

Was Boris Johnson justified in using John Stuart Mill to make the case for Brexit?



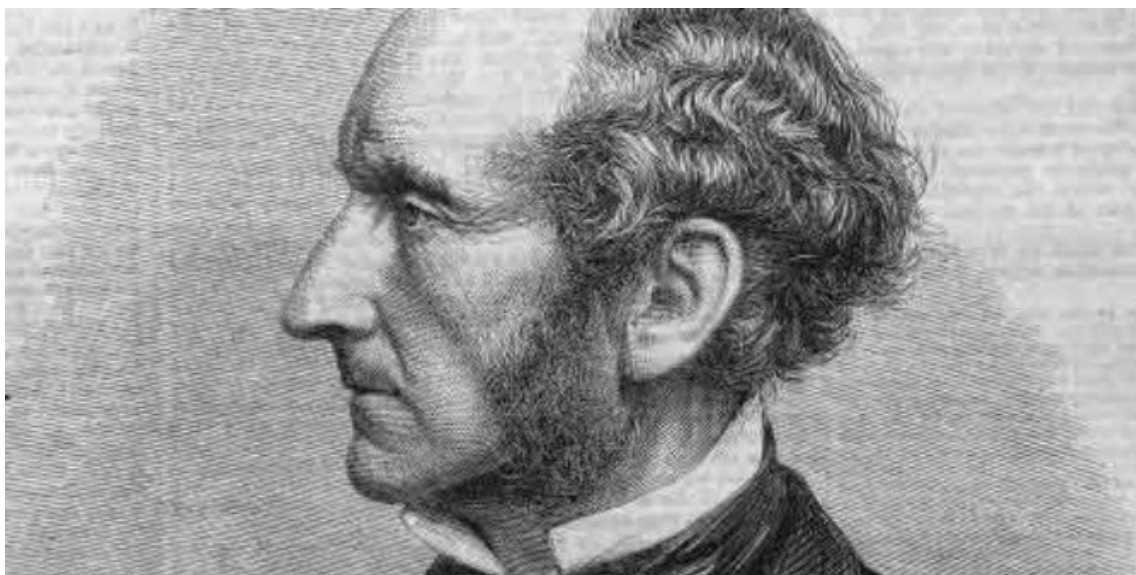
*Boris Johnson invoked John Stuart Mill in a recent speech, arguing that Mill's thinking about the importance of the nation state underpinned the case for Brexit. **Corrado Morricone** considers whether Mill's work can indeed be used to support leaving the EU.*

In his [Brexit speech on 14 February](#), Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson made the case for a 'spiritually British, European and global Britain' after the country's exit from the European Union. He sets out his view by, among the other things, quoting John Stuart Mill:

[Brexit] is to fulfil the liberal idealism of John Stuart Mill himself, who recognised that it is only the nation – as he put it, “united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between themselves and others”. Only the nation could legitimate the activities of the state.

It was only if people had this common sympathy that they would consent to be governed as a unit, because this feeling of national solidarity would “make them cooperate more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves exclusively.”

Sympathy towards other nations would remain intact after Brexit, Johnson claims. However, a number of factors make EU membership unsuitable and unpalatable for Britain: the need for national solidarity and sympathy in order for British citizens to accept things such as taxation and legislation on which some of them disagree; the alleged obscurity of the EU institutional and legal system and its incoherence with British legal, institutional and political traditions; the ‘teleological’ way in which the EU has been constructed despite British politicians’ doubts; and the lack of accountability. “That is why people voted Leave – not because they were hostile to European culture and civilisation, but because they wanted to take back control”, said Johnson – without breaking the cultural, scientific and academic ties with Europe and the rest of the world.



John Stuart Mill. Image: [openDemocracy](#) via a [CC-BY-SA 2.0 licence](#)

It is beyond the scope of this contribution to argue about the factual or logical consistency of Johnson's arguments as expounded in his speech. However, whether John Stuart Mill's words can be used as a source of an argument supporting Brexit may be an object of discussion.

Context: Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*

The excerpt included in Johnson's speech comes from one of John Stuart Mill's main political works, [Considerations on Representative Government](#), published in 1861 (two years after *On Liberty*) and described by the author in the preface as a text which will give 'no strong impression of novelty' to those who have already read his previous works, 'for the principles are those to which I have been working up during the greater part of my life, and most of the practical suggestions have been anticipated by others or by myself'. Indeed, many ideas included in the *Considerations* were already expounded, for instance, in Mill's writings on electoral reform, or in his reviews of Alexis de Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique*. It can be safely argued, therefore, that this book is both a compendium and a thorough presentation of Mill's life-long reflections on politics and society.

