

J.S. MILL AND DEMOCRACY: Classical Liberalism's Elitist Response

Abstract

Elitism today is the residue of the liberal scepticism concerning democratic government. Classical liberals in the early decades of the 19th century had profound forebodings concerning the apparently inevitable advent of democracy. In response, they advocated elitism as a brake on the "tyranny of the majority". While other liberals were concerned with the danger of "democratic despotism", J.S. Mill meant diagnosed a culture of mediocrity engendered by democratic forms of government. Mill at first followed Coleridge and Comte in espousing illiberal elitism, the view that the intellectual and cultural elite should constitute an estate of society – a Church or Caste with formal powers. He subsequently rejected illiberal elitism on the grounds that it did not foster individual autonomy, but still maintained liberal elitism, according to which the intellectual elite must exert influence through recognition of their authority in their sphere. In On Liberty his position is further nuanced, so that it is questionable whether he really was an elitist at all. I advocate a position that constitutes a middle way between elitism and populism. Elitism should be contrasted with populism, and not with (i) egalitarianism, or (ii) individualism in the sense of Mill's Liberty Principle. I conclude by considering the relation between elitism and a meritocratic standpoint which affirms individual autonomy.

1. Mill and the advance of democracy

Democracy is "the inexorable demand of these ages", Thomas Carlyle commented.¹ "It is too bad," wrote Chateaubriand, "but that is the way it is; what can we do?" J.S. Mill was almost correct in holding that democracy had arrived without any support from intellectuals – in Europe at least. The idea of settling important matters by majority vote was regarded as deplorable, and fear of democratic despotism was widespread. "It will no longer be a despot that oppresses the individual, but the masses", Flaubert thought.² Palmerston commented in 1862 to Lord John Russell, architect of the 1832 Reform Act, that history shows "that Power in the Hands of the Masses throws the Scum of the Community to the Surface".³

Liberals were prominent in sharing these concerns. Classical 19th century liberals wished to undermine the ancient privileges of monarchy, church and aristocracy, in order to create equality for all under the law, and in that sense might be regarded as pro-democratic. But they asserted the values of individualism over both despotism and democracy, and in their concern with the limits of government, recognised a tension between democracy and liberty. So in the earlier 19th century, our present concept of "liberal democracy" would have seemed paradoxical or even contradictory. Macaulay, Whig historian and in some respects a liberal, commented in his speech in the House of Commons on the 1842 People's Charter that "...in our country, universal suffrage is incompatible...with everything for the sake of which forms of government exist...it is incompatible with property [and] consequently incompatible with civilisation".⁴

This view was widely shared among liberals. Benjamin Constant, leading theorist of early 19th century French liberalism, contrasted the demand that power should be limited, with the demand that it should be distributed:

¹ Carlyle (2005), p. 213.

² Quotes in Stromberg (1996), p. 31.

³ Bentley (1984), p. 158.

⁴ Macaulay (1889), p. 626.

The ancients aimed at a distribution of power among all the citizens of a given state, and they referred to this as freedom. For the moderns, the goal is security in their private possessions. For them, liberty refers to the guarantees of these possessions afforded by their institutions.

Constant regards these aims as incompatible; where all participate directly in collective decisions, the individual ends up being subordinated to the authority of the whole – here he has Rousseau in his sights. Hence he concludes:

We today are no longer able to enjoy the liberty of the ancients, which consisted in their continual and active participation in collective power. Our freedom, by contrast, must reside in the peaceful enjoyment of private independence.

He saw unlimited popular sovereignty as an evil no matter in whose hands it is placed.⁵

Liberalism is a modern standpoint while democracy is ancient.⁶ In his succinct but magisterial Liberalism and Democracy, Norberto Bobbio argues that while classical liberals were suspicious of democracy, "modern [formal] democracy" is a natural extension of liberalism. In the procedural sense of government by the people, democracy is linked to the formation of the liberal state; where it has the substantial sense of government for the people, its relation to the liberal state is much more problematic – in this sense, for instance, it could be manifested by a despotism that enforces equality among citizens.⁷ Bobbio argues that Constant's counterposing of liberalism and democracy is less historically accurate than contrasting ancient organicism and modern individualism – for both liberalism and democracy "have a common starting-point: the individual".⁸

For Bentham and the Philosophic Radicals, including J.S. Mill, democracy was at most a means, not an end in itself. Mill's famous phrase "the tyranny of the majority" derives from de Tocqueville's Democracy In America, which has been described as "the single most important authority in Victorian debates about democracy".⁹ De Tocqueville, leading liberal of the 1815-48 era, made the contradiction between liberty and democracy the guiding theme of Democracy In America. He writes:

Our contemporaries...conceive a government which is unitary, protective, and all-powerful, but elected by the people. Centralisation is combined with the sovereignty of the people...They console themselves for being under schoolmasters by thinking that they have chosen them themselves...Under this system the citizens quite their state of dependence just long enough to choose their masters and then fall back into it.¹⁰

Mill is not so scathing about democracy, but still cautious. When a functioning democracy, the USA, appeared, he writes, "It was now perceived that such phrases as 'self-government', and 'the power of the people over themselves', do not express the true state of the case...The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people – the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted

⁵ Constant (1820), vol. 4, part 7, p. 253.

