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Navigating by the North Star: The Role of the ‘Ideal’ in John Stuart Mill’s View of ‘Utopian’ Schemes and the Possibilities of Social Transformation

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Abstract

The role of the ‘ideal’ in political philosophy is currently much discussed. These debates cast useful light on Mill’s self-designation as ‘under the general designation of Socialist’. Considering Mill’s assessment of potential property-relations on the grounds of their desirability, feasibility and ‘accessibility’ (disambiguated as ‘immediate-availability’, ‘eventual-availability’ and ‘conceivable-availability’) shows us not only how desirable and feasible he thought ‘utopian’ socialist schemes were, but which options we should implement. This, coupled with Mill’s belief that a socialist ideal should guide social reforms (as the North Star guides mariners), reveals much more clearly the extent of his socialist commitments (even if he thought political economists would be concerned with forms of individual property for some time to come). Moreover, this framework for assessments of ‘ideal’ institutions makes a useful contribution to an ongoing contemporary debate.

Among those who have taken John Stuart Mill’s self-declared socialism¹ seriously, several see it as a form of ‘utopian-socialism’, akin to the socialisms of Robert Owen, William Thompson, Henri Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Victor Considerant and Louis Blanc.² Yet, although Mill did not shy away from the word

¹John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography, Collected Works* [hereafter CW] I (Toronto, 1981), p. 239.

²Leslie Stephens, *The English Utilitarians* III (London, 1902), p. 224; Irving Horowitz, ‘Review: John Stuart Mill and French Thought’, *Philosophy* 35 (1960), pp. 181–3, at 182; Jacob Oser, *Evolution of Economic Thought* (New York, 1963), p. 99; Iris Wessel Mueller, *John Stuart Mill and French Thought* (Freeport, 1968), pp. 170–224; John Medearis, ‘Labor, Democracy, Utility, and Mill’s Critique of Private Property’, *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (2005), pp. 135–49; Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill’s Moral and Political Philosophy* (London, 1991), p. 7; Oskar Kurer, ‘J. S. Mill and Utopian Socialism’, *The Economic Record* 68 (1992), pp. 222–32; William Stafford, ‘How Can a Paradigmatic Liberal Call Himself a Socialist? The Case of John Stuart Mill’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 3 (1998), pp. 325–45; Gregory Claeys, ‘Justice, Independence, and Industrial Democracy: The Development of John Stuart Mill’s Views on Socialism’, *Journal of Politics* 49 (1987), pp. 122–47.

'Utopia',³ he hardly wrote the kind of detailed description which is arguably a necessary criterion for 'utopian socialism'.⁴ Moreover, it is cooperative-socialism which Mill calls 'the nearest approach to social justice, and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee',⁵ and this is not usually understood as 'utopian' (unless we think socialism can only be 'utopian' or 'scientific', which is not, itself, a helpful dichotomy). However, 'utopia' – and utopian socialism – plays an overlooked role in the content and development of Mill's political philosophy.

Mill describes his socialist opinions as concerning 'the ultimate prospects of humanity';⁶ his 'ideal of ultimate improvement ... would class [him] decidedly under the general designation of Socialists';⁷ he was 'far from intending' his words 'should be understood as a condemnation of Socialism, regarded as an ultimate result of human progress';⁸ it is linked with 'the ultimate capabilities of human nature';⁹ even though 'an entire renovation of the social fabric, such as contemplated by Socialism ... is not available as a present resource', it is 'valuable as an ideal, and even as a prophecy of ultimate possibilities'.¹⁰ This terminology has led some to suggest that he 'was never a *convinced* Socialist',¹¹ and that rather than speak of a '*conversion* to Socialism', we ought to recognize that Mill 'left open the possibility that socialism would never arrive'.¹² But Mill's view of the role of 'utopia' casts doubt on this interpretation. He wrote:

We should endeavour to set before ourselves the ideal conception ... however distant, not to say doubtful, may be the hope of actually obtaining it [so that] ... whatever is done now may if possible be in the direction of what is best, and may bring the actual fact nearer and not further off from the standard of right, at however great a distance it may still remain from that standard. Though we may only be sailing from the port of London to that of Hull, let us guide our navigation by the North Star.¹³

Rather than showing he was never a 'convinced' 'convert', this use of 'ultimate' shows that Mill felt socialism ought to guide our current efforts at reform, however incremental, and however far we would still remain from an 'ultimate' standard which might, in itself, never be reached. As he put it:

[Saint-Simonism] is the true ideal of a perfect human society; the spirit of which will more and more pervade even the *existing* social institutions, as human beings

³Mill, *The Claims of Labour*, CW IV (Toronto, 1967), p. 382.

⁴David Leopold, 'The Structure of Marx and Engels' Considered Account of Utopian Socialism', *History of Political Thought* 26 (2005), pp. 433–66, at 446–8.

⁵Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, CW II and III (Toronto, 1965), p. 794.

⁶Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 199.

⁷Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

⁸Mill, *Principles*, p. xciii.

⁹Mill, *Principles*, p. 214.

¹⁰Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, CW V (Toronto, 1967), pp. 749–50.

¹¹L. E. Fredman and B. L. J. Gordon, 'John Stuart Mill and Socialism', *Mill Newsletter* 3 (1967), pp. 3–7, at 3.

¹²Jonathan Riley, 'J. S. Mill's Liberal Utilitarian Assessment of Capitalism Versus Socialism', *Utilitas* 8 (1996), pp. 39–71, at 41.

¹³Mill, *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform*, CW XIX (Toronto, 1977), pp. 321–2.

become wiser and better; and which, like any other model of unattainable perfection, everybody is the better for aspiring to, although it be impossible to reach it. We may never get to the North Star, but there is much use in turning our faces towards it if we are journeying northward.¹⁴

As I will explore below, in later life Mill's view of the 'true ideal of a perfect human society' was no longer Saint-Simonism. However, although he thought all contemporary socialisms were 'necessarily imperfect ... and susceptible of immense improvement',¹⁵ his 'ideal' remained socialist – and its role in guiding contemporary reform remained the same. In this article I consider Mill's critiques of socialism and possible reforms to individual property in order to map how close to the 'ideal' he thought they came. By doing so, light is cast on Mill's own 'ideal'. Section I sketches the analytical framework Mill uses for these assessments, based on questions of 'idealness' in terms of the desirability of a scheme; the workability of a scheme; and how far distant a world would be in which it could practically be implemented. Section II considers the 'idealness' of the varieties of socialism Mill assesses in *Principles of Political Economy* and *Chapters on Socialism*. Section III considers Mill's 'ideal'. The article concludes by sketching some wider implications of this framework and role of 'utopia' for understanding Mill and contemporary ideal theory.

