Authority and utility: John Millar, James Mill and the politics of history c.1770-1836
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James Mill arrived in London early in the year 1802 in the company of his benefactor Sir John Stuart. They arrived in time for the beginning of a new parliamentary session which both attended; Stuart as MP, Mill as a spectator immersed in the politics of his day. The first weeks of his stay, Mill (according to his biographer) went to ‘every tolerable debate’ in the House of Commons. In March he heard Charles James Fox, to Mill’s mind the most eminent orator in parliament, making ‘one of the greatest speeches he was ever heard to deliver’. In the speech of two and a half hours long, dominating a debate on the Civil List, Fox thoroughly condemned the improper influence of the crown. May 1802 Mill sat through the full length of the debate on the peace of Amiens. To show his ability as a writer on political subjects for the periodical press, he had written a short piece (which has not been preserved) in favour of the pending settlement for peace, another subject that bore the seal of the opposition’s approval.¹

James Mill and his family moved to Queen Square, Westminster, in 1814. Westminster was the seat of government and the largest constituency of Britain. It was also the constituency of Fox. The year after Fox’s death, 1807, the radical Francis Burdett was returned to parliament by what was hence known as ‘radical Westminster’. Burdett (1770-1844) turned against Fox and the Whigs while electioneering. In more ways than one, Burdett acted as Fox’s conscience on the radical side. He decried the failure of Fox to fulfil his promise to reform parliament when he was in office. Earlier, during the Foxite secession, Burdett was ‘almost alone’ in criticising Pitt. This earned him the support of Fox and his party when he stood for Middlesex in 1802 and 1804 with a programme bent on reform.² By 1807, however, the tide was turning. The Whigs had proven to be so slow on the issue of reform as to appear adverse. Insistent reformers no longer counted on the Whigs for support. Instead, the Whig Henry Brougham (1778-1868) assumed Burdett’s programme of annual parliaments, equal districts and extended franchise to be elected for ‘radical Westminster’. In 1814 Brougham was prepared to be chosen as the constituency’s second member. He was supported by his old friend Mill. James Mill and Francis Place (known as the ‘radical tailor of Charing Cross’) were active in the Westminster Committee on Brougham’s behalf. Eventually the plan fell through because the vacancy was retracted. In 1814 Mill was also busy to prepare his protégé David Ricardo (1772-1823) for his representational duties. It was the first year in which Mill tried to hurry Ricardo into parliament. He succeeded in securing the Irish pocket borough of Portarlington at the
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beginning of 1819. On Mill's advice Ricardo employed corruption against itself. Shortly after having bought himself in as an independent candidate, he speeched on the evils of the unreformed system. James Mill had come to believe that non-party intervention in the form of personal infiltration was needed to demolish the bastion of 'sinister interests' in parliament.

John Dinwiddy has drawn our attention to the seemingly surprising similarities in the programmes of parliamentary reform of Francis Burdett and of Jeremy Bentham. Surprising, because at first sight Burdett's patriot traditionalism was incompatible with Bentham's rabid anti-historicism. But even Bentham noted the sameness of his measures with those of the person whom initially he regarded none too friendly. The similarities were clear for all to see when, in 1818, Burdett introduced a motion in the Commons entirely based on Bentham's draft for radical reform. Comparing their respective legitimations, we take a next step in the dialectic diction of British anti-oligarchism. Burdett suggested to fight corruption in true Bolingbrokean style, that is by arguing for a front of the king and the people against the oligarchy which included the Whigs. Bentham, on the other hand, stressed the corrupting influence of the crown. In terms of ideological antecedents, Burdett was a Tory and Bentham a Whig. On a deeper level of political understanding the two converged in criticising the Tories and the Whigs as practically indistinguishable parts of the corrupt establishment. It was said that Burdett owed part of his electoral success in 1807 to his making a stand against both parties at once. A little later, Bentham applied the concept of 'sinister interests' to the two parties that made up political reality. Sometime before 1806 Bentham had coined the phrase to expose the intricacies and inefficiencies in the legal sphere, and to explain why they persisted. Applied to constitutional abuses the concept sided with Burdett's outsider-perspective. From an impartial point of view (that is, committed to neither the Whig nor the Tory vision) the Whigs were seen to be implied in the oligarchical obstruction of the good of the political many.

The concept of sinister interests could be applied to many a sphere. For Bentham it always retained legalistic bearings. With James Mill the concept, whether applied to political or religious life, often had an economic undertone. The elites whose hidings he revealed were often oligopolie entities, combinations that operated against the common interest by discouraging free enterprise. The idea of sinister interests was central to utilitarian politics, and it is important to realise that it was first and foremost an expression of a collectivist concern. The interests at stake were those of the community at large; the threat was posed by groups of professionals in the position to let their interests prevail. The interests of the last sort were sinister, not because they referred to the darker side of individual motivation, but because they denoted the sometimes imperceptible and almost impenetrable power of favour and advantages combined. The core of political utilitarianism was the concern for the
relation between the interests of certain groups and the general interest, not that between private vices and public benefits.

The present chapter first turns to one of Mill's earliest literary engagements, his editorship of the Literary Journal. The first section deals with his written contributions to this periodical from the years 1803 to 1806. Like his translation of Villers' essay on the Reformation from 1805 (which is discussed in the subsequent section of this chapter) Mill's early work is proof of his straightforwardly Whig notions of British and European constitutional history, and of his intellectual proximity to John Millar. The third section, on the Edinburgh Review, discusses the historiographical bifurcation that occurred during Mill's political radicalisation since late 1808. In the fourth and final part of the present chapter several of James Mill's contributions to the Annual Review, the Monthly Review and the Philanthropist are introduced. That section starts in 1809 with a review of his hand in the Annual Review on the historical work of Fox that had been posthumously published. It ends with an article from the Encyclopædia Brittanica of 1817, in which his praise for Millar demonstrated the distance Mill had travelled from his former positions.

THE LITERARY JOURNAL 1803-1806

In 1802, the year of his arrival in London, James Mill became involved in the preparation of a new periodical to be called the Literary Journal. Mill edited the Literary Journal from its first issue in January 1803 to its last in December 1806. What had started as weekly in the first six months of publication was continued as a twice monthly in the next year and a half, and from then on published once a month until its demise. Mill's written contributions are estimated at some 230. In the prospectus James Mill spoke of a 'publication devoted to the dissemination of liberal and useful knowledge'. Mill saw a relation between the propagation of 'enlightened' knowledge (as through a journal in which all sorts of literature, from scientific to moralistic, were reviewed) and 'utility'. That relation resulted from what he called the 'censorial' and the 'didactic' powers of literature: literature 'points out what is wrong, and directs to what is right' in politics and other spheres of life. Mill's early understanding of what 'utility' amounted to was as vague as John Millar's. Utility, according to Mill, was one of two 'principles of subordination'. In the long run the 'right' principle, government in the general interest, prevailed over the 'wrong' one, that of submissiveness. Like Millar, Mill wrote about the materialisation of both principles and about the interaction between them in the history of authority.

In the first year of his editorship of the Literary Journal, Mill reviewed the 1803 edition of Millar's Historical View of the English Government. 'A work', Mill wrote, 'in
which the nature and progress of the English constitution have been delineated with the hand of a master; and we account it a public loss to this empire, that the labours of Millar were interrupted by death before their completion'. Mill also praised Millar’s lectures as being ‘of the most important kind’, and displaying the ‘greatest practical sagacity’, the ‘most extensive knowledge, and the most profound philosophy’. Most of all he admired the ‘complete unity of philosophy and history’ that Millar, after the example of David Hume, had achieved. According to Mill, Millar’s philosophical history included

the mode in which the people, at every particular period, were sorted and arranged, the mode in which they were connected together, the mode in which they were governed, and the mode in which they lived both at home, by themselves, and in the state with others. The last and great point to complete the philosophical delineation, was to point out the manner in which the principles of human nature operated in conjunction with the circumstances in which the people were placed, to produce the political changes; and thus to refer particular facts to general laws, the real business of philosophy.9

Mill considered John Millar’s true ‘philosophy of the history of the British islands’ as extremely valuable, both for its philosophical detachment and its involvement with the most exemplary polity in history, the British constitution. In comparison with ancient Rome, he thought, the history of British politics offered infinitely more instruction to the world.10

In the first part of his review James Mill elaborately reproduced the contents of the first volume of Millar’s Historical View, from the ‘pastoral tribes which broke into the different provinces of the Roman empire’ to the conclusion that the political regulations of the Anglo-Saxons, which bear so close a resemblance to the political system established about the same period in all the other kingdoms of Europe, were not the fruit of any artificial or complicated plans of legislation; but were such as occurred to the people by the suggestion of immediate wants and inconveniencies, and were the natural growth, if we may use such a metaphor, of the peculiar situation and circumstances of the society.11

Mill, who was soon to see through the linguistic constructions of most Whigs, was content with Millar’s metaphor. For a previous item, on the present political state in Europe, Mill had already made abundant use of the kind of philosophical history that Millar wrote. In the Literary Journal for 13 January 1803 Mill demanded attention for the gradual ‘changes in the occupations, sentiments, pleasures and whole economy of life of every rank’ begun by the Germanic peoples.

The change effected by the inundation of the civilized world by the northern barbarians was violent, involuntary, accidental and not to be accounted for by the general laws of human affairs.
During the whole of the above mentioned period, however, Europe has been the subject to the action of none but ordinary causes, and has been altered only by the natural operation of the circumstances in which she has been placed.\textsuperscript{12}

James Mill's account of the 'distinction of ranks' in medieval Europe was an almost exact copy of Millar's history of authority.

The subjects of every country were divided into two orders, of which the one was in complete subjection to the other. There were no manufactures or commerce. The sole employment of the citizens was to obtain a rude subsistence from the earth; they spent the rest of their time in idleness at home, or in waiting upon their chief. The business of their chief was the sports of the field, or the riotous consumption of the rude produce of the earth, conveyed to his castle as rent by the miserable occupiers of his land.\textsuperscript{13}

Gradually commerce set the vassals free, Mill continued, partly because a competitive craving for 'luxurious objects' impoverished the landlords. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from others and the 'other orders of society' they let go of their rustic ways which used to bind their inferiors. Those who came to be employed in manufacture, on the other hand, 'rendered dependant, in some measure, upon themselves, a multitude of their fellow citizens'. Besides industry, literature played its part in the emancipation of the people.\textsuperscript{14}

In the \textit{Literary Journal} for 3 February 1803, Mill's account of the present political state of Europe reached his own time with an attempt to 'estimate the effects' of the French Revolution. The Revolution was far from over and Britain was about to resume the war against the French. In this piece James Mill declared to be a 'moderate' but his opinions were not so mild. He denounced the 'levelling' practised by the French revolutionary masses that were inflamed by the 'cant words of the day, \textit{liberty} and \textit{equality}, which implied a right in the people to destroy the government which commanded them, and divide the property of the rich'. Wanting to estimate the effects on the political state of Europe, Mill analysed the cause of this kind of popular derailment. France and the rest of Europe, he thought, were caught at a state of independent minds that had not yet learned to be responsible. The people now knew the wrongs of blind submission but they forgot the need for compliance.