⁶ Bobbio (2005), p. 25. See also Graham (2002).

⁷ Bobbio (2005), pp. 31-2; as he points out, Rousseau is unusual in advocating both forms of democracy, in that his strongly egalitarian ideal is realisable only through the formation of the general will.

⁸ Bobbio (2005), p. 41.

⁹ Jones (2000), p. 66. Tocqueville refers also to the "despotism of the majority".

¹⁰ Tocqueville (1968), Vol. 2, pp. 899-900.

as the majority".¹¹ While the tyranny of custom exists in all societies, he holds, the tyranny of the majority is engendered specifically by democratic forms of government. His elitism results from attempts to overcome it. The 19th century was the era of elitism, both liberal and illiberal.

According to Mill, popular cultural tyranny is maintained directly through the state, and indirectly by social forces. On Liberty is concerned with both manifestations – Mill is much less concerned with coercion by individuals: "Protection... against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own".

Some authorities argue that Mill's consistent viewpoint throughout his political writings was not strictly democratic.¹² Others believe that he was.¹³ The dispute of course turns on what one means by democracy – a complex and highly contested ideal, whose justifications are equally contested. These are not issues I enter into here, for my concern is with the philosophical manifestation of liberalism's fear of democracy. But one obvious distinction must be noted. Democracy is often taken to mean "majority rule" or "one person one vote", and in that sense Mill was not a democrat in a strict sense, since he believed in plural voting and other mechanisms to qualify majority power; he does not agree with many democrats that people are equal in the moral and intellectual qualities required for the exercise of political power. However, he clearly believed in representative government, whose justification in terms of the encouraging of autonomy overlaps with that of majoritarian democracy. One could say, with Ten, that he believes that democracy is ideally the best form of government; if the social conditions which make it feasible are present, which Mill denied they were yet, it is the best.¹⁴ Liberalism and pure democratic thought, far from being indissolubly linked, are in fact two-way independent – though it may also be recognised that since our notion of democracy is a liberal one, the conflict passes unnoticed. We are so familiar with the linking of liberalism and democracy in the concept of "liberal democracy", that we fail to note the former's implicit qualification of popular rule through a set of basic liberties.

It will be useful to chart the development of Mill's thought concerning the democratic ideal. After his nervous breakdown in 1826, Mill assimilated influences beyond the Philosophic Radicalism of his youth, and these led him to qualify the Radicals' commitment to democracy. He questioned their advocacy of elected representatives as bound delegates, and focussed on the need for power to be exercised by the fittest persons. As he put it in an article in the Examiner: "The sovereignty of the people is essentially a delegated sovereignty. Government must be performed by the [judicious] few, for the benefit of the many". The alternative of direct democracy was "mere mob-government".¹⁵ This qualification remained a leitmotif of his political thought for the rest of his career.

In his review of de Tocqueville's Democracy in America in 1835, Mill describes the existence of a leisured class as a safeguard against the tyranny of mass opinion.¹⁶ Spurred by de Tocqueville, he looked increasingly to a power to rival that of the masses, rather than relying on people's ability to choose wise rulers. His essay on Coleridge marked his severance from

¹¹ Mill, On Liberty, Ch. 1 para. 4.

¹² Burns (1968), p. 328. Alan Ryan claims that we are used to regarding Mill as an "aristocratic liberal", though he qualifies the image - Ryan (2007), p.158.

¹³ Robson (1968), p. 224; Bobbio (2005), p. 57.

¹⁴ Ten (1998), p. 375.

¹⁵ Examiner 4 July 1832, pp. 417-8.