I. A framework for analysis

Mill analyses contemporary socialism according to three criteria. First, he considers the 'attractive[ness]' of the scheme or society described.¹⁶ That is, in the terms of the original pun, is the 'utopia' a 'eu-topos'? He considers questions of justice and 'meaningful equality', including of the sexes,¹⁷ individuality and independence,¹⁸ 'moral' improvement of social ethos, harmony and individual character,¹⁹ and general utility.²⁰ I refer to these as questions of 'desirability'.

Second, Mill considers the 'workability' or 'practicability' of institutions.²¹ If these institutions were up and running, would they work? Would they be stable, or collapse back into a system of individual property?²² Could people be motivated to do enough work under them; would they agree to follow the sorts of rules and regulations necessary for their ongoing existence; would they end up starving because of overpopulation? Because of evident similarity to contemporary debate, I refer to these concerns as questions of 'feasibility'.²³

¹⁴Mill, *Fontana and Prati's Saint-Simonism in London*, CW XXIII (Toronto, 1986), p. 678.

¹⁵Mill, *Principles*, p. 1028.

¹⁶Mill, *Chapters*, p. 748.

¹⁷Mill, *Principles*, pp. 201–3, 206–10, 758, 765–6, 775 and 793–4; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 744–5.

¹⁸Mill, *Principles*, pp. 208–9, 758–62, 775, 793–4; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 745–46.

¹⁹Mill, *Principles*, pp. 208–9, 754–62, 775 and 793–4; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 745.

²⁰Mill, *Principles*, pp. 208–9, 754–7 and 793–4.

²¹Mill, *Principles*, pp. 203–7, 210–14 and 766–94; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 738–43 and 747–50.

²²Mill, *Chapters*, p. 750.

²³John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), p. 145; G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton, 2009), pp. 56–7; Leopold, 'Marx and Engels'; Leopold, 'A Cautious Embrace: Reflections on (Left) Liberals and Utopia', *Liberalism as Ideology: Essays in Honour of Michael Freeden*, ed. Ben Jackson and Marc Stears (Oxford, 2012), pp. 9–33; Leopold, 'On Marxian Utopophobia', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54 (2016), pp. 111–34; Pablo Gilabert and Holly Lawford-Smith, 'Political Feasibility', *Political Studies* 60 (2012), pp. 800–25, at 813.

Third, Mill considers whether, when, where and by whom such institutions could be implemented.²⁴ He considers this in three stages. One, could the institutions be implemented immediately by some existing people in an existing society? In Mill's felicitous phrase, are these institutions 'available as a present resource'?²⁵ Two, is it possible to foresee a future in which those institutions would be 'available as a present resource' which is reachable from here? Is there a story we can tell about how people like us, in the society we now inhabit, would end up as the kind of people living in improved institutions?²⁶ Three, is it possible to conceive of any human society for which these institutions might be 'available as a present resource'? It may not be possible to see the route from 'here' to 'there' – perhaps because 'there' is so far distant from 'here' that we cannot imagine a possible path; perhaps because 'there' is already in our past, a destination only reachable from a path not taken. For instance, Mill suggests in *Principles* that Saint-Simonism might be an available resource in societies where the majority of people think their rulers have supernatural powers, but these are conditions which are firmly in the past.²⁷ For clarity (and brevity), I use the phrases 'immediate-availability', 'eventual-availability' and 'conceivable-availability' to express these three ideas respectively.²⁸

This framework allows us to make better sense of Mill's assessment of different contemporary forms of socialism, and of his repeated assertion that socialism was, or at least might be, the 'ultimate' form of human society. It also helps us understand how 'far' from ideal these schemes, and reforms of capitalism, were for Mill, and which he thought we ought to try in specific circumstances. It is to this assessment which I now turn.

II. Mill's assessment of socialist alternatives

Mill means by the general term 'socialism' both 'communism' and 'non-communistic socialism'.²⁹ He describes socialism, generally, as involving communal ownership of land and the instruments of production; labour directed towards the common good by democratically elected leaders; and remuneration determined by some publically acknowledged principle of justice rather than, as in contemporary society, 'accident alone'.³⁰ The difference between communism and non-communistic socialism arises in distribution. Communists are 'those whose scheme implies absolute equality in the distribution of the physical means of life and enjoyment', whereas socialists 'admit inequality, but grounded on some principle ... of justice or general expediency'.³¹

Mill discusses Owenite communism, Blancian communism, Saint-Simonism, Fourierism, cooperative socialism and 'the revolutionary form of socialism' (Marxism).³² The realities of these schemes complicate his theoretical distinction: Blanc is a 'Communist', but 'advocates equality of distribution only as a transition to

²⁴Mill, *Principles*, pp. 211, 213–14 and 769–94; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 748–50.

²⁵Mill, *Chapters*, p. 750.

²⁶E.g. the account given in *Principles*, pp. 793–4.

²⁷Mill, *Principles*, p. 211.

²⁸My thanks to Dale E. Miller for advice on improving this terminology.

²⁹Mill, *Principles*, pp. 201–10 and 775; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 737–9.

³⁰Mill, *Principles*, p. 202; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 738.

³¹Mill, *Principles*, p. 203.

³²Mill, *Principles*, pp. 202–14 and 758–94; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 703–53.

a still-higher standard of justice, that all should work according to their capacity, and receive according to their wants';³³ Fourier allowed private property in capital.³⁴

More illuminating than his initial disambiguation is Mill's statement that socialism presents 'a compromise with the selfish type of character formed by the present standard of morality, and fostered by the existing social institutions' by retaining a link between remuneration and labour.³⁵ That is, socialism allows for at least some harnessing of self-interest to motivate labour in a way which communism does not. I turn now to a consideration of Mill's assessment of communism in the light of the theoretical framework sketched in section I regarding desirability, feasibility and availability, and then do the same for non-communistic socialism.