That blind and superstitious reverence with which the lower orders formerly regarded the higher, and which made them pay to them a willing and devoted submission, was now in a great measure gone; and no more rational principle of subordination had yet had time to establish itself in their breasts. ... It is exactly in the transition from the one set of principles to the other, that Europe was attacked by the doctrines of the French Revolution, and it was in that situation only that they were capable of producing any effect. Had they been addressed to the inhabitants of Europe, two
hundred or even one hundred years before, they would have been regarded as impious, and the respect with which the poor man was overpowered at the thought of his superior, would have made him regard as sacrilege the attempt to deprive him of his property. Should they be addressed to Europe a hundred or even fifty years hence, they would be treated with as much hatred and contempt, as the advice to every man to rob and steal from his neighbour.\textsuperscript{15}

John Millar had explained the beginning of the French Revolution as a nationwide pervasion of the principle of utility; Mill blamed its excesses and the possible effects on Europe on the limited appeal of this ‘more rational principle of subordination’. The European countries whose well-being Mill worried about here did not include Britain. The gravest danger that beset British politics was of a different nature. Mill, following Millar’s diagnosis, maintained that a widespread comprehension of utility had taken root in Britain. At the same time submissiveness, in the new guise of corruptibility, was on the rise. And that was where the danger lay.

More than eight months after the last article mentioned and a fortnight since the first part of the review of Millar’s \textit{Historical View} a second part appeared on the opening pages of the \textit{Literary Journal}. Mill resumed the extensive summary with Millar’s account of how the most important legislative capacities were transferred from Saxon Wittenagemote to Anglo-Norman parliament. In the remainder of the review Mill paid attention to the author’s ideas on the special balance between authority and utility that had developed in Britain over the last century. Blatant authoritarianism had virtually disappeared after 1688, but the crown secretly managed to force its will on the nation, creating a new form of servility. The ‘great body of the people’, on the other hand, was politically emancipated. Mill spoke of two ‘mighty changes’.

The first is the growing influence of the crown, arising from the patronage which it has acquired, and the corresponding habits of dependance in the people which have thence been produced. The nature and causes of this influence [Millar] endeavours to explain. The other great change in the state of society, mentioned above, is the improvement of arts and manufactures, and the correspondent extension of commerce, which produced a degree of wealth and affluence, which diffused a feeling of independence and a high spirit of liberty through the great body of the people; while the advancement of science and literature dissipated the narrow political prejudices which had prevailed, and introduced such principles as were more favourable to the equal rights of mankind. To ascertain the nature of this mighty change is one of the most important and difficult branches of political enquiry. Our author appears to have directed to it the whole force of his genius.\textsuperscript{16}

We saw earlier that Millar, in spite of Mill’s last sentence, put more effort into
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stressing and stressing again the dangers of corruption than into ‘promoting’ the principle of utility, or elaborating its theoretical underpinning. James Mill did the same. Throughout the Literary Journal Mill’s endorsement of utility, understood as the idea that government derived its legitimacy from ruling in the general interest, was less marked than his fear for the predominance of particular interests induced by the crown. For the issue of 16 February 1804, for instance, he wrote an article called ‘On a Change of Ministry’. The ministry referred to was Henry Addington’s. Addington (1757-1844), who had come to office when Pitt resigned early 1801, was responsible for signing the Treaty of Amiens. Numerous critics saw weakness in Addington concluding a peace that failed, and in the way in which the war was fought. James Mill asked the question how a ministry that was generally considered to be so weak could survive. An answer (‘of which we have long been sensible’, Mill thought) to this question was the ‘indirect influence of the crown’. And it was after 1783 that secret influence had taken on huge proportions.

The multitude of places, and appointments augmenting the patronage of the crown, created during the administration of Mr Pitt, we agree was truly enormous. And if we consider the indirect influence attached to the office of minister, we shall probably not hesitate to allow that it does extend to a full half of the whole population.17

This was the cant of the Whigs in opposition. James Mill employed other Foxite themes as well. In the Literary Journal for 2 April 1804 Mill discussed a topic that he thought merited a ‘chapter by itself in the histoire raisonnée of party’: coalitions. Philosophically speaking, political coalescence was not the dereliction of principles. That last, Mill explained, should be called either ‘conversion’ or ‘apostacy’, as in the respective positions of Burke and Pitt on parliamentary reform. The kind of principled and patriotic behaviour that Mill had in mind was the alliance formed between Fox and North in 1783. That had been a ‘virtuous’ bond because party interests were made subordinate to the good of the nation. The king’s intervention later that year confirmed the notion that undue influence of the crown was the greatest threat to government in the general interest. James Mill’s idea of utility was implied rather than explicated in his earliest political writings, just as it had been in all of Millar’s work. Millar’s and Mill’s concern for the general interest was real but their hopes were pinned on high politics (of the Foxite persuasion) and the dangers they saw were confined to still higher quarters.

Mill did not think that the general interest was served by a coalition that had been spoken of to replace the Addington ministry. That coalition, which would involve Grenville and Fox, was improbable and undesirable. According to Mill, the political characters of Fox and Grenville were as contrary as possible. For Fox the people’s representatives formed the
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‘fundamental and most important part of every government’ while his intended partner was the ‘patron of monarchical and aristocratical privileges’. Those differences of opinion, if such was not too light a phrase, had insurmountably separated the two politicians. Mill called the Grenvillite imputations of Jacobinism hurled at Fox ‘absurd’ and exhibiting a ‘degree of rancour and animosity’ seldom found. The country was better served by a different combination, like that between Addington and Fox, which could take place without principles being deserted. May 1804, a month after Mill wrote those words, Pitt returned to office. Although Mill did not think that the Grenville-Fox coalition could ‘ever happen’, it became reality upon the death of Pitt, in February 1806.

For the June issue of a new series of the Literary Journal in 1806, Mill reviewed the fourth edition of John Millar’s first book, the Distinction of Ranks. Most of the review was concerned with the shortcomings of John Craig’s biographical account of Millar prefixed to the latest edition. Mill’s usual complaints about the work done by biographers followed from his fascination for what early education could do. In the case of Millar, Mill was doubly disappointed. The eminent Millar had published comparatively little. He had devoted much energy to his lectures, which Mill considered to be ‘among the most instructive things that were ever offered to the minds of youth’. Mill opined that Craig’s defective and dry-styled account failed to inform posterity on the making of Millar’s intellect as well on his ways of moulding his own pupils.

In the four years that he edited and wrote for Literary Journal James Mill emerged as a great fan of Millar, and as a faithful follower of his anti-oligarchical political historiography. Those two aspects were also conspicuously present in Mill’s contemporaneous adaptation of a French work on the Reformation.

Villers’ Essay on the Reformation of Luther (1805)

Charles de Villers (1765-1815) was a French Germanophile and propagator of Kant’s philosophy who belonged to the circle of Madame de Staël. Villers won the prize awarded by the Institut national de France in 1802 for addressing the following question. ‘What has been the influence of the Reformation of Luther on the political situation of Europe, and on the progress of knowledge?’. His award-winning Essai sur l’esprit et l’influence de la reformation de Luther reached a third edition by 1808 and appeared in two English translations in 1805. One of these translations was from the hand of James Mill. With the editorship of the Literary Journal, and the authorship of the anonymously published Essay on the Impolicy of a Bounty on the Exportation of Grain (1804), this translation was one of the first of Mill’s big assignments. To his translation of Villers’ work, published as An Essay
on the Spirit and Influence of the Reformation of Luther (1805), Mill added ‘copious’ footnotes to suit British taste and understanding. Several of those footnotes contained long excerpts from Hume, Robertson, Millar and Burke among others. Neither Villers’ enthusiasm for all things German nor that for Kant’s philosophy in particular were agreeable to Mill. The fact that Villers was a Frenchman was welcomed by Mill because it lent extra weight to his anti-papism, which, better still, was laureated by a French institution of learning. The fact that such unfrench ideas were proposed, penned and praised in France was, Mill said, what initially attracted his attention. The main thrust of the author’s opinions and the historiographic framework in which those were embedded were well-suited to make his work the vehicle of the intentions of the translator.

In the Essay on the Reformation of Luther Villers tried his hand on the subject of a providentialist and Germanistic perfectibility. He represented the rise of the Protestant religion as an act of providence in the face of the evils of Roman Catholicism. The epicentre of the convulsions that would lead to religious, political and intellectual perfection lay in ‘Saxon (or northern) Germany’ from where they spread over Europe. Villers’ account of the Germanic origins of medieval and Renaissance Europe was adorned with chiliastic imagery.

The children of the north poured themselves out upon the south of Europe, and carried their own darkness along with them. Chaos appeared to come again. Scarcely here and there a feeble spark of light appeared in the midnight gloom, which lasted the time proportioned to the foreign mass which had arrived. Ten ages of fermentation were necessary to assimilate so many heterogeneous elements to the better ingredients which were blended with them. At last the light burst forth anew on all sides. During three ages, since its appearance, it has spread and made a progress hitherto unexampled.

A thousand years of ‘fermentation’ preceded the second coming of German principles and politics that touched and cleansed large parts of Europe, and that promised well for the future.

The attitude of Villers to the middle ages was ambiguous. Employing antifeudal idiom throughout, he nonetheless insisted that this period of darkness was the seedbed of progress currently enjoyed, and the source of certainty concerning future consummation. Villers’ combined belief in providence and perfectibility made him contend that those dark times served a higher purpose and ultimately led to universal improvement. He contrasted his attitude with pessimistic primitivism, but was tied to the past himself. Villers demonstrated that the present grew out of what had come before, or, more particularly, that the rise of the Protestant religion was connected to medieval practices. He succeeded to connect the overtly good with the seemingly bad by pointing out that the evils of feudalism were the negation of the ills of the church of Rome. Anarchy posed itself against hierarchy; chaos challenged
Illumination, in Villers’ account, was spread in a rather counterintuitive way. Anciently, enlightenment (meaning civilisation and political freedom) was reserved to the great republics. ‘It belonged to the citizen of Athens, to the citizen of Rome. It belonged not to man’. When the last vestiges of Roman civilisation were trampled under foot by Germanic peoples, those bearers of darkness spread light like a blanket would, by nearly extinguishing it. But Germans were no ordinary heathens. Something inherent in the ‘German race’ made them susceptible to the Protestant faith. They shared a kindred ‘spirit’ that was hostile to the Catholic morality. Indeed, the Germans were Catholicised, but in their hearts they remained faithful to their natural convictions. When time came they gladly embraced Protestantism.

The Protestant nations, which may be considered as of the German race, have all so many points of resemblance in their manners, language, climate, that we must not at once regard some coincidence in the character and genius of their literary productions as the immediate effects of the great revolution which they all experienced. The spirit of each people, so deeply modified by many events and generations, has its peculiar tendency, its natural disposition, which cannot be attributed to a single and unconnected circumstance. The unanimity with which the nations, at present reformed, embraced the Reformation as soon as it presented itself, was only a consequence of that uniformity of mind which prevailed among them.23

A characteristic of the German race, according to Villers, was the purity of its religion. After having long practised their own ‘national, ancient and simple worship’ the Germans embraced Christianity ‘heartily and with good faith’. From the start, however, the unfreedom characteristic of Catholicism was considered a burden.

They always supported with a secret impatience the heavy yoke which the court of Rome imposed upon them ... But when they threw away this false crust which had grown over the Gospel, they retained the Gospel .... Popery was not to them the whole of religion. It was still of importance to them to have a religion ... They were fitted for a Reformation.