¹⁶ Examiner 15 July 1832, p. 450.

orthodox Radical doctrines, and strongly supports Coleridge's idea of a "clerisy", "an endowed class, for the cultivation of learning, and for diffusing its results among the community".¹⁷ The high tide of conservatism in Mill's thought occurred around 1840.¹⁸ In his second review of de Tocqueville, he expresses sympathy with the latter's fears of a tyranny of the majority, and looks for a counterbalancing force to mass opinion in "an agricultural class, a leisured class, and a learned class".¹⁹ Thereafter his radicalism was reinvigorated as he fell more under the influence of Harriet Taylor; he no longer felt that the need for a leisured class, but held rather that society at large should not be overworked.²⁰

By the time of Representative Government, Mill was firm in his requirement of a skilled professional administration. He had a constant concern for the quality of representatives, and believed that Hare's scheme of proportional representation would ensure that an assembly would contain "the élite of the nation": "equal voting [is not] among the things which are good in themselves...[it is] less objectionable than inequality of privilege grounded on irrelevant or adventitious circumstances, but in principle wrong, because recognising a wrong standard, and exercising a bad influence on the voter's mind. It is... hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge".²¹ Proportional representation checks the tendency of representative democracy towards collective mediocrity. The voting strength of those with plural votes should not outweigh that of the rest of the community, so that the former will not be able to enact their own class legislation. To reiterate, Mill believed in representative government, but does not assume that people are equal in the moral and intellectual qualities required by the exercise of political power. That is, he is a liberal elitist.

2. Defining elitism

Elitism, then, was the response by both liberals and non-liberals to the advent of democratic forms of government. Liberal elitism, it is argued by John Skorupski, is essential to the political thought of Mill and other classical liberals.²² Elitism becomes a recognisable standpoint only in an incipiently democratic age, when the prerogatives of caste or social elites come into question; the aristocratic radicalism of Carlyle or Nietzsche seems too extreme in its illiberalism and rejection of democracy even to be regarded as illiberal elitism. But how should elitism be defined? The Shorter OED offers "advocacy of or reliance on the leadership or dominance of a select group" – in the language of elitism's present-day critics, a group that is self-perpetuating, exclusive and non-meritocratic. Elitism, as Skorupski characterises it, is the denial of populism. This characterisation allows elitism to bear the weight of philosophical analysis, whilst acknowledging many of its everyday connotations. However, most commentators have neglected it, instead contrasting elitism with egalitarianism – the requirement that a large share of resources should be devoted to the developed elite, as Wendy Donner puts it.²³ This is a mistake, I believe. It is true that elitists tend to reject egalitarian distribution, but elitism should be defined in opposition to populism rather than to egalitarianism. (Although the claim that elitism is opposed to autonomy has more justification, this I will argue is also largely incorrect.)

¹⁷ See Burns (1968), in Schneewind (1968), p. 299.

¹⁸ Burns (1968), p. 305.

¹⁹ Edinburgh Review lxxii, p. 45.

²⁰ Burns (1968), p. 313.

²¹ "Recent Writers on Reform", Fraser's Magazine, lix, April 1859, p. 502; Mill (1973), p. 288.

²² Skorupski (1999).

²³ Donner (1991), passim.

In order to obtain a characterisation of elitism, therefore, we need to examine the elitism-populism polarity. The opposition between populists and elitists focusses on certain kinds of expertise. Populists have to allow that neuro-surgeons, physicists and professional sportsmen must possess genuine skill or expertise – no one objects to elitism in brain surgery, or in selection of the Olympic team. What populists deny is the elitist claim that – as Skorupski puts it – moral, cultural, and spiritual ends and values invite substantive and not merely instrumental deliberation, and that some individuals are more penetrating judges of these questions than others. On this view, elitism is both a moral and a political standpoint. The claim is that there are moral authorities – "experts" would have the wrong connotations – among whom Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama would be eminent; and that these should have social influence in their sphere. In its liberal version, on Skorupski's view, elitism does not regard these judges as equipped with special vision of an esoteric Platonic domain; rather, we recognise that in a particular area of human responses, they register more sensitively, or in the light of better information or greater reflection, natural dispositions which we also share. Skorupski holds that according to liberal elitists, there are better judges whose natural influence must not be impeded.²⁴ While classical liberalism held that one can deliberate about ends and values, modern liberalism has largely abandoned elitism, and bases equality of respect and ethical neutrality on the uncriticisability of ends.²⁵ Populist modern liberalism holds that individuals deserve equal respect just because their ends and values are unappraisable. For Skorupski, this "modernist liberalism" is a pallid deviation from classical liberalism.

One should distinguish between moderate or liberal elitism, the position of 19th century classical liberals, which affirms that the best judges are socially vital and must exert due influence in their sphere, and strong or illiberal elitism, the view that such an elite should constitute an estate of society – a Church, Vanguard Party or Caste – with formal powers.²⁶ The latter was the view of Coleridge, Comte and socialists such as Henri Saint-Simon, who, like his mentor Comte, proposed authoritarian government by engineers and economic experts. Ernest Renan, French essayist of the 1848-71 era, had this position in mind when he commented that "the aristocracy of which I dream would be the incarnation of reason: a papacy of true infallibility. Power, in its hands, could not but be beneficial".²⁷ The contrast here is between an elite with influence and one with power, and it has considerable plausibility when applied to the evolution of Mill's position. His associationism, with its assumption that everyone has intellectual potential, always qualified his elitism, but he moved away from and then back to liberalism.