II.1. Mill's assessment of communism

As noted, communism involves 'the entire abolition of private property', and breaks the link between remuneration and labour, Owenite communism distributing equal shares; Blancian communism adopting the 'still higher' principle detailed above.³⁶ Although both Owen and Blanc were involved with cooperation and not just intentional communities, when speaking of 'communism' Mill has in mind 'village communit[ies] ... composed of a few thousand inhabitants cultivating in joint ownership the same extent of land which at present feeds that number of people, and producing by combined labour and the most improved processes the manufactured articles which they required'.³⁷

Mill thought such schemes feasible, though his earliest assessment in *Principles* is not glowing: 'The scheme is not what is commonly meant by impracticable'.³⁸ Members 'might be able to live and hold together, without positive discomfort'.³⁹ Even so, this 'would be a considerable improvement, so far as the great majority are concerned'.⁴⁰ His later assessments are somewhat warmer: communist schemes 'cannot be truly said to be impracticable'⁴¹ and '[t]he *practicability*' of schemes like Owen's 'admits of no dispute'.⁴²

This is not to say he thought communism would be without feasibility-related problems. Dismissing the worry that workers would not be motivated, and that communism would lead to over-population, Mill says communism would perform at least as well as capitalism, and perhaps better.⁴³ But the difficulty of apportioning work equally,⁴⁴ of recruiting the most effective managers,⁴⁵ and of maintaining internal

³³Mill, *Principles*, p. 203.

³⁴Mill, *Principles*, pp. 210–14; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 738–9.

³⁵Mill, *Principles*, p. 210.

³⁶Mill, *Principles*, pp. 202–3.

³⁷Mill, *Principles*, p. 203.

³⁸Mill, *Principles*, p. 975. Even so, this is an improvement on his assessment in the 1820s (see Mill, *Population: Proaemium*, CW XXVI (Toronto, 1988), pp. 286–7; Mill, *Population*, CW XXVI (Toronto, 1988), pp. 287–96; Mill, *Population: Reply to Thirwall*, CW XXVI (Toronto, 1988), pp. 296–307; Mill, *Co-operation: First Speech*, CW XXVI (Toronto, 1988), p. 308; Mill, *Cooperation: Intended Speech*, CW XXVI (Toronto, 1988), pp. 308–13; and Mill, *Cooperation: Closing Speech*, CW XXVI (Toronto, 1988), pp. 313–25.

³⁹Mill, *Principles*, p. 975.

⁴⁰Mill, *Principles*, p. 975.

⁴¹Mill, *Principles*, p. 203.

⁴²Mill, *Chapters*, p. 739.

⁴³Mill, *Principles*, pp. 204–6; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 739–43.

⁴⁴Mill, *Principles*, pp. 206–7; Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 743–5.

⁴⁵Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 739–42.

harmony while centrally determining so much on which people hold strong personal opinions were concerns he saw as more serious.⁴⁶ However, he insisted that '[f]rom these various considerations I do not seek to draw any inference against the possibility that Communistic production is capable of being at some future time the form of society best adapted to the wants and circumstances of mankind', and that those difficulties it is fair to imagine, 'though real, are not necessarily insuperable', not being 'problems to which human intelligence, guided by a sense of justice, would be inadequate'.⁴⁷ Many advantages of communism may 'be reached under private property' through profit-sharing, but that does not undermine the feasibility of communism so long as individual characters had been sufficiently changed through moral and intellectual education, and so long as communism is introduced in a voluntarist, piecemeal, organic fashion and involves small-scale self-sufficient communities.⁴⁸

Mill also saw much that was desirable in that kind of communism. It was more desirable than contemporary capitalism: 'the worst and most unjust arrangement which could be made ... under a system aiming at equality, would be so far short of the inequality and injustice with which labour (not to speak of remuneration) is now apportioned, as to be scarcely worth counting in the comparison'.⁴⁹ He praises communism's commitment to female emancipation and equality,⁵⁰ and consistently calls Blanc's a 'higher' principle of justice even than Owen's.⁵¹ Moreover, the kind of education which would be necessary to make communism feasible is a kind Mill thought of as desirable – that is, as improving people's general intelligence and their moral calibre, particularly in enabling them to be motivated not just by self-interest, but through a desire for the common good and the greatest happiness of the greatest number.⁵²

In *Principles* Mill ends his consideration of communism with the striking claim that '[i]f ... the choice were to be made between Communism with all its chances, and the present state of society with all its sufferings and injustices ... all the difficulties great or small, of Communism, would be but as dust in the balance'.⁵³ There is no such resounding statement in *Chapters*, which is sometimes read as taking a more negative view than *Principles*.⁵⁴ How to weigh *Chapters* versus *Principles* is difficult: as Stafford rightly points out, *Chapters* was unfinished, and (as Miller also notes), it was written in 1869, yet the final, 1871, edition of *Principles* does not reveal a retreat from the earlier position on communism.⁵⁵ In neither work does Mill endorse communism as wholly unproblematic. But I do not think we can read *Chapters* as Mill fundamentally changing his position. Instead, *Chapters* is consistent with *Principles*, though engaging more with the threat of a new form of forcibly imposed communism via revolution.

⁴⁶Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 745–6.

⁴⁷Mill, *Chapters*, p. 746; Mill, *Principles*, p. 207.

⁴⁸Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 202–8 and 775; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 746.

⁴⁹Mill, *Principles*, p. 207.

⁵⁰Mill, *Principles*, p. 209.

⁵¹Mill, *Principles*, pp. 203 and 210; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 739.

⁵²Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 742 and 746. See also Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 241 and Mill, Letter 26, CW XII (Toronto, 1963), pp. 31–3.

⁵³Mill, *Principles*, p. 207. On this, see also J. Persky, *The Political Economy of Progress* (Oxford, 2016), p. 70.

⁵⁴E.g. Dale E. Miller, 'Mill's "Socialism"', *Philosophy, Politics and Economics* 2 (2003), pp. 213–38, at 225–6.

⁵⁵Stafford, 'Paradigmatic Liberal', p. 328; Miller, 'Mill's Socialism', pp. 225–6.

In both *Chapters* and *Principles*, Owenite and Blancian communism are seen as desirable and feasible.