The main topics of the book are representative government, the reasons why it is the best form of government, the conditions under which it can be established, the composition of its institutions and their functioning. Along with these, Mill investigates other issues: the nature of political institutions (whether they are a product of society or can be imposed according to a specific theory), their suitability to the different stages of civilisation of humanity, local representation, nationality, federal states, and colonies.

The words quoted by Johnson are taken from the beginning of a chapter titled 'Of Nationality, as Connected with Representative Government'. In this chapter Mill maintains that race, religion, geography and language are relevant elements, but political identity and a common national history are far more important in the definition of a nation's identity. Typically, according to Mill, states are nation-states; however, the existence of areas where different nationalities coexist and the benefits that less advanced nations may get from more advanced ones make the idea and the creation of multi-national or supra-national states with free and representative institutions possible and even desirable. Actually, in the following chapter of the *Considerations* ('Of Federal Representative Government'), [Mill argues in favour of the existence and the multiplication of federal states](#), since they have 'the same salutary effect as any other extension of the practice of co-operation', although only under some specific conditions: a mutual sympathy as well as common interests among the populations; the inability of each member state to rely only on its own strength; the lack of marked inequality among member states.

There are limits, of course, to the feasibility and the functionality of a federal state, Mill writes: for instance, an excessive territorial extension may make a federation ill-administered; moreover, different legal systems and legislatures may have to be maintained (Mill mentions England and Scotland as an example – and an interesting remark here is Mill's criticism of the 'mania for uniformity' possessed by some legislators in the rest of Europe), while the central authority would be in charge only of portions of legislation, along with external affairs; a sufficient sphere of action to the local authorities should be granted.

Mill on nationalism and cosmopolitanism

Mill wrote about the notion of nationality several times over the years. In his [essay on Coleridge](#) (1840) and in his [System of Logic](#) (1843), for instance, Mill establishes (using, by the way, exactly the same words in both works) a notion of nationality based on sympathy, union, feelings of common interest, connection, rather than 'senseless antipathy to foreigners, indifference to the general welfare of the human race', preference of national interests over general interest, pride for bad habits just because they are defined as national, and refusal to adopt good habits from other countries. In other writings, Mill touches upon the concept of race and dismisses the influence of biological and natural differences over the creation of a national character.

In general, Mill's work displays an idea of orientation of the 'national mind' towards a cosmopolitan outlook (see [Varouxakis, 2002](#); [Varouxakis, in Urbinati and Zakaras \[eds.\], 2007](#)), instead of a project detaching the individual from the very idea of nationality. While Mill appreciates the existence of ideas and feelings of nationality, he attaches it to superior demands related to the general welfare, unrestricted to the specific national community or nation-state to which one belongs, as love for the nation may induce the more general idea of devotion to a larger group, an 'enlightened patriotism', and, after all, commitment to the common cause of mankind.

Along with this, and with reference to the specific European identity, it can also be argued that, according to Mill, [different national peculiarities and habits are a positive feature](#) that would prevent the continent from falling into a state of 'stationariness' and uniformity of thought and lifestyles.

While Mill acknowledges the existence and the relevance of nationality, its utility is strictly linked to the pursuit of the general welfare and it is not limited to the nation; at the same time, cosmopolitan projects should not eliminate local and national characteristics.

Conclusions

Drawing conclusions on contemporary issues from short excerpts written a long time ago in a very different context is always a problematic exercise and can tell us very little about what a particular author may or may not have thought about the topic. In the particular case of Boris Johnson's speech, it may be concluded that a partial (and perhaps partisan) use of Mill's words has been made. Going further, it may be said that Johnson lost a chance to make his pro-Brexit case by employing Mill's intellectual and moral authority. Indeed, it might be reasonably argued that Mill's idea of an outward-looking form of nationality could be considered as consistent with the project of a post-Brexit global Britain. However, maintaining that Mill's ideas of nation and state could support Brexit would be an excessively bold interpretation of the work of the English philosopher.

Mill criticised the continental 'mania for uniformity' as regards law, was aware of the dangers of cultural and intellectual harmonisation, and would not have favoured any institutional solution hindering the existence of national cultural and legal peculiarities. Moreover, he identified or set conditions and limits on the creation of federal states, and believed that a feeling of common interest is necessary for the proper functioning of political institutions in the pursuit of the general good.

On the other hand, he believed that humanity would have benefitted from cooperation at a federal level among states, that legal and political solutions could be found to avoid an excessive centralised authority, and that mutual feelings of sympathy among populations would have helped this project. With reference to the issue of European integration, therefore, different conclusions can be drawn from Mill's political and social thought: for instance, that the European Union should be reformed, perhaps, not abandoned, or that the creation of a feeling of a common political and cultural enterprise is required for the European project to succeed.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

Corrado Morricone's doctoral thesis from the University of Durham discussed education, democracy and representation in John Stuart Mill's political philosophy.