After abandoning his Radical heritage, Mill as we have seen followed Coleridge and Comte in espousing illiberal elitism, and supports the former's idea of a clerisy. By 1840, when Mill's thought was at its most conservative, he sympathised in his review of de Tocqueville's Democracy in America with the latter's fears of majority tyranny, and looked to counterbalance mass opinion with "an agricultural class, a leisured class, and a learned class".²⁸ Subsequently he rejected strong elitism for failing to foster individual autonomy, and

²⁴ Skorupski (1999), p. 210.

²⁵ Mill did not have an instrumentalist conception of reason; he believed that autonomy or "moral freedom" involved mastery of the passions by the rational self, and a capacity to recognise and act on rational principles and ends – an appropriation of the German ideal of self-development (see Skorupski (1999), pp. 205-9).

²⁶ The terms are Skorupski's, (1999), p. 195. The Church of England's present status in moral matters makes it something like an estate, if an enfeebled one; a different example is the Academie Française. Although liberalism and democracy do not coincide conceptually, and one could imagine an argument that strong elitism, though undemocratic, was not illiberal; however, illiberal and anti-democratic elitism, and also liberal and democratic elitism, are practically coextensive.

²⁷ Renan (1966), quoted in Stromberg (1996), p. 34.

²⁸ This was the review of the second volume of Tocqueville in Edinburgh Review lxxii, p. 45; see Burns (1968), p. 305, and Ryan (2007), p. 158.

maintained moderate elitism. The educated class with leisure to engage in free enquiry is no longer to be formally constituted as a clerisy or Comtean élite.²⁹ However, despite Mill's elitism, I will argue that On Liberty offers a glimpse of an alternative position. After his Coleridgean period, Mill no longer believed that the One or Few should have the power to force their views on others, though in safeguarding the freedom of each to draw up their plan of life, the exemplary gifted few must have the freedom to "point the way". Mill's liberalism is anti-authoritarian but not anti-elitist. As Skorupski comments: "True liberalism is not populism and the real difference between them is one of the most important lessons Mill has to teach".³⁰

In the 20th century, illiberal elitism assumed a corporatist and even totalitarian form. In Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, T.S. Eliot defines high culture as the preserve of "superior individuals", and wants to replace the existing class system by what he describes – or mis-describes – as a meritocracy headed by a cultural elite: "the superior individuals must be formed into suitable groups, endowed with appropriate powers [which] will direct the public life of the nation; the individuals composing them will be spoken of as 'leaders'. There will be groups concerned with art...science [and] philosophy as well as groups consisting of men of action: and the groups are what we call élite".³¹ Efforts to make high culture accessible to all, through the democratisation of the education system, lead to falling standards, Eliot argues; artistic excellence implies a limited, privileged audience.³²

Note how Eliot, as a modern proponent of elitism, focusses on culture and the arts. It is cultural elitism which has become the primary target of populists.³³ To describe opera as an elitist artform is to say, as current sloganising has it, that it is "obscure, not relevant to ordinary people, socially exclusive". Other kinds of elitism now considered objectionable include the remains – or more than this – of social elitism in English public schools and ancient universities, and American Ivy League universities. Administrative elitism, closest to Mill's aspirations, has never really been a target of populists. One version espouses technocratic government, which attempts to treat moral and cultural questions as social scientific ones. Douglas Jay's pronouncement that "in the case of nutrition and health, just as in the case of education, the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves", shows how administrative elitism merges with paternalism. Mill would accept Jay's claim, but – unlike T.H. Green perhaps – deny its interventionist implication; as we will see, he aims to strike a balance between elitism and paternalism.³⁴ The ideal of a humane mandarin bureaucracy, which began to be realised in Mill's time by the Northcote-Trevelyan Reforms of the Civil Service, is elitist in placing a brake on democratically-elected government: "the informal 'mixed constitution' of mandarin democracy averted the formation of the mass society that liberal thinkers dreaded".³⁵

Is liberal elitism still defensible? I will suggest that there is now a realisable alternative to both elitist and populist liberalisms – that is, meritocratic liberalism. (Liberalism has always been meritocratic in aspiration, of course.) Thus I wish to advocate a meritocratic middle way

²⁹ Different interpretations of the transitions in Mill's thought are discussed in Ryan (2007), pp. 157-9.