Another characteristic of the ‘native, frank and manly race’ which ‘had stopped on the banks of the Elbe the flight of the Roman eagle’ and then conquered Europe, Villers wrote, was the equipoise between the people and the sovereign. The power of government was vested in the sovereign by the ‘confidence of the people’ for the purpose of ‘serving and defending the nation, not of oppressing it’. ‘The nature of the movement by which this authority was placed in his hands directed him to use it in the most lawful and equitable manner’. Contented Villers concluded that the ‘most profound observers have remarked that nature has particularly disposed the people of the north for being republicans’.24
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The Reformation of Luther was the outcome of the Renaissance or "restoration of learning", as Villers called it. "In itself", the Reformation was a next stage in the intertwined progress of reason and (religious and political) freedom. It was the "act by which reason declared itself emancipated from the yoke of arbitrary authority". Villers insisted that the centre of learning and liberty was Saxon Germany. He thought that a single German university, such as had brought forth Luther and other reformers, generated more knowledge than all the Spanish universities taken together. In the early sixteenth century the Roman Catholic maxim "Submit, without examination, to authority" was challenged from the free north. Against the popish creed of "believe!" Protestantism heeded "examine!". The Romish edifice could not stand up to scrutiny of any sort and, Villers thought, had to collapse under the pressure of a questioning public.

What was to become of a power founded entirely upon opinion, the moment opinion was withdrawn from it? To doubt of its rights was to annihilate them; to inspect its foundations was to undermine them; to examine was to destroy.

Finally, men "dared to think, to reason and to examine". From Germany a sapient vigorousness spread itself over Europe, together with a strong sense of self-esteem. "The people, who till now had been counted only as cattle, passively subject to the caprice of their leaders, [began] to act from themselves and to feel their own importance and utility". Thousand years after the innate susceptibility to pure religion and good government was physically settled, Europe was finally liberated by the spreading of the gospel and the dissemination of knowledge.

Villers' historiographical framework of liberty of person and conscience winning out on absolutism was filled in by James Mill with his own concerns. Mill qualified Villers' Germanism but took up his antifeudalism. In footnotes to Villers' text he added a Scottish textured Anglo-British constitutionalism. Mill, moreover, used Villers' hints to ventilate his own ideas on the relation between the Reformation and the French Revolution. Unlike John Millar, Mill found an historical precedent for the French Revolution: the Reformation. According to Mill such disturbances as went on in France were religiously determined or, rather, would have been relieved had religious struggles taken another turn. Villers thought that a revolution like that in France could only take place in a country in which the Reformation had failed. Mill added that the French Revolution would finish what the Reformation had left undone. "The French Revolution has been peculiarly instrumental in bringing the Pope to the last stage of degradation ... We may now expect to see speedy changes in the state of Catholicism wherever it yet exists".  

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James Mill considered the French Revolution and the Reformation as two different stages in the historical progress of utility which caused the demise of political and religious authoritarianism. But the prospects for the near future were not altogether favourable. Mill did not wholly endorse Villers’ belief in perfectibility. By looking at what had taken place before, he put more recent occurrences in a sober perspective. On the one hand, Mill wrote soothingly about the confiscation of church-property in France. He criticised Edmund Burke for being ‘perfectly frantic’ on this topic. Burke, Mill thought, repeated ‘word for word’ what the ‘patrons of the ancient abuses’ had uttered against an identical aspect of the Reformation that time had proven to be perfectly meritorious. This criticism was part of a more general dissatisfaction with what Mill saw as Burke’s limited historical understanding of the French Revolution. According to Mill, Burke found the principal cause for the revolution in the tiers état without realising that that body represented the ‘opinions, projects and principles predominant in the nation’. To understand the French Revolution, Mill stressed, one should pay attention to the ‘change in the circumstances of the king and of the people’, and to the ‘change in opinion’. Different from their English counterparts, French royalty could ignore the estates general early on. Of late that body gained significance because it was the king’s last hope to avert bankruptcy. That things worked out differently was caused partly by the fact that notions of utility publicly resonated. Burke, of course, lamented that the ‘age of chivalry’ was replaced by that of ‘sophists, economists & calculators’. Against Burke’s negative appraisal of the progress of utility, Mill brought to bear William Robertson’s antifeudalism. Quoting at length from Robertson’s View of the Progress of Society in Europe (a locus classicus of antifeudalism) Mill emphasised that modern knowledge and security of life and wealth were preferable to medieval poverty, anarchy and slavery.27

However, as was said before, Mill did not believe that the bumpy road away from authority always led forward. The comparison between the Reformation and the French Revolution was mostly to the advantage of the first. And when similar consequences were to be expected, a picture loomed up that was far from bright. A comparison between the aftermath of the Reformation and the anticipated after-effects of the French Revolution yielded a gloomy prospect.

Were it not that we are not yet come to an end of the commotions and disturbances occasioned by the French Revolution, it would be a curious task to compare the disastrous consequences of this event with those of the Reformation. If near a whole century of war and bloodshed was necessary to restore tranquility after this tempest, we have still to augur no little evil from the present aspect of affairs in Europe.28
Opposite French unrest James Mill placed the British model of constitutional ease. Had the Reformation been successful in France, he stated, the country would have developed in the same exemplary manner as Britain, and the current turmoils would not have been.

France was in circumstances fully as favourable for all the happy products of freedom at the time of the Reformation as England, and the same career of prosperity and glory would in all probability have awaited her. A mixed and limited monarchy would have been established; the people would have been prosperous and contented; and all the horrible effects of the revolution, and all the alarm which it has created in Europe would have been prevented. 29

Mill sketched the familiar Whig history of the British politics of balance, graduality, freedom and public spiritedness. He was very pleased with (what perhaps he did not recognise as) a slightly backhanded compliment of Villers as concerned the patriotism of the ‘English peasant, burgher and gentleman’. ‘The bosom of an Englishman’, Mill rejoiced, ‘justly swells with pride to hear these praises extorted from all disinterested foreigners, of that manly and independent spirit with which he has at all times resisted oppression and vindicated his rights’. Besides the spirit of the classes that Villers had singled out, Mill also celebrated the connection between the three traditional powers. King and nobility kept each other in check, while the people were more independent of higher orders, and better off than the people of any other country, with the possible exception of Denmark. 30

Villers saw something very different when he turned his eyes to the history of the British political system. He viewed a century-and-half of English constitutional history after the Reformation as a sequence of struggle and strife. Misery began with what Villers called the ‘half Reformation of Henry VIII’. Those critical times did not admit of ‘half measures’, he thought. The Tudors managed to support their near absolutist rule by arranging and adorning a church according to their despotic inclination. Britain, threatened by Catholic nations, became divided between episcopelians, presbyterians and puritans. That ultimately led to civil war and regicide. The ‘unfortunate’, ‘unhappy’ Charles I had to face a fanatic parliament that unreasonably denied his demands and unseasonably took command. 31

James Mill disagreed with Villers’ view of Tudor and Stuart rule, especially the reigns of James and Charles I. Mill considered Villers to be ‘entirely misled’ by Hume, who tipped the historical balance of power to the side of the crown. Hume, Mill wrote, lay stress on the despotism of the Tudors to implicate parliament and to exculpate the first Stuarts. ‘Hume exaggerates with the utmost industry the arbitrary power of Elizabeth, which met with no resistance, that he may extenuate that of the Stuarts which was resisted’. In turn, Mill did his best to make the Tudors look less like despotic rulers so that the Stuarts would look more like popish enemies to the old mixed government. Mill also stressed the exemplary conduct
of the parliamentarians who stood up to the insolence of James and Charles I, ‘a passage of so much importance in the history of British freedom’. To show that freedom was intact when the first Stuart took office; that he and his successor tried everything to change that; and that successive parliaments only meant to protect the ‘original constitution and fundamental laws of the kingdom’, Mill quoted at great length from the third volume of John Millar’s *Historical View of the English Government*.32

Millar saw the seventeenth-century conflicts as the outcome of a double development: the authority of the crown increased while the ground for political obligation was shifting towards the principle of utility. The claims to power of the king increased just like the people’s wish to gain consideration, a wish infused by the diffusion of knowledge and the spreading of social distinction. Millar chose the side of utility, and blamed the bloodiness of the events on the unbounded wish for power of the Stuarts and of Cromwell. Had they behaved more reasonably, the confrontation between the two principles of political obligation would have ended in the same manner, but peacefully. After 1688 the two developments continued together. The crown added to its power while the people emancipated. Millar thought that after 1783 the balance was acutely endangered by the ‘secret influence’ of the crown. Until the end of his life, Millar wrestled with the incompatibility of the principles of authority and utility. The first presupposed an unproblematic identification of the people with the opposition party in parliament. The second required that the people be given a greater share in the composition of parliament.

First in late 1808, James Mill began to question whether the king really posed the greatest threat to British liberties. He forcefully suggested that aristocracy (the group left out, not by chance, in this part of Millar’s scheme) might be putting up a smokescreen to the loss of the people. Mill forced a face-off between the principles of utility and authority (that still coexisted in his additions to Villers), taking up the elaboration of the first while debunking the second. Sitting parliament was not inviolable. It was a point of assembly of an ill-meaning elite who should make place for the representatives of the emancipating people. Mill’s plea for parliamentary reform placed him opposite the Whigs. In the *Edinburgh Review*, their main tribunal, a new constitutional theory was formulated in the years between 1807 and 1812. The principal editor wrote that the balance of the constitution had come to reside within parliament, but he did not give up Millar’s idea of a balance whose dynamics derived from the interplay between authority and utility. The *Edinburgh Review* eventually opted for the principle of authority by continuing to stress exclusively the influence of the crown, thereby leaving the authority of a basically unreformed parliament unquestioned.33

To leave no doubt it must be emphasised that it would be wrong to portray the difference between Mill and Whigs as simply that between utility and authority. It was rather the different ways in which these two inextricably bound up concepts were laid out, and the
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differences in weight given to either. The principle of authority was given relative priority in the Edinburgh Review. In the case of Mill, certainly after 1818, we can speak of the relative priority of utility. Neither priority was absolute. On certain moments Whigs spoke out as much for utility as Mill did (even though, from the latter’s point of view, they were not talking in earnest). And in the end authority set the limits to how Mill thought the general interest should be served, as it did for Whigs (though the representatives of the people as he saw them were lower down the social scale).