Turning to considerations of availability, Mill saw communism as at least conceivably available. The ‘high standard of both moral and intellectual education’ required to make it feasible has been instituted before.⁵⁶ Moreover, such an education could be instituted again: though this will take ‘successive generations ... the hindrance is not in the essential constitution of human nature’.⁵⁷ Indeed, Mill ‘reject[s] altogether the notion that it is impossible for [the necessary] education and cultivation ... to be made the inheritance of every person in the nation’ though he is ‘convinced that it is very difficult, and that the passage to it from our present condition can be only slow’.⁵⁸ He ‘admit[s] the plea that in the points of moral education ... only a Communistic association can effectually train mankind for Communism’ and says ‘[i]t is for Communism, then, to prove by practical experiment, its power of giving this training’.⁵⁹

In 1849, in correspondence with Harriet Taylor, Mill expresses doubts about the eventual availability of communism, feeling that, though it might be true that children could be taught to be communists in ten years, there will be no ‘unselfish’ people to teach them, for even ‘cleverer people’ cannot be motivated ‘to desire’ communism.⁶⁰ If he and Taylor had ‘absolute power tomorrow’, he adds,

though we could do much to improve people by good laws, and could even give them a very much better education than they have ever had yet, still, for effecting in our lives anything like what we aim at, all our plans would fail from the impossibility of finding fit instruments.⁶¹

Mill evidently changed his mind on this score, though always emphasizing that the transition to communism – if it happened at all – would be ‘slow’, for his later writings on education and communism show that he thought communism not only eventually available to most of society, but immediately available to what Mill calls ‘the elite of mankind’.⁶² That is, those who already had the requisite moral and intellectual capacities to make communism immediately available included, as Mill makes plain in *Principles*, those working people currently engaging in a disciplined pursuit of independence from the domination of capitalists through founding cooperatives by pooling their often meagre and very hard-won individual savings.⁶³ (It also shows how Mill

⁵⁶Mill, *Principles*, pp. 202 and 975–6; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 746; Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 239–41.

⁵⁷Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 241.

⁵⁸Mill, *Chapters*, p. 746.

⁵⁹Mill, *Chapters*, p. 746.

⁶⁰This correspondence has been used to support what Claeys calls ‘the hen-pecked thesis’: that Taylor was the ‘Socialist’, not Mill (Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 36–42). Though we lack her half of the correspondence, we can probably say she expressed the thought that communism was eventually available, and sooner, than Mill at that point believed. But we cannot say how long she held that view once she had heard Mill’s thoughts: certainly, the position in the 1849 edition of *Principles* (some parts of which Mill records as being co-written) is that of Mill’s letters, not her supposed position (see Mill, *Principles*, pp. 203–4). On the other hand, Mill’s position did eventually change – not just in *Principles* but also in *Chapters*, where communism is acknowledged to be eventually available, even immediately available to some.

⁶¹Mill, Letter 24, *CW III* (Toronto, 1965), p. 1030.

⁶²Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 746–8.

⁶³Mill, *Principles*, pp. 775–94.

thought socialist ‘experiments in living’⁶⁴ could help prove, and improve, the feasibility and availability of such schemes.)

Mill certainly had severe doubts about communism’s desirability and feasibility in the 1820s, when he debated with the Owenites.⁶⁵ Even if he thought Owen’s schemes available then, he did not think they were something we should attempt. And he retained some concerns regarding availability in the 1840s. But when we look at Mill’s later writings on communism, and view them through the framework for analysis sketched in section I, we see his mature position was that communism was desirable, feasible, and not only conceivably available, but eventually available to much of society, and even immediately available to some, whose self-help efforts in cooperation were giving them the required moral and intellectual education.

11.2. Mill’s assessment of socialism

Mill considers four forms of socialism in depth: Saint-Simonism, Fourierism, revolutionary socialism and cooperative socialism. Here I explore his assessment of each in turn.

11.2.i. Saint-Simonism

Saint-Simonism involved an unequal division of the produce; different occupations depending on ‘vocation or capacity’, assigned ‘by the choice of the directing authority’; remuneration by salary ‘proportioned to the importance, in the eyes of that authority, of the function itself, and the merits of the person who fulfils it’.⁶⁶ The ruling body ‘might be appointed by popular suffrage’, though the original idea was that ‘the rulers’ would be ‘persons of genius and virtue, who obtained the voluntary adhesion of the rest by the force of mental superiority’.⁶⁷ Saint-Simonism also involved reform of marriage and divorce, and a commitment to equality of the sexes; healed current class antagonism; improved individual character; and aimed at the common good.⁶⁸

Even when Saint-Simonism was an active force in French politics with which Mill was keenly engaged, he had some concerns about their utopian vision, including their over-praise of ‘production’, and some other ‘absurd and exaggerated’ ideas.⁶⁹ However, notwithstanding this, he called Saint-Simonism the ‘true ideal of a perfect human society’ and the ‘North Star’ of our endeavours in reaching social justice.⁷⁰ Unlike ‘every other Utopia we ever read of ... if it could be realised [it] would be good’.⁷¹ Though his feelings appear to have cooled over time, Mill still calls Saint-Simonism ‘a system of far higher intellectual pretensions’ than communism, ‘constructed with greater foresight of objections, and juster appreciation of them’ in 1849.⁷² Even in the very last editions of *Principles*, he says Saint-Simonism is ‘totally free from the objections usually urged against Communism; and, though ... open to

⁶⁴Mill, *On Liberty*, CW XVIII (Toronto, 1977), p. 281.

⁶⁵Mill, *Population: Proaemium*, pp. 286–7; Mill, *Population*, pp. 287–96; Mill, *Population: Reply to Thirwall*, pp. 296–307; Mill, *Co-operation: First Speech*, p. 308; Mill, *Cooperation: Intended Speech*, pp. 308–13; Mill, *Cooperation: Closing Speech*, pp. 313–25.

⁶⁶Mill, *Principles*, pp. 210–11.

⁶⁷Mill, *Principles*, pp. 210–11.

⁶⁸Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, pp. 678–80.

⁶⁹Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 675.

⁷⁰Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 678.

⁷¹Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 678.

⁷²Mill, *Principles*, pp. 980–91.

others ... by [its] large and philosophic treatment of some of the fundamental problems of society and morality ... may justly be counted among the most remarkable productions of the past and present age'.⁷³ Overall, then, we should read Mill as seeing Saint-Simonism as desirable.

Mill likened Saint-Simonism to a massive joint-stock company employing people by a salary 'proportioned as far as possible to their services'.⁷⁴ This was, he says, an 'impracticable' scheme 'but the impracticality is only in *degree*, not in kind' because the history of the world so far has been one of increasing 'combination of labour': 'We have only to imagine the same progression infinitely continued, and a time would come when Saint-Simonism would be practicable; and if practicable, desirable'.⁷⁵ Here we see that by 'impracticable' Mill did not mean infeasible – he meant not immediately available. This passage nicely illustrates how Mill thought Saint-Simonism not only conceivably available in the 1830s, but eventually available.