³⁰ Skorupski (1989), p. 354; see also his (1999).

³¹ Eliot (1962), first published 1948, p. 36.

³² F.R. Leavis, Christopher Fry and Clive Bell also held elitist views, though without Eliot's fascist sympathies.

³³ It is interesting that Mill's "higher pleasures" are usually regarded as cultural – and Mill himself contrasted pushpin and poetry. Gray convincingly argues that the higher pleasure are those that require the exercise of autonomy, but it is not possible to explore this difficult issue here (Gray (1996), especially pp. 73-86).

³⁴ Jay (1937). I am indebted to Wikipedia for this information, a source that elitists would certainly avoid.

³⁵ Lind (2005), p. 37. Mill was sceptical about civil service reform, and the possibility of talented recruits for the civil service; he had contempt for the stasis of Chinese society, which had been run by mandarins for over two thousand years.

between elitism and populism, while conceding that much of what seems objectionable in elitism results from tone and presentation rather than substance, and that the contrast between elitism and meritocracy remain elusive. This position involves arguing against the possibility of a meritocratic elitism, of which more shortly.

3. Culture and elitism

The main target of contemporary populists, to reiterate, is cultural elitism, allegedly embodied in the major opera houses, ancient universities, and public service broadcasting, especially BBC Radio 3. (Ivy League universities and British public schools are socially elitist and anti-meritocratic. Just as political elitism appears only in an incipiently democratic age, so cultural elitism appears only in an era of mass culture. Populists target high culture, and claims to objectivity in aesthetic judgment which underlie the existence of a canon. For them, the artworld of curators, connoisseurs and critics possesses only the illusion of expertise, attempting to legislate on what are in fact purely subjective matters of taste and opinion. Elitism, in contrast, is committed to high culture and objectivity in aesthetic judgment – which are not, in the strict sense, elitist in themselves, I have argued – but is also characterised by its dismissal of popular culture and of what I term the democracy of taste, the claim that even the neophyte's responses have a status in critical discourse.³⁶ These dismissals are misconceived, I believe. So while there is considerable truth in elitism, my rejection of it does not result from pusillanimous reluctance to engage with political correctness – which while correctly diagnosing inadequacies in elitism, criticises them from the standpoint of crass philistine subjectivism.

Our question of cultural elitism could not have arisen for Mill – so-called elite culture did not yet have a rival in the mass culture propagated by the culture industry. There was then no ideological counterweight to (high) culture. Mill's elitism in part arises from fears for individual freedom, but he also regarded the social tyranny of the majority as constituting a general threat to cultural ideals. Like his arguments for freedom of expression in On Liberty, therefore, his elitism embodies collective values as much as, or more than, individualist ones.³⁷ Mill shared with Matthew Arnold a passionate concern about the cultural impact of democracy. As Alexander puts it, Mill and Arnold became representative figures in the Victorian period through "their recognition that the great problem of modern life is the preservation of the ancient humanistic ideal of culture in democratic society".³⁸

For Mill, the danger is a democratically-imposed stagnant conformism, for Arnold it is anarchy, that is, insufficient state intervention. The latter's Culture and Anarchy insisted on "the urgent necessity, in the reign of democratic ideas, of maintaining or of building up the culture of the spirit as a counter-weight to the brutality and violence which is [democratic ideas'] natural bent".³⁹ Mill's essay "Coleridge", which as we saw marked his partial regression to illiberal values, expressed similar sentiments on the internal threats to liberal culture:

the relaxation of individual energy and courage; the loss of proud and self-relying independence; the slavery of so large a portion of mankind to artificial wants...

³⁶ Hamilton (2008).

³⁷ On these arguments for freedom of expression, see Skorupski (1989), pp. 369-84.

³⁸ Alexander (1965), p. 12.

³⁹ Quoted in Knights (1978), p. 120. The concept of the clerisy is also discussed in Collini (2006), pp. 76-9, 320-1. If Mill writes like a self-appointed Royal Commission, Arnold writes like a self-appointed leader writer for the Daily Telegraph, and is almost unreadable today.

absence of any marked individuality, in their characters...the demoralizing effect of great inequalities in wealth and social rank.⁴⁰

Mill and Arnold lamented the lack of an intellectual community in Victorian England, treating Ancient Greece as their cultural and political ideal, and it is not surprising that the debate over elitism often turns into the question of the status of intellectuals (Collini, Furedi) – "elite" means either "intellectual elite" or "social elite", or maybe "cultural elite" – or the university (Warnock).⁴¹ The university now performs many of the functions of the leisured class assumed by Mill, though it is also true that everyone in Western liberal societies now has leisure.