The Edinburgh Review 1802-1818

Three of the four founders of the Edinburgh Review were Scotsmen educated at Edinburgh University at the same time as James Mill. Two of them also moved to London in the first years of the nineteenth century. Of them, Henry Brougham maintained his friendship with Mill which dated from their time in college. Brougham took care that Mill came to write for the Edinburgh over twenty review articles from 1808 to 1818. After a year Mill ran into problems with the periodical’s principal editor, Francis Jeffrey (1773-1850). Jeffrey’s editing was rigorous to the point of ruthlessness. In a draft article on a French work on the penal code Mill favourably mentioned and often quoted Bentham on the same subject. Without consulting the author, Jeffrey placed the article with the quotations left untouched but with all mention of Bentham’s name erased. This editorial intervention, which led to imputations of plagiarism, was prompted by Mill’s ‘impertinence’ in demanding legal reform and his praise of the eccentric champion of that cause. When the commotion had died down, a month after the article was published, Jeffrey wrote to Brougham, ‘Granted Mill must write no more about law — and I must tell him so explicitly and at once’. This incident meant the end to a relatively short period in which the Edinburgh sought the collaboration of Bentham. In 1804 a work of his still received a severe review in that quarterly journal. In 1805, however, Bentham was tempted to form an ‘allignment with the opposition’. From that year he frequented Holland House, the domicile of the nephew of Charles James Fox, Henry Fox (1773-1840), and the meeting-place of his coterie. The period of attempted conciliation corresponded with the time that the Edinburgh reviewers could consider Bentham as a political conformist. Bentham’s Whig conformity reached its climax in 1807, when he referred to the Fox-Grenville coalition as ‘our ministry’. In January Jeffrey publicly complimented Bentham’s jurisprudence. Later that year he was offered a pension by Lord Holland, and Francis Horner (the third editor of the Edinburgh Review) mediated to get Bentham’s pamphlet on reform of the Scottish judicial system published. The reviewers were very friendly, but as it turned out to be, they were being friendly strictly on their own terms.
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Their loyalty was with their patrons. The articles of Horner (1778-1817), for instance, were all meant to impress the Whig grandees of his talents and his sympathies. Brougham, after a short ‘quasi-Tory’ phase (and except for his temporary radical phase in 1814), rendered his services to the Whig establishment. At the moment that Bentham and Mill took up a more independent position a sympathetic appraisal by the *Edinburgh* was less opportune. That moment had arrived in 1809.

The first number of the *Edinburgh Review* came out in October 1802. Inescapably, the French Revolution figured prominently. In the very first article Francis Jeffrey reviewed a book by the Frenchman Mounier (who had been president of the *Assemblée Nationale* in 1789 and was now in exile) on the causes of the revolution. Mounier meant to discredit the celebrated *thèse de complot* that the French Revolution was forged in Parisian *salons* under the cover of polite philosophising, in French Masonic lodges, and in the ceremonies of German Illuminati. The author advanced that instead of being instigated by any such conspiracy or even by unwilled influence, the revolution was caused by the subordinate position of the ambitious third estate, and by the forfeit of the state’s finances. Jeffrey was not satisfied with Mounier’s story as an account of the revolution’s causes. As a participant’s description it had some value, but it did not explain why it was that the people revolted. Anticipating James Mill’s historical criticism of Burke’s understanding of the French Revolution (discussed above), Jeffrey commented that the ambitions of the third estate, and the forces unleashed by financial chaos were caused by what we have called the progress of utility. In the words of Jeffrey, the ‘change that had taken place in the condition and sentiments of the people, ... the diffusion of information, and the prevalence of political discussion’. Like John Millar, Francis Jeffrey added the ‘constant example’ of Britain, and a ‘contagion caught in America’ to the causes of the French Revolution. None of those causes were politically exceptionable. Neither American republicanism, British freedom, nor the progress of utility were phenomena to which ‘liberal minds’ should be averse. This positive appraisal of the causes of the French Revolution taken together with Jeffrey’s condemnation of the ‘pernicious’ influence of a few *philosophes* like Rousseau and Condorcet, the propagation of whose ideas he thought did not (like those of others) contribute to the progress of utility, can be understood as reaction to the anti-Jacobinism used to blacken even the most moderate proposal for political reform in Britain.

By explaining the French Revolution as the emancipation of the people and the *demasqué* of royal authority, and by stressing that what in France had to lead to revolution was constitutionally channelled in Britain, the *Edinburgh* reviewers managed to make a very qualified approval of the revolution in France serve as an argument for moderate reform in the British context. They sketched an inevitable historical process, freed of the excrescences it had formerly exhibited. In the early years of the *Edinburgh Review* the editors mentally
associated with the reformist Whigs from the first years of the French Revolution. This is clear in an article by Francis Jeffrey that appeared in the issue for April 1805 (less than a year before the Fox-Grenville coalition took office). The article reviewed the *memoires* of Bailly, the first president of the *Assemblée Nationale Constituant*. He was guillotined in 1793. Jeffrey began by repeating John Millar’s sorrowful opinion that the French Revolution had turned back the clock with regard to the cause of reform in Britain. The storm of alarm that still blew over the island made even the most moderate reformer suspect. This left the political community in a state that resembled the spell which Wilkes had upset in the mid-1750s.

Moderate reformers were not the only well-meaning people whose reputation suffered from false imputations and unjust associations, Francis Jeffrey said. Among the *philosophes* and the first French revolutionaries there were many who were wrongfully confounded with the ‘monsters’ by whom they were hated and killed. The patriots who founded the constituent assembly made ‘inexcusable’ mistakes, however, one of which was to hurry the gravest of matters beyond necessity. ‘Their constitution’, according to Jeffrey, ‘was struck out at a heat and their measures of reform proposed and adopted like toasts at an election dinner’. Surely the third estate would have come into power without violence and force, for ‘nothing could have stood against force of reason’. It ‘would have grown into power ... and would have gradually compressed the other orders into their proper dimensions, instead of displacing them by a violence that could never be forgiven’. After the ‘restoration of the legislative function to the commons of the kingdom’, the British example should have been followed. The Commons tempered rather than raised the sentiments of the people, whose power had been recently increasing. Due to its composition, and to the wisdom and virtue it combined, the British House of Commons steered the growing involvement in the right direction at the right pace.

The greatest contrast, Jeffrey thought, between the time-honoured British and the new-modelled French legislature was that between ‘natural aristocracy’ and ‘mere popularity’. In the one case legislation was entrusted to those who had ‘natural’ authority, in the other it was thrust upon men who were elevated on the tide of a popular rising. In the case of France, where there was no ‘legitimate, wholesome or real aristocracy’ left, the members of the legislative body were led by, rather than leading popular opinion.
people are impressed with a constitutional veneration for an institution called parliament, but because it has been passed by the authority of those who are recognised as their natural superiors, and by whose influence, as individuals, the same measures might have been enforced ... They carry each their share of influence and authority into the senate along with them, and it is by adding the items of it together that the influence and the authority of the senate itself is made up.  39

In Britain (but not in France) the legislature derived its 'influence and authority' from that of its individual members. The same procedure ensured that the power of parliament could never be turned against the people. The elite's anxiety to retain its power, Jeffrey argued, was enough to keep parliament from overstepping its 'natural' bounds.

As the power and authority of a legislature thus constituted is perfectly secure and inalienable on the one hand, so, on the other, the moderation of its proceedings is guaranteed by a consciousness of the basis upon which this authority is founded. Every individual, being aware of the extent to which his own influence is likely to reach among his constituents and dependents, is anxious that the mandates of the body shall never pass beyond that limit within which obedience may be easily secured. He will not hazard the loss of his own power, therefore, by any attempt to enlarge that of the legislature. ... From the very nature of the authority with which [the Members of Parliament] are invested, they are in fact consubstantiated with the people for whom they are to legislate.  40

Francis Jeffrey's argument, highlighting the advantages of British over French representational experience, combined an explanation of parliamentary authority with the assurance that that authority was in safe hands. The reform which Jeffrey was contemplating certainly not involved a drastic change in the existing relation between the people and their representatives. He thought that the Commons could control itself and the people besides. The relation that worried Jeffrey was that between parliament and crown. The legislature (whose members 'consubstantiated' with the people) should have a stronger and more independent position vis-à-vis the executive power. What we see here is that, of the two contrary tendencies that Millar had said characterised Britain's 'commercial government' (the emancipation of the people versus the growing influence of the crown), the first was smothered by parliament in order to check the latter. The Edinburgh Review Whigs welcomed the progress of utility only insofar the guardians of the people's conscience, the 'natural aristocracy', directed popular opinion and ambition towards the containment of an overgrown executive. Their programme for political change was largely negative. The reviewers used the language of natural growth, ranks and riches, influence and authority, and the identification of parliament with the people, to transmit the message that the upward
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movement of the people was no less of a problem than the increasing influence of the crown. Herein lay the greatest difference with the more radical proposals that the utilitarians were to develop shortly. James Mill and others questioned the idea that people and parliament were constitutionally identical, and they developed a more positive programme on the basis of the belief that the people were emancipating fast.

There is no proof of any direct contact between the editors of the Edinburgh Review and John Millar, though it is sometimes assumed that Francis Jeffrey, Francis Horner and Henry Brougham were his students. And there is the fact that the father of Jeffrey, afraid of Millar's political reputation, forbade his son to take Millar's classes when he studied a year at Glasgow in 1787. Jeffrey thought that the written work of Millar was rather a meagre substitute for his lectures, that Millar's style could hardly compare to his 'living language'. Millar's Historical View of the English Government was a 'subject I do not very much like', Jeffrey wrote to Horner in September 1803 to prove that he not just wrote on his favourite topics. In his review of the 1803 edition of the Historical View Jeffrey paid attention to Millar's person and professional life, lamenting that this first posthumous work contained no biographical sketch. When the Origin of the Distinction of Ranks was reissued in 1806 with John Craig's account of Millar's life and writings prefixed, Jeffrey wrote a review of that part alone. He thought that his former sketch and Craig's Life coincided 'in all the leading traits' and that it was not worth the while to expand on their differences. It is noteworthy that the reviewer's only complaint echoed that which James Mill had expressed a few months earlier in his review of the same work. Jeffrey criticised Craig for not having taken the rare opportunity to 'trace the genealogy of a literary progeny so correctly', and for having passed over the 'most decisive part of his uncle's life with so short and superficial a notice'.

Jeffrey's article on Millar's Historical View appeared in the Edinburgh Review for October 1803, the same month as James Mill's review of the same work in the Literary Journal. In his discussion of Millar's political temperament, Jeffrey called him a 'decided whig' who stayed clear of that 'sentimental and ridiculous philanthropy which has led so many to the adoption of popular principles'.

[Millar] took a very cool and practical view of the condition of society, and neither wept over the imaginary miseries of the lower orders, nor shuddered at the imputed vices of the higher. He ... looked with profound contempt upon all those puerile schemes of equality that threatened to subvert the distinctions of property, or to degrade the natural aristocracy of virtues and of talents. At the same time he was certainly jealous, to an excess, of the encroachments of the regal power, and fancied that, in this country, the liberty of the subject was exposed to perpetual danger from that patronising influence which seemed likely to increase with the riches and importance of the nation.
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Francis Jeffrey exaggerated Millar’s anti-popularism while he considered that Millar had exaggerated his concern for the influence of the crown. By doing so, he slightly redressed the question which he recognised was a central theme in Millar’s *Historical View*, the importance of which he underwrote. Jeffrey called Millar’s observation that the dynamics of recent British politics was caused by two opposite developments ‘extremely valuable’. By slightly colouring Millar’s position on one strand (and mildly correcting the other position from which he differed), he showed that he was concerned with the increase in popular rather than executive power.45

That was in 1803. In the following decade Jeffrey and the other editors of the *Edinburgh Review* held several political views that were not always compatible, but the direction in which they were heading was towards the notion that the influence of the crown posed ever more of a problem, while the threat of popular prevalence never wholly disappeared. In 1807 Jeffrey could repeat the arguments he gave two years earlier on the excellent composition of the Commons (discussed above). He even added that without a certain number of placemen and pensioners the constitutional balance, residing within the Commons, would be upset. John Clive calls this one-off bit of anti-reformist theorising ‘anachronistic’ from which the *Edinburgh* was soon to move away. However, the argument that was espoused to support a mildly reformist position was just as anachronistic (although it is doubtful that anachronism is a helpful word in this context).

