”) is its degree of possession of “individuality”. On this issue, Mill’s discussion does not set up an intra-European contrast between England and the Continent, but finds in it instead its determining (spiritual) reference to a European space conceived as a *whole*, to “the nations of Europe” as such. Thus, in his description of Europe’s nations as sites of individuality – with respect to which we can

consider the England-France-Germany triptych as exemplary – he can speak indifferently; in the name of we Europeans: “We have... We thus... But we are... We continually... We are eager... We flatter ourselves... We should think we had done wonders... We have a warning...”

To bring into view Mill’s willingness to speak here, at length, in the third person plural, I have cut his text to ribbons. However, in doing so, two important things are no longer visible. First, what draws Europe together as one, what speaks for gathering this scattering together as “we Europeans”, is that *we are not one*. We are a unity only of the singular: we can draw “we Europeans” together as one (spiritually) *because* we are not one (spirit). *We are the one that is not one*. And this, says Mill, is the source of the “greatness” of its nations.

Or has been. For the second thing that the shredded citation covers over is that the self-congratulation of “we Europeans”, our shared tendency to continue to bask in our old glories and achievements, our back-slapping self-love, itself masks a worrying trend in these European nations, a trend which threatens to close off the possibility of this Europe *having a future of “having a history”*. They could become, as Mill supposes China to have become, “stationary”.

We Europeans, speaks this great European liberal, are in trouble. Not because of some threat from outside us, but because of what we are now making of ourselves – because, in fact, of what we are now increasingly *desiring* for ourselves: uniformity. This tendency will produce an odd kind of stationariness for the once great nations of Europe: one that allows change – but just so long as all now change together, as one. “We should think we had done wonders if we had made ourselves all alike... We have a warning in China...”.

European Union

What made us a “we” really worthy of the name – what made it worth speaking about us Europeans all together as one – is... our “individuality”, the “singularity” of the people and peoples within the diverse nations of Europe, and their “unlikeness” one to another. And today, Mill says – Mill in his today which is not so very far from our own today – this is being swept aside by forces which favour the very worst form of a totally assimilating “we”: the “we” in which every other is (or should be) just the same as every other.

In a critique of [Jürgen Habermas’](#) vision of a new supranational sovereign power in Europe, I cited Mill as among those who would recoil at his enthusiasm for it. What Europe needs is not a fundamental “[transfer of competences from the national to the European level](#)” but efforts to foster an enduring multiplicity:

What has hitherto preserved Europe from [becoming another China]? Not any superior excellence in the [European family], which, when it exists, exists as the effect not as the cause; but their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals, classes, nations, have been extremely unlike each other: they have struck out a great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable; and although at every period those who travelled in different paths have been extremely intolerant of one another, and each would have thought it an excellent thing if all the rest could have been compelled to travel his road, their attempts to thwart each other’s development have rarely had any permanent success, and each has in time endured to receive the good which the others have offered. Europe is, in my judgement, wholly indebted to this plurality of paths for its progressive and many-sided development.

While Mill does not explore the idea directly, the creation of a European Union that wants *both* to preserve and secure the diversity of Europe’s nations *and* to reduce their “extreme intolerance of one another” is something he would welcome. So his text offers a timely warning for the present generation of European liberals: that its courageous efforts to achieve “ever closer union between the peoples [sic] of Europe” carries inside itself the threat of wanting the plurality invoked here finally to be eliminated – a final overcoming of what Habermas sees as the

debilitating effects of “national particularisms” in European politics – as if the *ideal telos* of European integration would be the creation of a “European people” that really *is* one because it really *is* one.

In Mill’s view, by contrast, and I think we still need to heed this, the best and most European of Europeans today are those who come to “see that it is *good* that there should be differences”. The alternative is a nightmare of a distinctively European form of history-ending “stationariness”: the levelling demand for uniformity that, often enough in the form of a profoundly hollowed-out appeal to “democratic feeling”, betrays Europe because it “proscribes singularity”.

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