The "mass" feared since the Greek origins of democracy, for instance by Burke and Carlyle in their responses to the French Revolution, had been the mob. This was how most Victorians saw it, for instance Dickens in Barnaby Rudge and A Tale of Two Cities. De Tocqueville presented a different picture of a mass that arose not from violent revolution but from American representative government – a passive body that nonetheless induces conformity in freer spirits, and a "new physiognomy of servitude". Mill takes up this account, anticipated in some of his own earlier work, with alacrity.⁴² Finally, there is a third sense of "mass", a genuine "low culture" expressed through art at least since the medieval era, though we should be careful in attributing historical unity to it:

the artistic low culture...had long overlapped with the dominant high culture: in the comic portraits that stole into the borders of illuminated manuscripts, the misericords hidden under choir stalls, the gargoyles leering from dark corners and high columns, the chapbook illustrations and broadsheet woodcuts...tough, realistic studies of men and women making shoes, stirring pots, ploughing fields, dancing and playing music, coexisted with fantasy and symbol, a combination that flowered in the art of Bosch or Breughel...⁴³

This low culture is not our current mass culture; only when the population has leisure can it generate a truly popular or mass art. In the 19th century the great majority of the population had little chance of appreciating the classics. However, it is this final sense of "mass" – connected in some ways with Tocqueville's sense, and stressing ideas of cultural stagnation which he shared with Adorno – which has become the target of 20th century elitists.⁴⁴ A different sense of "mass" means a different but related motive for elitism.

4. Later liberal thinkers on culture and the elite

It is definitive of elitism in any form that "high" cultural goals such as museums, the arts and sciences, higher education, public service broadcasting, libraries and the reading of literature deserve support, though elitist and other liberals may not agree that this support is best given by the state. Populists reject these cultural goals as ends, treating them at best merely instrumentally, for instance as vehicles of economic growth; neutralist liberals such as Rawls, in contrast, maintain that insofar as such support promotes ethical ideas, the state should not be involved. Although neutralism and populism interestingly share epistemological assumptions, my concern is not with the (possibly mis-characterised) debate between neutralism and

⁴⁰ Mill (1963-91), Vol X, p. 134.

⁴¹ Collini (2006), Furedi (2006), Warnock (1989).

⁴² De Tocqueville (1968), Vol 2. On these two senses of mass, see for instance Levin (2004), and also Ryan (2007), p. 160.

⁴³ Uglow (2002), pp. 58-9.

⁴⁴ Adorno's cultural elitism is discussed in Hamilton (2007), Ch. 5.

perfectionism, but with that between elitism and populism. I believe that there is a middle way between elitism and populism which supports high culture, and which rejects the narrow, static conception of it assumed by contemporary liberals.

While the question of Culture is inescapable to many Continental philosophical traditions, contemporary liberal theory neglects it. It interprets cultural elitism in attenuated and indirect terms, as a claim about distributive justice, in particular resource-allocation to elites, and ignores the possibility of culture as a general good. Focussing on resource-allocation expresses a static conception of cultural value encouraged by classical utilitarianism, and at odds with Mill's richer, German Idealist-influenced stress on the progressive development of human autonomy. It also, as noted earlier, pulls elitism into a misleading opposition with egalitarianism. This static conception is both instrumentalist and philistine, that is, it regards the aesthetic as inessential to human well-being. Transcending this conception enables one to locate a middle way between elitism and populism.

To reiterate, elitism is characterised in opposition to populism, not egalitarianism; it is not a doctrine about distributive justice. However, Rawls' neutralist or sceptical liberalism, which says that government should not promote specific spiritual, moral or cultural goods, even if aesthetic experience, for instance, is part of human well-being, takes unequalitarian resource-allocation as the hallmark of elitism; so does Hurka's account.⁴⁵ The result is an unduly time-bound, static perspective. The classics are not, as these writers assume, "the preferences of the elite"; they are the common heritage of humankind, and no partiality is implied by state support for them. This claim clearly needs further defence, but that is not my project here; I am assuming the unacceptability of populism, which rejects the concept of the classics.⁴⁶

Wendy Donner also contrasts elitism with egalitarianism, discerning that dichotomy in Mill's work; she also locates an opposition between elitism and individualism. As an egalitarian, she holds, Mill would not devote a large share of resources to the developed elite, while as an individualist he would not – as she puts it – impose elite values on ordinary individuals. "His own mode of laying out his existence is best", and all have a right to liberty of self-development:

Mill's liberty principle commits him to allow a sphere of personal freedom to those who have not [through education] developed themselves, and so he cannot be regarded as an elitist in the self-regarding domain...Mill may justly be denominated an elitist in the public sphere if he holds that the choices of the developed can be judged more worthy of societal pursuit... [= liberal elitism] An extreme form [of the latter elitism] is that in which those who are not yet developed are not allowed to participate in public choices [= illiberal elitism].⁴⁷

We have seen that elitism is mis-characterised as the opposite of egalitarianism. Is it also a mis-characterisation to oppose elitism and autonomy, or should we follow Donner in also criticising the position as paternalist and authoritarian?