This position changed by the time he came to write *Principles*. There, though he still thought it feasible, and though he says, of socialist schemes in general, that they are deserving and capable of trial, Saint-Simonism is best seen as conceivably available.⁷⁶ This is because it necessitated the belief on the part of the subjects in the almost supernatural powers of their leaders.⁷⁷ This might have worked in the past, but looks implausible in modern times.⁷⁸ Saint-Simonism is not mentioned in *Chapters* (though it remains in the last edition of *Principles*, written later than *Chapters*). Mill's mature take on it, then, is that it is desirable, feasible and conceivably available.

II.2.ii. Fourierism

Mill did not learn about Fourierism until he had already published the first edition of *Principles*. Like many of his contemporaries, he was not initially impressed, calling Fourier

a sort of ... Owen who is to accomplish all things by means of cooperation & of rendering labour agreeable, & under whose system man is to acquire absolute power over the laws of physical nature; among other happy results, the sea is to be changed into lemonade.⁷⁹

However, once he started taking Fourierism seriously, Mill describes it as '[t]he most skilfully combined, and with the greatest foresight of objections' of all the 'utopian' socialisms.⁸⁰ He praises Fourierism's feminist credentials, and its attempt to create equality 'not from the compression, but, on the contrary, from the largest possible development, of the various natural superiorities residing in each individual', saying a practical trial is 'to be desired'.⁸¹ He concludes his account in *Chapters* by saying:

Altogether, the picture of a Fourierist community is both attractive in itself and requires less from common humanity than any other known system of

⁷³Mill, *Principles*, p. 210.

⁷⁴Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 678.

⁷⁵Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 678.

⁷⁶Mill, *Principles*, pp. 210–13.

⁷⁷Mill, *Principles*, pp. 210–14.

⁷⁸Mill, *Principles*, pp. 210–14.

⁷⁹Mill, Letter 64, CW XII (Toronto, 1963), p. 134.

⁸⁰Mill, Letter 64, CW XII, p. 211; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 747.

⁸¹Mill, *Principles*, pp. 1028 and 213.

Socialism; and it is much to be desired that the scheme should have that fair trial which alone can test the workableness of any new scheme of social life.⁸²

Thus, Mill, from 1849 onwards, thought Fourierism desirable, feasible, immediately available to some, and eventually available to more.⁸³

11.2.iii. 'Revolutionary socialism'

Mill does not engage with 'revolutionary socialism' in early editions of *Principles* because this form of broadly Marxist socialism (though Marx was not yet so well known that he had become synonymous with it) did not yet exist as a substantial political force. But by the time he came to write *Chapters*, 'revolutionary' socialism was both a more evident political force, and one of which Mill had more personal knowledge – for instance, through his correspondence with the Nottingham branch of the International Workingmen's Association.⁸⁴

Revolutionary socialists, Mill says: 'proclaim themselves content to begin by simple subversion, leaving the subsequent reconstruction to take care of itself ... but in what mode it will, they say, be time enough afterwards to decide'.⁸⁵ Though sympathizing with their hatred of existing social evils and their impatience with the current, apparently glacial speed of reform, and 'finding much that I warmly approve' in the 'principles' of the Nottingham IWA, he believed socialism had to be proven feasible, and felt 'it was impossible for me to say to what extent I should concur in the practical measures which the association would propose in order to bring the principles into operation' as these were fleshed out.⁸⁶ Feasibility was best tested through small-scale experiments which would, in turn, aid the necessary moral revolution. If a wholesale political revolution took place *before* this moral revolution, it would end in misery and the eventual re-establishment of private property: if the moral revolution happened first, the political one might be rendered unnecessary.⁸⁷

Overall, then, revolutionary socialism was neither desirable nor feasible – in fact, one might read *Chapters* as an attempt to persuade the workers of the world *not* to unite in revolutionary action, but in different, more peaceful reforms.⁸⁸ However, it was immediately available: indeed, this was its danger.

11.2.iv. Cooperative socialism

Lastly, we come to cooperative socialism ('association of the labourers among themselves'⁸⁹) whereby the property is 'jointly' owned by all the owner-workers, and the

⁸²Mill, *Chapters*, p. 748.

⁸³For a more detailed consideration of Mill and Fourierism, see Helen McCabe, 'John Stuart Mill and Fourierism: "Association", "Friendly Rivalry" and Distributive Justice', *Global Intellectual History* 4.1 (2018), pp. 35–6.

⁸⁴Mill, Letter 1749, *CW XVII* (Toronto 1972), pp. 1910–12. This connection also shows that J. Salwyn Schapiro is not quite correct when he states that 'Mill knew nothing of Marx or Marxism' (Schapiro, 'John Stuart Mill, Pioneer of Democratic Liberalism in England', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4.2 (1943), pp. 127–60, at 147). See also Persky, *Progress*, pp. 155–68 for Mill and 'echoes' of Marx.

⁸⁵Mill, *Claims*, p. 709.

⁸⁶Mill, *Claims*, p. 749; Mill, Letter 1749, p. 1911.

⁸⁷Mill, *Chapters*, p. 749.

⁸⁸Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 709 and 748–9; Helen Taylor, 'Preliminary Notice', *CW V* (Toronto, 1967), p. 705, and Mill, *Chapters*, pp. 748–9.

⁸⁹Mill, *Principles*, p. 775.

principles of remuneration in each cooperative are to be democratically determined by the owner-workers themselves.⁹⁰ They might pick piece-work; they might adopt Blancian principles; they might adopt anything in-between: but they must not employ workers for wages, and they must not reward people more highly merely for exercising more power.⁹¹ The associations would compete among themselves in a spirit of ‘friendly rivalry’, and would have eradicated classes, thus improving the social ethos and social harmony.⁹² If, Mill says, women were equal partners in such schemes, the state of affairs in which all capital had ‘spontaneously’ become joint property and everyone worked in cooperative associations would be ‘the nearest approach to social justice, and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee’.⁹³ As Persky argues, cooperation ‘makes coherent Mill’s radical reform agenda ... Ultimately, a productive system built around worker cooperatives constitutes the radical promise of progress, the greatest happiness of the greatest number’.⁹⁴ Thus, cooperative socialism was desirable, feasible and immediately available to some, with ‘higher’ principles of justice, and a society in which *everyone* was so employed, being desirable, feasible and eventually achievable.