The main reason that was given again and again for the need to reform the British parliamentary system was that the influence of the crown and its ‘monstrous patronage’ should be checked. The hidden agenda read that wind should be taken out of the sails of ‘democratic’ elements. Both points derived from well-tried oppositional strategy. Retrospectively, the reviewers and their patrons compared the dissolution of the Grenville-Fox coalition in 1807 to the traumatic events of 1783 and 1784, when the Whigs were expelled from office through the personal interference of George III. One more coalition was sunk and once again the old fear of the opposition for an overbearing executive was fuelled. In 1822, Henry Brougham moved the resolution that the ‘independence of parliament’ was being destroyed by the influence of the crown. And Lord Holland was, in the words of John Clive, ‘less concerned with increasing the power of the people than with restoring the influence of the House of Commons’. In fact, the *Edinburgh* reviewers were concerned with how the increasing power of the people and especially its more radical manifestations could be controlled. In an article of 1808 jointly written by Brougham and Jeffrey popular opinion was invoked to paternalise the movement for reform, and to tone down more radical demands (like the Friends of the People had done in 1792). Up to 1812 the *Edinburgh Review* featured articles on parliamentary reform in which the composition of the House of Commons was only open to discussion in so far the crown was seen to outweigh the opposition, and only

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to the extent that the integrity of the 'natural aristocracy' was safe from 'democratic' intrusions.\textsuperscript{46}

In October 1808, the \textit{Edinburgh} published (what in the literature is commonly considered to be) the first of James Mill’s radical articles. The contrast with the editors' contributions is striking. In his review of a book on British foreign affairs by an author called Leckie, Mill seized on the author’s extensive knowledge of Sicilian politics to make the point that the British parliament should be made answerable to the recent extensions of public awareness. Rapidly changing the theme from the external to the internal politics of Britain, Mill bewailed the ‘vast accessions to the patronage of the crown’ recently made. But, turning to Sicily next, he argued that the real problem lay elsewhere. The feudal kingdom of Sicily demonstrated in all its ugliness the deficiencies of a society dominated by the aristocracy. Misery, poverty and oppression, Mill claimed, were the pure, natural and unavoidable effect of permitting one order of the citizens to pursue their own interests without any check or control from the rest. The desolation and imbecility of this fertile and delightful country is a grand and instructive example of the consequences which naturally flow from allowing the aristocracy of a country, under a monarchical head, to engross the power of the state, and to thrust the people from all share in the management of national affairs.\textsuperscript{47}

Sicily was a bad case of oligopolitics but certainly not the only one. In the whole ‘history of mankind’ James Mill could not think of a single government (excepting dictatorships) in which the aristocracy did not trample the people underfoot. The ‘prevalence of aristocratical over popular interests’, Mill thought, was a ‘natural bias’, a ‘perpetual impulse’. Though the people of Britain enjoyed many ‘advantages’ they were no exception, because they had not gotten there by themselves. They were given preferential treatment twice. And now they found themselves facing aristocratical supremacy once again.

The people of this country were first elevated by the kings, who united with them against the nobles. They were next elevated by the nobles themselves, who united with them against the kings. The first efforts placed the people in the situation which they held during the reigns of the Tudors. The second placed them in the situation which they attained at the revolution. If we examine, however, the course of affairs since that period, we shall clearly discover that they have proceeded in their usual course. And, notwithstanding that the helps provided for the people to protect their interests are, in our happy constitution, the strongest ever actually admitted in any government, all the changes which have taken place in the texture of our common affairs have been in the favour of the aristocratical interest.

Here for the first time, Mill severely criticised the British government for lending too much weight to the ‘aristocratical interest’. Mill drew attention to a combination (or even
conspiracy) of peers that he, following Bentham, was later to call ‘sinister’, against the
public interest. A case in point was parliament. ‘The composition of the Commons’ House
of Parliament has become, confessedly, less dependent upon the voice of the people’, Mill
wrote. The people needed to claim their share of power, but how could they hope to win
from a ‘perpetual impulse’? Mill thought that science was the solution. An improved ‘science
of government’ could clarify the dynamics of political power, and indicate how the public
could take part and secure its interests. This prospect went against the anti-popularism of
Whig rhetoric.

It is far from being virtuous, therefore, or wise, as many unthinking persons are too ready to
suppose, to be perpetually on the watch to curb the power of the people, as perpetually tending
to become exorbitant. The danger, in most cases, is all on the other side. The great problem of
government is to find a counteracting force ... to prevent those gradual changes in favour of
aristocracy which the common state of things has so strong a tendency to produce. The people
have no doubt the power of rising in tumult, and ... of annihilating one set of nobles to make way
for another. But what advantage do they ever derive from this? ... If a cure is ever to be found
for the disease, it must be found in the improvement of the science of government. The people
themselves more frequently injure than amend. As the science of government advances, one
favourable institution may be created after another, till the important object be in some happy
situation accomplished.38

James Mill would work for years to come on the science of government. Most
famously, in his article ‘Government’ (1820) he explained how the ‘great problem of
government’ should be solved, that is, how the public good should be safeguarded against
the narrow interest of a single order. From the onset Mill engaged in a polemic with Whig
points of view. The question was how long the prominent Whig quarterly was willing to
tolerate this kind of political radicalism on its pages.

In the Edinburgh Review for November 1812, four years after Mill’s first dissonant
article, Francis Jeffrey published an article that would be his last for a long time on strictly
constitutional matters. It was a review of a new publication by Gould Francis Leckie, the
same whose earlier work Mill had discussed in 1808. The differences between Mill’s and
Jeffrey’s reviews are most instructive. They were not reviewing the same book but that does
not really matter, since the comments they chose to make tell us more about their own
respective positions than about Leckie’s.

Whereas Mill concluded that Leckie’s overseas residence enabled him to take a
perspective on British politics that was wholesomely detached, Jeffrey immediately insinuated
diminished responsibility for the author of the ‘worst written’ and ‘worst reasoned’ pamphlet
he had ever come across. Living abroad, Leckie had not only lost the proper ‘use of his native language’ but also those ‘feelings without which it really is not possible to reason, in this country, on the English constitution’. What was a healthy distance to one, was to the other a disqualification for understanding the sentiments involved in being a Briton and enjoying freedom.⁴⁹

According to Jeffrey, Leckie’s pamphlet on the Practice of the British Government was an assault on British freedom.

This is the most direct attack which we have ever seen in English upon the free constitution of England—or rather upon political liberty in general, and upon our government only in so far as it is free—and it consists partly in an eager exposition of the inconveniences resulting from parliaments or representative legislatures, and partly in a warm defence and undisguised panegyric of absolute, or, as the author more elegantly phrases it, of simple monarchy.

From the first sentence of the article, it is clear what Jeffrey thought upheld British liberty, and what threatened it: the crown should be kept at bay by parliament. Jeffrey was of the opinion that parliament was infinitely more important in its function of checking and even leading the executive, than in formulating and fixing the rights of the people.

We do not hesitate to look upon their negative or preventive virtues as of far higher cast than their positive and active ones, and to consider a representative legislature to be incomparably of more value when it truly represents the efficient force of the nation in controlling and directing the executive, than when it merely enacts wholesome statutes in its legislative capacity.⁵⁰

In this article of 1812, Jeffrey gave a lengthy history of authority to show that British liberty was safe only as long as parliament consisted of those persons who had the ‘natural power of the community’, the ‘stronger part of the nation’. He took the story from monarchical beginnings through ‘feudal aristocracies’ to ‘commercial and enlightened times’. In the latter, he stressed, freedom should not only be protected from the unsolicited exertions of the executive but also from the unfortunate ‘convulsions’ of the people which ‘become greater in proportion as the body of the people become more wealthy and intelligent’.⁵¹ It is obvious that Jeffrey’s concerns were very different from those of Mill as given in his article on Leckie’s work. For Mill, the dangers posed by the influence of the crown were nothing compared to the ever growing discrepancy between an aristocratically dominated parliament and the public interest.
Going back a little in time, to the *Edinburgh Review* for January 1809, we find what is known as the second of Mill’s radical articles. One scholar, who wants to see the accepted version of Bentham’s transition to political radicalism reversed, objects that the article on the ‘Emancipation of Spanish America’ is not really radical after all. It contains, he says, ‘not straightforwardly an argument … based on utility’. And it is ‘oddly flavoured with monarchical sympathies’. The passage on which the latter conclusion is based was nothing more than an argument for a mixed monarchy in which the power of the crown was ‘sufficiently diminished’ and in which the people were given a ‘sufficient share’ of power. There was or is nothing odd about this argument, except for those who try to understand Mill’s political radicalisation outside the ideological context in which it emerged. The fact that there cannot be found an argument ‘straightforwardly based on utility’ is insignificant, except for those who look for changes ready-made.\(^5\) Agreed, the article contained less dynamite than Mill’s previous contribution to the *Edinburgh*, four months earlier. Now, James Mill slightly refined his plea for empowering the people by distinguishing the making of a constitution from running it. His view on separate interests remained unaltered.

It is one thing to *form* a constitution—it is another thing, and a very different thing, to *administer* a constitution … after it is established. In regard to the first, we adopt in its full extent the proverbial maxim, ‘That as much as possible should be done *for* the people—but nothing *by* them’. … In the moment … of forming a constitution it can hardly ever happen that sufficient checks exist upon popular violence. But in regard to the second particular—the conduct of the national business according to the rules of the constitution, the case is widely different. Here there is something which must be done *by* the people … Whenever the interests of two sets of people are combined together in one concern, if the entire management be left to one, it is perfectly clear that this managing set will draw, by degrees, all the advantages to their own side, and throw all the disadvantages to the other. And if the joint interest is so wide and unwieldily a concern as that of a nation, so far is this inequality sure to proceed, as to ruin the interest itself and to destroy all national prosperity—witness Sicily, Poland and all other countries where a feudal aristocracy has swallowed up the power of the people.\(^5\)

In conducting the nation, Mill said, the people (a category which he did not yet accurately circumscribe, in writing anyway) should act through their representatives. That the right to vote was better extended too wide than restricted too narrow, was what he named the ‘grand principle’ of the question of representation.

There is one danger in rendering the basis of a representation too wide. There is another danger in rendering it too narrow. In rendering it too wide, you incur the inconveniences of the ignorant and precipitate passions of the vulgar. In rendering it too narrow, you incur, what is still worse, the mischiefs of bribery and corruption.\(^5\)
Though it made clear that Mill preferred the inconvenience of popular tumult to the mischievousness of aristocratic politics, the article of January 1809 was less outspoken than that of October 1808. The passages on constitutional matters were less prominent, and the criticism of British internal affairs was more indirectly phrased. This may explain why the piece was printed in the Edinburgh Review at all. The salvo directed at the separate interest of the aristocracy in Mill’s article on Leckie was never repeated on its pages. In 1809 Jeffrey and the other editors must have decided that it was not just about law that Mill should write no more. Much of Mill’s later contributions dealt with India, a subject in which he was entangled since 1806 and on which his views were on the whole unexceptionable, often even congenial to the Edinburgh’s staff. On the state of Hindu society, for instance, their views were identical. ‘Having’, John Clive remarks, ‘at one point decided that Indian civilisation had been asserted rather than proved, the Review resumes the subject a few months later, sick of the dull morality of the Hindus and weary of their toilsome and abortive attempts at poetry’. On the subject of reform, the Whig quarterly would be silent for five years from 1812 onwards.55 That allowed the Whig party to attempt to close its ranks in the face of his majesty’s ways to end the independence of parliament. James Mill continued to write on parliamentary reform, and to specify his demands. He only had to look for other periodicals that would publish those writings.