5. Authority and autonomy

"Liberal elitism" does not seek to "impose" elite values on the non-elite, in apparent contravention of Mill's Liberty Principle; it is not a contradiction in terms. However, there is something in what Donner says. We can begin to examine the question by looking at how

⁴⁵ Hurka (1993), p.164.

⁴⁶ This issue is discussed further in Hamilton (2007), "Introduction".

⁴⁷ Donner (1991), pp. 159, 186 (my parenthetical additions).

Mill himself characterises authority relations. His first instructors "had always identified deference to authority with mental slavery and the repression of individual thought", he wrote.⁴⁸ But he soon came to fear that a mass society exhibited too little as well as too much authority; social pressure is a simulacrum of authority, while real authority figures are lacking. In "Auguste Comte", Mill concedes to Comte that it is "the necessary condition of mankind to receive most of their opinions on the authority of those who have specially studied the matters to which they relate...[but] in order that this salutary ascendancy over opinion should be exercised by the most eminent thinkers, it is not necessary that they should be associated and organised".⁴⁹ Note the indubitably elitist reference to "receive their opinions" and "salutary ascendancy" – though here Mill's comments can be construed as including scientific knowledge, and not just moral and cultural matters. In "The Spirit of the Age", Mill writes more judiciously, though perhaps more generally: "[every man] should follow his reason as far as his reason will carry him, and cultivate the faculty as highly as possible. But reason itself will teach most men that they must, in the last resort, fall back upon the authority of still more cultivated minds, as the ultimate sanction of the convictions of their reason itself".⁵⁰

On Liberty, in contrast, specifies a more active contribution from the uninitiated. Mill famously writes: "No government by a democracy or numerous aristocracy...ever did or could rise above mediocrity except in so far as the sovereign many have let themselves be guided...by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few". He argues that "when the opinions of masses of merely average men are everywhere become or becoming the dominant power", a corrective is needed in "the more and more pronounced individuality of those who stand on the higher eminences of thought". Benign social deviants – who will include a sprinkling of visionaries and geniuses along with harmless eccentrics – must be allowed to show through "experiments in living" the alternatives to custom.⁵¹ Mill then adds the claim of individual autonomy: "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode" (Ch. III).

If, as elitism asserts, some people are more penetrating judges of cultural and moral questions than others, then it is still the case that each individual must ultimately decide these questions for themselves. This seems to be one implication of the "individual autonomy" claim. As Mill recognised, what is required is not "the blind submission of dunces to men of knowledge, but the intelligent deference of those who know much, to those who know still more".⁵² The undermining of deference since the Victorian era has been liberating, and reinforces the possibility of un-self-abasing respect for intellectual authority. The ideal of liberal education and the university is that a teacher inspires autonomous agents, not slavish adherents. This ideal underlies Mill's defence of freedom of expression, which is based on a model of honest dialogue in a world of imperfectly rational and moral human beings. He realises that not everyone can participate equally in dialogue; but on this question also, On Liberty qualifies the conception of authority found in the "The Spirit of the Age" and "Auguste Comte".

Is the preceding, rather more egalitarian, picture of authority an elitist one? To return to Skorupski's characterisation: elitism holds that some individuals are more penetrating judges of moral, cultural, and spiritual questions, and should be socially influential in their sphere. My response is that this characterisation is necessary but not sufficient for elitism, which

⁴⁸ Mill (1961), p. 188; see Friedman (1968), pp. 385ff.

⁴⁹ Mill (1963-91), Vol X, pp. 313-4 – "Auguste Comte and Positivism".

⁵⁰ "The Spirit of the Age", in Mill (1986), p. 244.

⁵¹ As Ryan ((2007), pp. 156-7) argues, Mill does not consider whether these "experiments" realise convergent and divergent conceptions of the general good – each person at least learns what is the best life for them, but not necessarily the best life for humans. The picture seems to be of a variety of routes leading in different and non-competing directions.