In summary, then, Mill found all forms of socialism, apart from that brought about by revolution and involving a centrally planned economy, desirable. Similarly, he thought they were, bar revolutionary socialism, all feasible. He thought revolutionary socialism immediately available, which was its danger. Saint-Simonism was conceivably available. Cooperative socialism, Fourierism and Owenite and Blancian communism were immediately available to the ‘elite of mankind’ (i.e. those members of the working classes already showing their capability of accessing such institutions ‘as a present resource’ through their heroic efforts in setting up cooperatives). All these latter were also eventually available much more widely through an organic, evolutionary, but plausible and foreseeable expansion of cooperation and profit-sharing, which in turn would generate the required moral and intellectual education.

III. Mill’s ‘ideal’

The question still remains concerning which of these forms of socialism (if any) Mill considered to be the ‘ideal’ by which we ought to navigate social reform. Here the question of availability is of little importance (the ‘ideal’ is not necessarily available, just as the North Star is not itself reachable), but questions of desirability are paramount, and questions of feasibility also relevant.⁹⁵

As noted, in the 1830s Mill characterized Saint-Simonism as the ‘North Star’, but later he ceased to see it as the ‘ideal’. Above, I noted Mill’s concerns about the social ethos which might be generated through Saint-Simonism’s emphasis on production, as well as his concerns over its centralization of power.⁹⁶ We should also note that

⁹⁰Mill, *Principles*, pp. 211 and 775–94.

⁹¹Mill, *Principles*, pp. 782–4.

⁹²Mill, *Principles*, pp. 794–6. For more on Mill and ‘friendly rivalry’ see McCabe, ‘John Stuart Mill and Fourierism’.

⁹³Mill, *Principles*, pp. 775–94.

⁹⁴Persky, *Progress*, p. 148.

⁹⁵Mill did not obviously think desirable schemes had to be feasible. Certainly he thought schemes we ought to implement had to be both desirable and feasible, but that is not quite the same thing.

⁹⁶Mill, *Principles*, pp. 210–11; Mill, Letter 27, CW XII, p. 37.

Mill categorizes Saint-Simonism as a form of ‘socialism’, and socialism necessarily involves a ‘compromise’ between reality and the ‘ideal’ – between the selfishness of contemporary characters and human perfection.

From 1852, Mill calls cooperative socialism ‘the nearest approach to social justice and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee.’⁹⁷ But this, too, is only an ‘approach’ (however ‘near’) and not the ‘ideal’ itself. Though it has much to commend it, like Saint-Simonism, cooperative socialism involves a ‘compromise’ between selfishness and the ideal. The ‘ideal’ would *not* involve this compromise (even if this means it is ultimately unachievable). What does not involve this compromise is communism.

Communism, for Mill, involved the ‘highest’ principles of distributive justice – either equal shares or ‘from each according to his abilities; to each according to his needs’. Mill’s own nuanced – if brief – considerations of distributive justice help explain why he thought these principles were ‘higher’, and therefore better, than those of any extant form of socialism, and those underpinning capitalism.

Mill accepts there is a claim of justice to the full fruits of one’s own labours.⁹⁸ However, he also thinks people have a right to subsistence purely by dint of existing; though they also have a duty to contribute to the costs created by their existence.⁹⁹ Moreover, even when people’s subsistence is guaranteed, Mill felt it was unjust to reward people for natural talent or strength as this unfairly gives more to those who already have most.¹⁰⁰ Further, he was concerned about the self-interest which was bred by current capitalism, even when recognizing the justice of the principles ‘on which in every vindication of it which will bear the light, it is assumed to be grounded’ – ‘proportion between remuneration and exertion’.¹⁰¹ What was better was that people worked for ‘generous’ reasons, and that their actions (including their labour) were directed towards the common good.¹⁰² Blanc’s principles are ‘still higher’ than the already ‘high’ ideal of equal shares, then, because they not only guarantee subsistence, but also do not allow inequalities through compromise with selfish self-interest, or further rewarding those who already have most.¹⁰³

⁹⁷Mill, *Principles*, p. 794.

⁹⁸Mill, *Principles*, p. 208.

⁹⁹Mill, *Principles*, p. 360; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 713. See also Persky, *Progress*, pp. 109–21.

¹⁰⁰Mill, *Principles*, p. 210.

¹⁰¹Mill, *Principles*, p. 208.

¹⁰²Mill, *Principles*, p. 931; Mill, *Cooperation*, CW XXVIII (Toronto, 1988), pp. 5–9; Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

¹⁰³Mill’s concern about rewarding those who already have most chimes with some of the concerns of contemporary luck-egalitarians: unequal outcomes are justified if they are the outcome of *choice* but not if they are the outcome of bad or good ‘brute luck’. However, I do not think Mill’s overall position is rightly characterized as luck-egalitarian. Persky claims ‘that modern attitudes toward luck can be traced directly to Mill’ and that ‘Mill’s theory of progress suggests an attractive radical reconciliation of the two camps of the modern philosophical debate on luck’ (Persky, *Progress*, p. 199). I agree that Mill is both interested in the normative problem of luck, and not rightly considered a luck-egalitarian, but I disagree that he thought ‘justice would require a move from something like “democratic equality” to the achievement of something like “luck egalitarianism”’, or that these are ‘succeeding stages in the conquest of poverty and the historical achievement of justice’ (Persky, *Progress*, p. 200) for Mill if by this is meant that Mill endorsed a luck-egalitarian position as *ideal* (and not just better than contemporary capitalism). For though Mill endorses something which looks rather akin to Dworkinian luck-egalitarianism in his sketch of a potentially ideal system of private property, Blancian principles of justice are *not* luck-egalitarian.

These 'higher' principles of justice are only attainable by people with much-improved moral characters. Moreover, this improvement in character would also necessitate and attain much more than Mill considered desirable: meaningful equality, particularly between the sexes; independence; social harmony, an improved social ethos and individual character; and general utility.