The History of Improvement

There were several platforms of publication open to James Mill from which he sent forth ideas that became increasingly unwelcome with Whigs. A considerable part of Mill’s contributions to all periodicals for which he wrote up to 1818 dealt with British India, a subject that will be taken up more fully in the next chapter. Here we are concerned to follow Mill’s historiographical politics with regard to Britain itself. It has never been a secret, however, that the foreign spectres conjured up by Mill were meant to improve matters at home no less than abroad. India was just the most elaborate of those unsavoury images, as we shall see when we get there.56 James Mill’s imaginary excursions to distant lands are more apt to confuse than his historical tours, even though the one almost always led to the other. In case a foreign country was discussed there is often the possibility of double entendre which with his history mostly there is not. From 1808 onwards Mill became convinced and expressed ever more clearly that all history was the history of improvement, and that that history should be used as a source of encouragement for future improvement. He did not wish to let himself or others be confused by his Whig opponents who, as he saw it, invoked history to retard improvement or worse. By contending that the present was better
than the past but still far from being good, Mill confronted Whig discursive strategies.

The *Annual Review* was a yearly repository of book reviews. Hundreds of books that had appeared in one year’s time were discussed under nineteen different headings. James Mill reviewed at least five books for the year 1808 which fell under the category ‘History and Politics’. In the same category we find a very favourable review of Mill’s own *Commerce Defended*. The reviewer praised this pamphlet in terms largely derived from its author, who thought he had decisively answered the physiocratic-based trivialisation of the disastrous economic consequences of Napoleon’s Continental Blockade. Mill’s most noteworthy article for the *Annual* was a review of the *History of the Reign of James II*, a work by Charles James Fox, posthumously published. In fact, the work was more modestly titled than the abbreviated title suggests. And with good reason. *A History of the Early Part of the Reign of James the Second, with an Introductory Chapter* was really an historical fragment left unfinished by the author that would hardly have merited publication without the first chapter separately mentioned. The introductory chapter was introduced as ‘unquestionably the most correct and finished part of the present publication’ by Lord Holland, who saw his uncle’s work through the press. In that chapter constitutional events that took place from 1485 to 1685 were condensed. Two more chapters covered just seven months of the reign of James II. The whole was topped of by a lengthy appendix which contained the correspondence between Louis XIV and his ambassador in Britain, Barillon. Fox, who took up writing after his secession from parliament in 1797, found historical composition demanding and more time-consuming than delivering eloquent speeches. That explains the scanty literary estate he left at his death in September 1806.

The publication of the *History of the Reign of James II* formed part of the cult that befell the memory of Fox in Whig circles. It was heartily embraced by the *Edinburgh* reviewers. In the issue for July 1808 Francis Jeffrey hailed the work, despite its faults, as a ‘memorial’ of the man, a ‘remembrancer’ of his public duties and, above all, as a ‘record of those sentiments of true English constitutional independence, which seem to have been nearly forgotten in the bitterness and hazards of our more recent contentions’. Jeffrey, of course, alluded to the French revolutionary scare that threatened to make reform undebatable. Reform, Jeffrey repeated, was needed to counteract the ‘tremendous’, ‘monstrous’ patronage of government, the dangerous influence of which was multiplied by the ‘great increase of luxury’. October 1809, the *Edinburgh* published Francis Horner’s findings on reading a French translation of Fox’s book, named *Histoire des deux derniers rois de la maison de Stuart*. Horner had detected that the text was mangled and the translation misleading for a purpose all too clear. He found that Fox’s condemnations of Hume as a historian on the side of the crown, and of Charles and James II as tyrants and pensioners of France (condemnations that received praise from Holland, Jeffrey and Horner himself) were omitted.
Verbal chirurgy was performed on the term ‘republican’, which was made to read ‘qui respecte la liberté’. This and other incisions (like where mention was made of government established by military means) were dictated by Napoleon, who feared the ‘liberal’ sentiments expressed by Fox. Napoleon had reason also to fear the historian’s pen, Horner thought, because he might ‘be disquieted by the anticipation of that posthumous infamy from which even the memory of his fortune in war will not rescue his name. In the prophetic ear of conscience he may hear already the doom of posterity, and even the future curses of inconstant France’.69

James Mill was not a man to revere authority, still less that of a memory. Yet, little after the latter days of his ‘advanced Whiggism’ Mill reviewed Fox’s History in a manner that made a contemporary comment that he must be one of Fox’s ‘warm admirers—as far as he can bring himself to admire any minister’.60 It is certain that Mill thought more highly of Fox than Bentham did, who wrote in 1808 that he had always seen Fox as a politician hungry for power and ‘destitute of any fixed intellectual principles’. Mill considered Fox in a more thoroughgoing fashion. Mill began his review article with an extensive exposé of the myth of great men, in an attempt to dissolve the mist that hung around high politics. He blamed the exaggerated expectations with which the publication of Fox’s book was awaited on too much regard for what was only a politician. Mill preferred to base his opinion of a person on more solid ground than reputation. ‘It is not being the champion of a party in the field of common place politics, managing the weapons of trite controversy, and declaiming on the superficial topics of debate with rather more than ordinary address, that constitutes to us sufficient evidence of a great man’. James Mill had withheld his judgement until now, when finally a real test of Fox’s ability was presented to the public. By writing history, Mill said, Fox had dared to present himself ‘undisguised’, which was an act of greatness in itself. Especially for a statesman, added Mill (who took pleasure in noting that Pitt neither would nor could have bared himself like Fox had done).61

Fox’s greatest achievement by far was the ‘moral’ character of the history he wrote, according to Mill. Fox surpassed all British historians in assessing the virtuousness of his characters. Mill explained that history ought to teach and inspire ‘virtues of a public nature’. ‘Of these’, he wrote, ‘the principal is what is commonly called public spirit, or the love of the public weal’. The writing of history had taken another turn however. History tended to be speculative or philosophical. Lately historians proceeded

towards the analyses of the great principles of society and government; they trace the phenomena of government to far more general laws [than their predecessors had done]; they mark with more precision the progress of the human race from barbarity to refinement, and assign more instructively the causes.62
Mill stated that Charles James Fox’s work was one more proof that historiography’s speculative component was mute without a moral appeal to the past. This statement was neither meant as a compliment to Fox nor as a disqualification of philosophical history. But it contained the kernel of an intellectual and ethical programme to which Mill committed himself. Philosophical history was very important to him, but he found it almost entirely absent in Fox’s History. In those scarce sections where it did occur, the futility of constitutional speculations unaided by moral considerations stood out. James Mill thought that on these few occasions Fox partook in the none too virtuous detachment of philosophical historians, who ‘form to themselves a conception of government, as a certain abstract being, some of them including more of monarchy in it, and some of them less; and to this abstract being it is that they principally or solely look when the interests of society are in question’. And so did Fox in his speculative moments. To him the sum of public interests was the amount of protection that the Commons could offer to constitutional freedom by counteracting the influence of the crown.\(^63\) Fox had failed to combine philosophical with moral history. Exactly that was what Mill hoped to accomplish. The blend of philosophical and moral history that Mill aspired to shall be called the history of improvement.

Like Mill, Francis Jeffrey reproached Fox for being weak on philosophical history. Jeffrey’s criticism was not of the external kind, however. He looked at Fox’s failure as an insider; from the angle that Mill criticised. Whereas Mill found fault with this part of Fox’s History to formulate his own objections to a whole genre, Jeffrey suggested that the genre be employed and applied more consequently. That was ‘essential to the true perfection of history’. To Jeffrey, philosophical history comprised those ‘general views of the causes which influence the character and disposition of the people at large’, like ‘manners, education, prevailing occupations, religion, taste and, above all, the distribution of wealth, and the state of prejudice and opinions’. Changes in, what Jeffrey abbreviatedly called, the ‘national character’ brought either a ‘greater or a smaller part of the nation into contact with its government, and ultimately produce the success or failure of every scheme of tyranny or freedom’. Jeffrey blamed Fox for not employing this analytical tool at all consistently, while decisive moments in the period about which he wrote could be thus explained.\(^64\) Jeffrey showed an interest in the ‘people at large’ but, wholly in line with Mill’s definition of philosophical history, the interest was confined to them as the source of general laws concerning the progress of society, rather than as the makers of laws for their own good. The moral element which Mill found wanting in philosophical history was wanting here. The people were a causal factor in Jeffrey’s scheme; he did not forward the people’s cause. Mill, on the other hand, preferred a history of improvement whose repercussions in the present went way beyond those at which Fox (and Horner with him) had hinted.

Mill well knew what Fox had done in writing his History and what he meant to do,
but did not live to complete. Fox meant to take the story to the Glorious Revolution. Then he would have discussed the Revolution principles of the 'old' Whigs. From what was finished it is already plain, John Dinwiddy says, that Fox's history was written partly in reply to Edmund Burke's *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. Against Burke's appeal to the wisdom of the old Whigs, Fox reasserted that the opposition to the influence of the crown was based on a vintage and valid Whig principle. Vintage because it went back to the seventeenth century, and valid because history showed that it was effective in protecting British liberties. Fox's historical work aspired to what Fox had failed to accomplish in his public career. It legitimated an opposition party united *contra* the crown. James Mill concluded that Fox was blinded by an obsessive jealousy of the crown, which was old indeed, and none too bright. Mill called this jealousy a 'reflection which was a favourite with him, and had a great influence on his public life, but which is altogether unfounded, and the futility of which it is lamentable that Mr Fox was not sufficiently enlightened to detect'.

The decisive year in Foxite recollection was 1783. Fox, as Secretary of State, introduced his India Bill to put the East India Company under control of a committee. The act he proposed, and the situation he was in, made Fox vulnerable to the criticism he himself was wont to make when out of office: that the measures proposed were meant to add to the places, pensions and sinecures at the disposal of the executive, and so to the undue influence it exerted. Things eventuated differently, though. The Bill was accepted by parliament and then parliament was dissolved by George III. The required second round was to be held in a newly elected Commons which, Fox feared, would be so corrupt as to succumb to the king's will of granting renewal of the East India Company's Charter. The whole question ended with the fall of the Fox-North ministry through the personal exertions of the king. The king, who saw his prerogative threatened as not he but Fox would appoint the contemplated committee, took measures to secure what he viewed as his rightful power. One of those measures was to turn Fox's own rhetoric against him.

Thirty years later, another renewal of the East India Company's Charter was at hand. Several works were published to support the pros or contras of renewal, and James Mill reviewed one of those for the *Monthly Review* for April 1813. The book was written by a man named Grant, an employee of the Company, who Mill thought was mainly serving his own interests in pleading for renewal. Grant's argument against strict government control of the Company's business was the familiar complaint that that would feed the already overgrown influence of the crown, which would lead to the subversion of English liberties. Mill's reaction to Grant's thesis was mildly cynical. That 'description of persons who are so ready to raise the hue and cry on the dangers of influence' with regard to Indian affairs unhappily followed what had started with Fox's India Bill in 1783 merely to further their 'sinister interests'. Their general political attitude showed the hypocrisy of their
Argumentation. Given the fact that patronage flowing from controlling the East India Company was nothing compared to all the other means to increase royal revenue, Mill concluded with villainous delight, those concerned about royal influence with regard to the Company should be on the whole in favour of political reform, or at least firm supporters of the rights of the people. That they were not, proved that words of this import were uttered to serve particular rather than public purposes.66

In October 1813, the Monthly featured the sort of reasoning that Mill detested more and more. A book by the title of Defects of the English Laws and Tribunals was very badly received. The reviewer denied that the use of the word ‘defect’ in the British constitutional context made him shiver.