⁵² Mill (1963-91), Vol X, pp. 313-4 – "Auguste Comte and Positivism".

interprets these claims as requiring a unitary elite, self-perpetuating in the sense of non-meritocratic, and rejects popular culture and the democracy of taste. Thus one should perhaps question Benn and Peters' claim that "Every society, however democratic, has its elite".⁵³ Although Skorupski's characterisation of elitism is not anti-meritocratic, the popular conception of it is, and in this respect should not be ignored.

Meritocracy is a system of social organisation where appointments are made on the basis of ability rather than wealth, family connections or class. Its critics regard it merely as a new legitimisation for social elites. When Michael Young first used the term in Rise of the Meritocracy (1958), it was as a pejorative, referring to a dystopia where social position is determined by "IQ plus effort" – a divided society in which "deserving" winners hold down "undeserving" losers. A recent critic, Roy Hattersley, holds that "meritocracy only offers shifting patterns of inequality".⁵⁴ Their objection simply seems to be that meritocracy is unattainable – that any hierarchy will create an entrenched and self-perpetuating elite, not effectively open to all the talents – rather than that it is objectionable. These critics rightly criticise the rigid stratification and low social mobility increasingly prevalent in Western societies, especially the US and Britain – but these are factors which undermine meritocracy. Without meritocracy, how would scientists, surgeons, generals, engineers, teachers, town planners, bankers, broadcasters, artists and athletes be selected? The alternative is the insanity of Mao's Cultural Revolution or Pol Pot's "Year Zero".

What would a meritocratic alternative to elitism, and to cultural elitism in particular, involve? It asserts that authorities constitute an open and not an entrenched elite, and affirms the more balanced notion of authority required for that openness. Mill was writing in a pre-meritocratic age, when Western culture was largely the preserve of a class or classes with a virtual monopoly on leisure. Today, almost everyone in Western liberal societies has sufficient leisure to become an aesthete in a minimal but essential sense, that is, they can regard art and the aesthetic as ends in themselves. Meritocracy recognises, and requires, that those who are capable of appreciating high culture – even though they may be a minority – originate in any section of the population. "The elite" is not "self-perpetuating"; its composition is in flux, it is not unitary. Mill's elitism clearly requires that the few are well-qualified; but before universal education, it was impossible for qualified positions to be filled from all social classes.

Why not accept, as Skorupski seems to, that there can be a meritocratic form of elitism, in which elites let newcomers join their ranks on merit? Claims have been made that the British Establishment is such an elite. Skidelsky says that it is "not a closed order or corporation but an elastic governing class with an instinctive sense of self-preservation, and therefore an exceptional capacity for self-renewal...expressed...in the meritocratic selection of its elite, and the authority and honour given to exceptional ability. In England [rebels] were absorbed by the established order and used to strengthen its defences [against revolution]".⁵⁵ The claim is questionable. There was nothing meritocratic about the landed aristocratic element of the Establishment, while the Civil Service had old-school-tie traditions; rebels such as Wilde, Shaw, Russell, Strachey, Churchill and Aldous Huxley were tolerated at best.

More important, meritocracy is not so easily defined as first appears. "Appointing on merit" combines the notion of "most deserves the job" with "will be best at doing it", and assumes that the latter is a conclusive reason for the former. "On the basis of ability" presumably means "ability to do the job". Academic success, especially when the result of much effort, is usually regarded as a better predictor of job success than parentage, type of school or social charm. But traditionalists must have thought Etonians more capable of performing the duties of a civil servant or diplomat than state school applicants. The root of the issue is that elites

⁵³ Benn and Peters (1959), pp. 158-9.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Kellner (2001), p. 25.

⁵⁵ Skidelsky (2004), p. 834.

usually have partisan views about what constitutes relevant merit. When the British Medical Association dismisses homeopathy, it uses a phrase like "without merit". Professional or labour elites such as guilds and unions have combined to define merit and value, excluding people and practices that do not conform; thus elites construct the conditions of their own meritocracy. The challenge, then, is to define a robust concept of meritocracy that properly expresses its self-proclaimed fairness; perhaps – and this has Hegelian and Marxist overtones – one where the elite is self-consciously self-destructive.

The options facing us are therefore:

- (1) elitism is acceptable when it is made meritocratic
- (2) elitism is unacceptable because it cannot be made meritocratic.
- (2) "meritocratic elitism" is unacceptable because meritocracy is essentially elitist.

The debate over cultural elitism is a particular form of this debate. The "agenda" of artistic elites is reflected in their unwarranted dismissal of popular culture, while the question of the democracy of taste and the neophyte's right to contribute suggest that in the arena of culture, the concept of meritocracy requires further development than I have attempted so far. In this article I have explained how liberal elitism arises from scepticism about democracy, and examined it in relation to populism and meritocracy. Further treatment of these cultural issues must remain material for another occasion.

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