As noted, Mill was concerned about the negative effect of communism on individuality. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century concerns about communism's deleterious effect on individuality generally have in mind the power of the state in Soviet-style communism. But Mill's concern is not about the power of the state so much as the potentially inescapable power of public opinion in small, communal communities. In phrases foreshadowing *On Liberty*, he worries whether 'there would be any asylum left for individuality of character; whether public opinion would not be a tyrannical yoke; whether the absolute dependence of each on all, and surveillance of each by all, would not grind all down into a tame uniformity of thoughts, feelings and actions'.¹⁰⁴

Given this, and given that he thought 'the education which taught or the social institutions which required' people to 'renounce liberty for the sake of equality, would deprive them of one of the most elevated characteristics of human nature', we might think communism was ruled out as the 'ideal' on the grounds of individuality, whatever Mill thought about its distributive principles and other desirable elements.¹⁰⁵ However, Mill is not sure communism *will* have these deleterious effects: 'No doubt,' he says, 'this, like all the other objections to the Socialist schemes, is vastly exaggerated'.¹⁰⁶ Communism would 'promise greater personal and mental freedom than is now enjoyed by those who have not enough of either to deserve the name'.¹⁰⁷

These concerns, however, do not apply to cooperative socialism. Mill does not seem to see any potential problems for individuality in cooperative socialism. Indeed, as Baum, Claeys and Stafford rightly note, cooperative socialism is the direct extension of Mill's beliefs regarding independence, anti-paternalism and individuality to the economic sphere.¹⁰⁸ But he did have some concerns regarding the justice of some distributive principles which might have been implemented by cooperatives (even if these would be better, because democratically determined, than when imposed by an external force).

A combination of the 'high' ideals of communism, eradicating any need for compromise with selfishness, and flourishing individuality, then, is Mill's 'ideal'. And this could be achieved through cooperatives adopting Blancian distributive principles, which would meet the considerations Mill puts forward in the *Autobiography* regarding 'the social problem of the future'.¹⁰⁹ That is, a society comprised of such cooperatives would be one 'no longer ... divided into the idle and the industrious', where the rule 'they who do not work shall not eat' would indeed 'be applied ... impartially to all' (save those whose right to subsistence without working Mill defends elsewhere).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴Mill, *Principles*, p. 210 and Mill, *Restraints of Communism* (Toronto, 1986), pp. 1179–80.

¹⁰⁵Mill, *Principles*, p. 210.

¹⁰⁶Mill, *Principles*, p. 209.

¹⁰⁷Mill, *Principles*, p. 209.

¹⁰⁸Bruce Baum, 'J. S. Mill and Liberal Socialism', *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, ed. Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 102–17, and 'J. S. Mill's Concept of Economic Freedom', *History of Political Thought* 20 (1999), pp. 494–530; Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism*, pp. 123–72; Stafford, 'Paradigmatic Liberal', p. 336.

¹⁰⁹Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

¹¹⁰Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

‘[T]he division of the produce of labour, instead of depending ... on the accident of birth, will be made by concert, on an acknowledged principle of justice’ – indeed, on the principle that Mill regards as ‘still higher’ than any other.¹¹¹ It ‘will no longer either be, or be thought to be, impossible for human beings to exert themselves strenuously in procuring benefits which are not exclusively their own, but to be shared with the society they belong to’, both on a small scale (i.e. their own cooperative) and the wider scale of society more generally.¹¹² ‘[T]he greatest individual liberty of action’ would have been ‘unite[d] ... with a common ownership of the raw material of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the fruits of combined labour’.¹¹³ There would have been a ‘transformation ... of character ... in both ... the labouring masses, and ... their employers’, with ‘both ... classes’ having ‘learn[ed] by practice to labour and combine for generous ... purposes’.¹¹⁴

I argue, then, that worker-founded and run, democratically organized cooperatives which had voluntarily chosen to implement Blancian principles of distribution and which were of a sufficiently advanced education and character to make such principles practicable, were, for Mill, the model we ought to use as our guide in navigating towards the ‘ideal’ society, even if this model turned out to be only conceptually available. They would ‘unite’ maximal independence and individuality with distributive justice, improvement in moral character and productive efficiency, and therefore lead to maximization of general utility.

III.1. Countering two possible counter-arguments

One counter-argument to this claim is that Mill says he and Taylor ‘had not the presumption to suppose we could already foresee by what precise form of institution these objects could most effectually be attained’.¹¹⁵ He does not himself make an overt claim for cooperatives adopting Blancian principles of justice being the ‘North Star’ by which we ought to guide our reform efforts in the same way as he had once done for Saint-Simonism.

But this does not undermine my claim. The North Star represents ‘true’ north – but it does not tell us how, precisely, to navigate from London to Hull. But from Mill’s work, we can say he thought that ‘[t]urning our face towards’ cooperation involving the ‘highest’ principles of distributive justice – and therefore combining individuality, independence, equality, distributive justice and productive efficiency – would be something for which ‘everybody is the better ... although it be impossible to reach’.¹¹⁶ It would be a good thing, for Mill, if the ‘spirit’ of such institutions ‘pervade[d] ... existing social institutions’.¹¹⁷ The precise workings of such institutions were not worked out by anyone, including Mill who deliberately eschewed such blueprint making. But a lack of ‘presumptuous’ detail does not negate the claim that there is an identifiable – albeit vague – ideal discernible from Mill’s writing, which ought to guide our progress towards reform, just as knowing one ought to head north from London to reach Hull does not mean one need take one prescribed route.

¹¹¹Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239; Mill, *Principles*, p. 203.

¹¹²Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

¹¹³Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

¹¹⁴Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

¹¹⁵Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 239.

¹¹⁶Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 678.

¹¹⁷Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 678.

A second counter-argument arises from the fact that one might think that no form of socialism could *really* have been Mill's 'ideal', despite the foregoing exploration of the meaning of Mill's use of 'ultimate' and his varying endorsements of forms of socialism. After all, he says that, though communism is vastly superior to contemporary capitalism, the choice is not just between these two options, but between 'Communism at its best' and 'the regime of individual property, not as it is, but as it might be made'.¹¹⁸ And *this* choice is 'a mere question of comparative advantages, which futurity must determine. We are too ignorant either of what individual agency in its best form, or Socialism in its best form, can accomplish, to be qualified to decide which of the two will be the ultimate form of human society'.¹¹⁹

Given Mill's discussion of permissible governmental action in the final book of *Principles*, and his chapter-heading in that book which reads '*laissez-faire* [sic] the general rule' it is often assumed that what Mill means by 'the regime of individual property ... as it might be made' is some perfected or improved form of *laissez-faire* capitalism, and this adds weight to the idea that Mill was never *really* a socialist.¹²⁰ But this would be to misread Mill's position.¹²¹ For one, he offers a good many criticisms of *laissez-faire* as it is usually understood.¹²² For another, the exceptions he supports to the 'general rule' of *laissez-faire* are numerous and present a vision of a 'perfected' regime of individual property which is very far from what we usually understand as *laissez-faire* capitalism.¹²³ As Persky rightly notes, '*laissez-faire* capitalism was an efficient – indeed, necessary – stage ... Ultimately, however, it was not in itself the end state of progress'.¹²⁴

Nor did Mill have in mind unreformed contemporary capitalism as 'the regime of individual property ... as it might be made' (as his caveat of 'not as it is, but as it might be made' shows): he thought many elements of contemporary capitalism undesirable, and that the whole system was, in the light of increasing working-class independence, infeasible.¹²⁵ It is also plain that he disapproved of paternalist reforms: though sympathetic to the concern with the plight of the poor and the problem of increasingly violent class antagonism, Mill saw paternalism as undesirable and infeasible.¹²⁶

What he *did* mean by 'the regime of individual property ... as it might be made' involved profit-sharing; reform of land tenure and inheritance; various forms of government provision, including greater provision of education; fairer access to the professions; and improvement in the conditions of domestic servants.¹²⁷ All of these

¹¹⁸Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 207.