Whatever is rotten and unsound, let it be brought to light, severed and removed. It is by this kind of treatment that our constitution has become what it is, and possesses those excellences which we deem [the author] unjust in not allowing to it. Admirable as we think the English laws are in many respects and on the whole, we admit that they labour under many defects, and we wish to see these probed to the very bottom and exposed to open day. Did it depend on us, no abuse would be tolerated and no defect be allowed to remain.

In reality, the mere suggestion of parliamentary reform made the reviewer cry out: ‘On this point there can be no argument if the House of Commons, defective as we admit it to be in several respects, is not in its actual state acknowledged as a branch of the constitution and identified with the people’. ‘We do not see how this can be denied by any who consider allegiance to be a duty’. The author whose book was reviewed was called irreverent and ill-informed for opposing the infallible authority of Montesquieu and Tacitus. The reviewer recalled the gradual progress of the unsurpassed English parliamentary system from its glorious beginnings in the ‘woods of Germany’.67 Mill had had enough of, what to him looked like, retrogressive praise which unquestioningly identified the Commons with the people, and supposed its proceedings to cover their interests. He was convinced that panegyric served sinister interests by obstructing discussion and thereby retarding improvement. It was for a different kind of progressivism that he looked.

A wholly different view of progress and the activities which the concept ought to inspire were expressed in the Philanthropist. The quarterly was founded and financed by the Quaker William Allen (1770-1843). Allen and Mill were friends since 1810 and collaborators from the first issue of the Philanthropist, that appeared in 1811, onwards. During the seven years of its existence Mill wrote some seventy articles for the magazine. The tenor of the Philanthropist was that of benevolent activism and a somewhat secular mission. One of the very first articles, for example, was called ‘On the Most Rational Means of Promoting Civilisation in Barbarous States’. The author explained that civilisation and Christianity (or
social and moral illumination) were two distinct states of mind of which the first took precedence in this world. One should, accordingly, enlighten the uncivilised ‘as men’ before they were to receive divine truths. The first process was to be performed by ‘husbandmen and mechanics’ who would teach the savages to better their situation by making them settle down, introducing agriculture, promoting industry, by raising their wants and thereby increasing their knowledge.

All of Mill’s contributions to the journal were pervaded by the will to do good, to instruct and educate. In order to fulfil his mission, Mill thought it necessary to dispel the mists of ancient lore that hung over much of the subjects upon which he touched. History was a favourite source of instruction and demystification, but Mill used it in an unusually confrontational manner. History, he thought, contained everything that should be avoided and cleared away. James Mill looked for testimonies to the chaos and arbitrariness of former times in order to unmask those who were writing history to cover up the intentions of the establishment. He found an historical person who filed complaints against the malpractices of his own time in a prominent Quaker, William Penn. Penn (1644-1718), the English founder of Pennsylvania, was famously tried several times for his religious opinions. James Mill was most interested in Penn’s politics. ‘That portion which most peculiarly distinguishes him from almost all other men’, Mill called it, in one of the three articles in the Philanthropist in 1813 and 1814 that he dedicated to a book on Penn’s life. Mill focussed on Penn’s defence in court which culminated in an attack on common law procedures, and on his credentials as a legislator for his own community. In an ‘ever-memorable trial’ that took place in 1670 William Penn infuriated the court by exposing the ritual of uttering indictments based upon laws that were uncodified. Mill supported Penn’s case against fictitious laws that served the sinister interests of the legal profession. After Penn had acquired the property of, and sovereignty over Pennsylvania, he single-handedly framed its government. By deduction, Mill showed that Penn’s insistence on the rule of law came down to rule by the people: the only laws which deserved the name served the interests of the people; the only way in which a governing body would rule by such laws was by having it controlled by a superior body; the only controlling body that would work needed to have the ‘preponderating interest’ of the whole society, and that could only be the ‘general body of the community’. Of course, the community needed to be represented for several practical reasons. By rehearsing some of the reasons why the popular part of parliament was indispensable, Mill demonstrated why it needed to be much more representative of the population than it presently was.

There is unspeakable utility in a House of Commons. It is universally allowed that the only circumstance which makes the English government differ from the worst governments of Europe, the government of Spain, for example, or that of Austria or Russia, is the House of Commons.
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If this, however, be the case it follows as the universal acknowledgement that kings and nobles, if they alone had the making of laws, ... would make laws enabling themselves to deal with the people and their interests as they pleased. This clear inference of reason, from which men may very well turn their attention, but which they cannot controvert, implies nothing invidious with regard to kings and nobles as orders of men. Take any minor portion of the people themselves, and give to them the power of making laws for the rest, and they will act the very same part … The grand problem of legislation is not to get rid of [this effect], for that is impossible, but to find the means of counteracting it.

The means to secure the rule of good laws was to make the people ‘fully share’ in legislative power. Since the subject of his article was the public and private life of William Penn, Mill reassured the readers of the Philanthropist that he would not bother them with the ‘practical details’ to be derived from his reasonings. But a few pages ahead he elaborated the advantages of annual parliaments and secret voting for a democratic system.69

In the Philanthropist for 1814 James Mill pronounced, what was until then, his boldest statement on the use of history. History was useful insofar it helped to achieve a future good by averting a present evil.

The knowledge of the past is good only for the improvement of the future. To renew the recollection of the mischiefs of former bigotry; of the sinister interests of men of former days, confederated in the name of religion against the improvement of the future, is only useful as far as such evils are now to be averted, as such sinister interests now exist, as such confederations are now to be counteracted.

The special task of history was to teach people to undervalue no longer (as they usually did) existing ills and future benefits. That task could be performed by sketching the life of an exemplary person who had distanced himself from the pernicious practices of his times (or by delivering that person from his historical context if needs be). In that way people were made aware of the defects in their own situation for the handling of which they could find inspiration in past protestations against what was still withheld and in the progress already achieved. By highlighting what had been improved over the years, without downplaying remaining shortcomings, it could be pointed out that it was possible and meaningful to actively improve one’s situation. Progress with retention of misery was Mill’s motto now, a long shot from Whig history according to which the good of the present (to say nothing of the future) lay in its past.70

‘There are few things things of more importance to those who pursue the good of mankind, than to contemplate the progress which has already been made’, was the opening which Mill came up with for an article the title of which promised a ‘Comparison of the Sixteenth Century with the Nineteenth, in Circumstances which regard the Intellectual and
Moral State of the Public Mind’. The article illustrates how Mill believed history should be used. From the memoires of a perceptive contemporary of Elizabeth and James V of Scotland, Mill selected a range constitutional enormities committed at the court of both sovereigns, whose reigns were generally acclaimed to be among the most prosperous and beneficial. Readers should take heart at the predicaments that were overcome. By recalling contemporary abuses Mill hoped to infuse this positive energy in the will to improve the present situation, to become the ‘active instruments of good’.

Imperfect as are the restraints under which the men of power even at present act, and numerous as are the ways in which the spirit of misgovernment may perform its mischievous acts; yet if we compare the unbridled license of former rulers, in the gratification of their own interests and passions at the expense of the people, we shall find that even in this respect, the most important of all, ... the amelioration which human affairs have gained is great and most encouraging. In the times of which we speak, one set of great men were somewhat restrained in their injustice upon another. The King was by the nobles somewhat restrained in his conduct towards the nobles; and the nobles had various restraints upon them in their conduct towards the King. But on the conduct of both as towards the people there was no restraint whatsoever. ... Circumstances now exist which favour the people to a certain degree. Reserve must be used in the channels of oppression which yet stand open, and unfair dealing towards them, on the part of power, must at any rate be coloured and have a kind of cloak. These restraints are something, and under them the condition of the great body of mankind is gradually though slowly improving.71

To drive his point home Mill paraded a series of flagrant iniquities and gross abuses from the sixteenth century. He concluded his article with a warning for the dangerous appeal to ancient ‘wisdom’ that had survived into the nineteenth century. The progress of knowledge, the brightest of progresses, was threatened to be reversed, and political reform, the need for which derived from the progress of knowledge, was threatened to be blocked. He warned his readers for what in Bentham’s Book of Fallacies was called the ‘Chinese Argument’.

These are the ancestors to whose wisdom we are so often and so imperiously commanded humbly to submit. These are the ancestors upon whose institutions any attempt at improvement is so often charged with presumption. That the charge is characterised by the greatest folly is too obvious to need any proof. But it is a miserable consideration, that a plea of this description should be still so capable of being used successfully to defeat the best projects of reform and prevent the good of mankind.72

By 1814, in which also the previous article taken from the Philanthropist was published, James Mill loudly declared the Whig vocabulary antiquated. He also unmasked it as the sinister interested language of deference and stagnation. From now on he unfailingly
proscribed the study of the history of authority for history's sake, or worse, for the sake of authority.

In 1814 Mill was approached by Macvey Napier (1776-1847), Jeffrey's son-in-law, who was asked to edit a supplement to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, that great Scottish undertaking which bore its first fruits in 1771 (the year of Millar’s Distinction of Ranks).73 Napier (as confirmed a Whig as Jeffrey whom he succeeded as the editor of the Edinburgh Review in 1829) asked Mill to contribute. Mill wrote twelve entries that appeared in the Britannica from 1816 to 1823. The most notorious entry, ‘Government’, is discussed in the next chapter; we will end this one with the entry ‘Caste’, published in June 1817. This article reflected some of the labour that, on the stroke of 1818, led to the publication of Mill’s History of British India. In ‘Caste’ the concept of progress had a central place. The concept was explicitly linked to the work of John Millar. That gives us the opportunity to see how far Mill had actually moved away from Millar’s concerns. The article shows Mill employing the concept of progress for condemning both the mess that had been left behind, and the atavisms that had survived. The use to which Mill put Millar’s ideas in this politico-historical move simply had to clash with Millar’s conception of history. That was not the conclusion of James Mill however. He presented Millar as the one who set the standards for a true history of improvement.

Having defined caste as the ‘establishment of hereditary permanence’ in orders or classes with their specific tasks, privileges or burdens, Mill relegated this societal organisation to the past. One of his sources was John Millar, ‘to whom the world’, according to Mill, was ‘indebted for almost the first lessons which it received in tracing the facts of history up to the general laws of the human mind’. In the first volume of the Historical View of the English Government, Millar had drawn attention to the fact that the ancient division of the Anglo-Saxons into occupational ranks corresponded to the actual state of society in India. As usual, Millar placed this comparison in a wider context. James Mill reproduced the following quotation from Millar, minus the underlined sentences.

From the natural course of things, it should seem, that in every country where religion has had so much influence as to introduce a great body of ecclesiastics, the people, upon the first advances made in agriculture and in manufactures, are usually distributed into the same number of classes or orders. This distribution is accordingly to be found, not only in all the European nations formed upon the ruins of the Roman empire, but in other ages and in very distant parts of the globe. The ancient inhabitants of Egypt are said to have been divided into the clergy, the military people, the husbandmen and the artificers. And these four descriptions of men were, by a public regulation, or more probably by the influence of custom derived from the early situation of the country, kept invariably distinct from one another. The establishment of the four great castes in the country of Indostan is precisely of the same nature. This division of the people, which goes back into the remotest antiquity, has been ascribed by historians and political writers.
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to the positive institution of Brama, the early and perhaps fabulous legislator of that country. But, in all probability, it arose from the natural separation of the principal professions or employments in the state; as it has since been retained by that excessive indolence, to which the inhabitants of those warm and fertile regions are addicted and which has hitherto checked their improvements, by producing an aversion to every species of innovation.²⁴

The fact that Mill left the sentences here underlined out is interesting for it shows that Mill’s intention in universalising this particular distinction of ranks was very different from Millar’s. In writing the above passage Millar sought to demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxon political organisation was not, strictly speaking, the work of man, still less that of a legislator. He used the contemporary state of India as one example to prove that the present government of Britain was the outcome of a process of natural growth for which not a single person or line of persons could claim responsibility. Mill, in quoting part of the above passage, meant to support the image of India as a retarded nation, by likening it to Anglo-Saxon Britain and other ancient societies. Those scary images promoted political changes that Mill thought were long overdue.

Mill pretended to borrow Millar’s four stages to discover the origin of caste, and to account for its universal incidence in history. As a characteristic of an early stage of civilisation, caste was caused by the same phenomenon from which progress took its origin, to wit the ‘state and condition of the human mind’. In fact, caste was meant to illustrate how the progress of the ‘human mind’ was obstructed. In contradiction with Mill’s professed intention, and incompatible with the substance of Millar’s first sentence left out, the ‘situation of the country’ explained nothing but had to be explained itself. Millar (Mill claimed) had laid out, by reducing ‘historical facts’ to ‘general laws of the human mind’, how mankind jumped from one stage to the next. Inspired by Millar, Mill argued that the ‘situation of the country’ was subject to the human mind that found its highest expression in the ‘legislator’, of which Millar had denied the existence in the final sentences left out by Mill. Whereas Millar had considered the ‘mentality’ of a society as following from its material circumstances, his interpreter gave causal priority to the first.

Mill proceeded as follows.

Men continue to suffer under the inconveniences which their present condition imposes upon them, complaining of their miseries, but unable to form a clear conception of the means of exemption, and doubtful of all the remedies which are pointed out to their attention. In the mean time, as the human mind is essentially progressive, and ... never fails to make progression, the uneasiness which is felt under the inconveniences of a state to which the mind has become superior, and above which it is rising higher and higher every day, is continually increasing; and at last rises to such a height that some change is unavoidable, and the society are prepared to welcome the most plausible of the schemes which are proposed to them. The grand steps which are made in
improving the condition of mankind, though essentially the result of a progression in the minds of the society taken as a whole, are commonly the immediate suggestion of some one individual, or small number of individuals.\textsuperscript{75}

James Mill introduced the ‘legislator’, a person or group of persons whose elevated understanding led the people forward, as the ultimate proof of the progress of the human mind in a particular place or time. The legislator could change only so much in the situation of a country as the progress of the human mind allowed. This notion of the legislator could easily be applied to Britain, where the human mind had progressed way beyond the Indian level. Lacking was the person who would bring the material state of the country into conformity with its mental state. Such a change, Mill had shown, was not just desirable. It was ‘unavoidable’. In a letter to Ricardo, written in October 1817, several months after the publication of his article ‘Caste’, Mill was confident that parliamentary reform in Britain was forthcoming. Whiggery notwithstanding, the country was ‘prepared for it’.

It appears to me that the population in this country with regard to some important improvement in their government may be compared to a vessel of water exposed to a temperature at 32°. Leave it perfectly still, and the water will remain uncongealed. Shake it a little, and it shoots into ice immediately.

Mill opined that one man could do the stirring. ‘All great changes’, he continued, ‘are easily effected when the time is come. Was it not an individual, without fortune, without name and in fact without talents, who produced the Reformation?’. Mill’s appraisal of Luther’s personal achievement was far removed from the explanation of the Reformation that he found and followed in Villers’ work. It was also diametrically opposed to the anxiety with which the legislator as an historical actor was beheld by Millar, the reading of whose \textit{Historical View of the English Government} Mill recommended to Ricardo in the same letter.\textsuperscript{76} The idea that a legislator could, should and eventually would head the people to a next stage was conflicting with the tenor of Millar’s stadal approach, that was meant to discredit the notion of a legislator that was larger than life.\textsuperscript{77}

John Millar’s approach of course tended to a sympathetic interpretation of the British constitution (sympathetic, that is, to the constitution as he understood it) on the basis of the natural process of which it formed the completion. Mill’s account was far from sympathetic either to the British constitution as he saw it, or to the version his opponents tried to uphold. In line with this, Millar employed common law concepts to keep institutions wilfully constructed historiographically at bay, while Mill brought in acts of positive legislation in his combat against the outdated precepts of common law. It is interesting to see that, whereas Mill was apt to confront most Whigs with their errors he managed to put Millar’s concepts
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to good use exactly where they seem to differ most. Mill performed this considerable task by interpreting Millar as answering both the philosophical and the moral demands that were made on the historian. By reducing Millar’s constitutional disquisitions to the discovery of the ‘general laws of the human mind’ Mill managed to come up with an external moral standard. He praised Millar for building his work on the notion of progress that was itself founded on the conclusion that man was essentially a progressive being; a being that strived for, and realised himself through improvement. Mill made no distinction between the factual and the ethical significance of man’s characteristic feature. Man was not only capable and actually busy improving his lot, everything that threatened to obstruct improvement was reprehensible. Thus the ‘inutility of castes’ was proved, and other rigid institutions that belonged to the past were condemned.78 By mentalising and moralising Millar’s work Mill managed to make it work for his own purposes.

Mill’s move was a next step in the radicalisation of constitutional logic, rather than the revival of an old notion. The lawmaker that Millar wanted to expel from the historical imagination stood for absolutist pretensions, while the legislator that Mill introduced was a conceptual tool employed against Whig anti-royalist discourse that impeded popular measures. James Mill’s legislator was part of a criticism of a language in which the dangers of the influence of the crown were emphasised. That did not make Mill an advocate for royal influence, however. His plea was in favour of political reform towards the popular side, and against a one-sided emphasis that served to veil the issue that should be discussed. One more qualification of Mill’s ideological manoeuvring, now towards the other side, must be stressed. The legislator represented the best the nation had to offer in point of reason, practical ability and political credibility. This mostly figurative being was the product of national right-mindedness and social progress, and therefore needed not be told anything by anybody. Rather like the nobiliaire Whig history of authority, wherein the legislative and its history was the infallible mouthpiece of the nation, Mill’s history of improvement was a custodian construction. Though both were concerned with the grounds of political obligation, they were based on, or culminated in a peremptory person or body of men. Mill may have spoken of Whig fallacies of authority but his own legislator in history had an authoritarian set of mind. Summing up. Mill reinstated a metaphorical figure that had been censured by Whigs for its despotic nature. As it were by mouth of the legislator Mill criticised Whig constitutional history for taking for granted the approval of the nation without earning and humbly asking for it. Mill’s legislator, however, suffered from the same complaints.
NOTES


3. Biancamaria Fontana, *Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: The Edinburgh Review 1802-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), 135. Bain, *Mill*, 75-76, 77-79. David Ricardo, *Speeches and Evidence* (Cambridge, 1952), in *Works and Correspondence*, ed. Piero Sraffa, 5:xiii-ix. Because the electorate was largely thought to be averse to change, parliamentarians who represented virtually no-one were more at liberty to criticise the unreformed system than those who were duly elected. This opened up some of the rottenst parts of the system to some of its 'most vigorous critics'. Thomas, *Philosophic Radicals*, 50.


20. A few examples in Mill's characteristically critical style are found in three subsequent footnotes added to Villers' work. In the first note he objected to Villers' insistent glorification of Kant. According to Mill, the 'greater number' of Kant's 'speculations' were 'chiefly composed of arbitrary theories,
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unsupported by any just evidence, and leading to no useful conclusion'. Next, Villers was reprimanded for wanting to put to shame his French readers by writing that the work of a certain Scotch philosopher was 'cultivated and improved' in Germany. Mill thought that German admiration, rather than French indifference, of a system about which the British 'conversed and laughed' stood in need of explanation. Thirdly, Mill 'violently suspected' that Villers' panegyric of Prussian military strategy was a sign of utter unfamiliarity with the subject, 'as even the most ignorant of us' could confirm. Charles Villers, *An Essay on the Spirit and Influence of the Reformation of Luther*, translated by James Mill (London, 1805), 336-37. On the background of Villers' learned leanings see Martin Thom, *Republics, Nations and Tribes* (London, 1995), especially 198-200, 214, 218-19.

21. Villers, *Reformation of Luther*, i, 6-7 n.
27. Villers, *Reformation of Luther*, 174-78 n, 12-14 n, 73-77 n.
35. Of the first number initially 750 copies were printed and sold. The next month another 750 copies followed. Within a year over 2000 more were sold in Edinburgh alone. By 1814 each issue sold about 13,000. Jeffrey estimated that the total readership amounted to three or four times the sales figures. Clive, *Scotch Reviewers*, 30, 133-35.
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38. Craig, Life, cxviii-ix.


59. _Edinburgh Review_ 12 (1808), 272, 274, 275. _Edinburgh Review_ 15 (1809), 190-96, 194. Horner took the phrase ‘posthumous infamy’ from a passage in Fox that was entirely suppressed in the French translation. In that passage, Hume was severely chastised for absolving Charles II from the murder of Algernon Sidney. Fox explained how Hume had failed the historian’s moral duty.

Fear of censure from contemporaries will seldom have much effect upon men in situations of unlimited authority; they will often flatter themselves that the same power which enables them to commit the crime will secure them from reproach. The dread of posthumous infamy [is], therefore, the only restraint, their consciences excepted, upon the passions of such persons.

Fox, _James II_, 49-50. The idea contained in the passage was expressed earlier by Voltaire. John Dinwiddy, ‘Charles James Fox as Historian’, in _Radicalism and Reform in Britain 1780-1850_ (London, 1992), 24-25 n34.

60. The comment was made in a letter to Macvey Napier, the future editor of the _Edinburgh Review_. Bain, _Mill_, 92.


62. _Annual Review_ 7 (1809), 102, 101.

63. _Annual Review_ 7 (1809), 102. Fox, _James II_, 9, 12-13, 42, 56.

64. _Edinburgh Review_ 12 (1808), 283, 284.


68. Bain, _Mill_, 81-82. _Philanthropist_ 1 (1811), 9, 16-21.

69. _Philanthropist_ 4 (1814), 204, 46-56, 204-17, 208, 211.

70. _Philanthropist_ 4 (1814), 117, 118.

71. _Philanthropist_ 4 (1814), 351, 353, 351-52.

72. _Philanthropist_ 4 (1814), 360.

73. Bain, _Mill_, 128.


75. _Encyclopædia Britannica_ Supplement (1817), 2:649.

76. Ricardo, _Works_, 7:198, 197.

77. The contradictory ways in which Millar and Mill viewed the ‘legislator’ has struck several scholars who have studied both authors. See for example Guido Abbattista, _James Mill e il problema indiano: Gli intelletuali britannici e la conquista dell'India_ (Milano, 1979), 98-105, and Knud Haakonssen, ‘James Mill and Scottish Moral Philosophy’, in _Natural Law and Moral Philosophy_ (Cambridge, 1996),
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298-300.