¹¹⁹Mill, *Fontana and Prati*, p. 208.

¹²⁰Fredman and Gordon, 'Mill and Socialism', pp. 5–6; William Thomas, *Mill* (Oxford, 1985), p. 190.

¹²¹See also Baum, 'Mill and Liberal Socialism', p. 104; Mueller, *Mill and French Thought*, p. 57; Stafford, 'Paradigmatic Liberal', pp. 336–7; Riley, 'Capitalism versus Socialism', pp. 41 and 48; and Persky, *Progress*, pp. 70–88, on not confusing Mill's commitment to individual liberty with simple endorsement of *laissez-faire* economics.

¹²²Mill, *Principles*, pp. 800–4 and 936; Mill, Letter 72, *CW XII* (Toronto, 1963), p. 152; Mill, *Attack on Literature*, *CW XXII* (Toronto, 1986), p. 320; Mill, *The Gorgias*, *CW XI* (Toronto, 1978), p. 149.

¹²³Mill, *Principles*, pp. 936–71; Mill, *Liberty*, pp. 292–310.

¹²⁴Persky, *Progress*, p. xix. See also pp. 86–8.

¹²⁵Mill, *Principles*, pp. 201, 205–9 and 758–94 and *Claims*, pp. 708–36; McCabe, 'John Stuart Mill's Analysis of Capitalism and the Road to Socialism', *A New Social Question: Capitalism, Socialism and Utopia*, ed. Casey Harrison (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 8–26.

¹²⁶Mill, *Principles*, pp. 758–94 and *Claims*, pp. 363–89.

¹²⁷Mill, *Principles*, pp. 207–8, 223–6, 387–8, 755, 766–972 and 977; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 382; Mill, *Claims*, p. 382; Mill, Letter 1690, *CW XVII* (Toronto, 1972), p. 1848; Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, *CW XXI* (Toronto, 1984), p. 301; Mill, *The Case of Mary Ann Parsons I*, *CW XXV* (Toronto, 1986), pp. 1151–3;

reforms Mill evidently thought desirable and feasible, and most of them were immediately available, at least to some, with, eventually, all workers being capable of being employed in profit-sharing arrangements, save those for whom that was already not enough, the 'elite of mankind' who would be making socialist experiments, for instance in cooperation.¹²⁸

But in later passages in *Principles* than the one contrasting 'Communism at its best' with the 'regime of individual property, not as it is, but as it might be made',¹²⁹ Mill clearly shows how these reforms to capitalism would 'spontaneously' transform into a form of cooperative socialism.¹³⁰ From *there* the people of the future might decide to transform further into small, communist villages, but their starting point would not be a capitalist one.

Miller has argued that, given what Mill says in *Liberty* about different ways of life suiting different people, we should expect this organic, voluntarist process to arrive at a "patchwork" economy in which capitalistic and socialistic enterprises exist side by side rather than a wholly cooperative economy.¹³¹ I don't disagree that this might indeed be the outcome of spontaneity, even in the very long run: perhaps some people will never be motivated in the way Mill suggests they might to work not for private gain but the common good. Similarly, Riley argues that Mill 'left open the possibility that socialism would never arrive' – and I agree that Mill is not predictive or prescriptive.¹³² Kurer notes what he considers a 'significant change in outlook' in the 1860s, when Mill 'began to believe that a complete transition to socialism was not really necessary in order to achieve his social aim'.¹³³ He bases this argument on a letter Mill wrote in which he said that, to eradicate class antagonism, 'it is not necessary that cooperation should be universal' but 'only very frequent' and the claim that a significant change occurs in *Principles* from 1862.¹³⁴ In the 1850s, Mill had written that labourers would form associations with capitalists 'temporarily, and in some cases', while 'in other cases, and finally in all' they would form associations among themselves.¹³⁵ As 'temporarily' was later removed, and 'perhaps' added

Mill, *The Case of Mary Bird*, CW XXV (Toronto, 1986), pp. 1153–7; Mill, *The Case of Mary Ann Parsons II*, CW XXV (Toronto, 1986), pp. 1164–7; Mill, *The Case of Susan Moir*, CW XXV (Toronto, 1986), pp. 1165–7; Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism*, pp. 159–60. See also Persky, *Progress*, pp. 91–108 and 122–32. Mill also briefly mentions the regime of individual property which might be adopted by 'colonists' arriving in an uninhabited land. Persky describes these as 'not Mill at his best' as he offers 'in place of a strong historical argument ... a rather rarefied thought-experiment' (Persky, *Progress*, p. 69), a criticism with which I do not agree, seeing some strength in a thought-experiment over historical description in getting people first to see that property rights were not as natural and immutable as people assumed them to be (cf. Mill, *Chapters*, p. 749) and second that it was not impossible to conceive of people actually adopting principles of communal property. Of course, it *may* have been *more* than a 'rarefied thought-experiment' – Mill, after all, was not opposed to colonialism. But he can hardly have considered countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand to be 'uninhabited'.

¹²⁸Mill, *Principles*, pp. 793–4; Mill, *Chapters*, p. 748.

¹²⁹Mill, *Principles*, p. 208.

¹³⁰Mill, *Principles*, pp. 793–4. Baum says: 'Mill is vague about whether such a cooperative system should be regarded as a reformed type of capitalism or as a form of socialism' ('Liberal Socialism', p. 106). But as Iorwerth Prothero rightly points out, in Mill's context this 'thick' form of cooperation was 'the most important aspect of socialism' in the period (Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France, 1830–1870* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 145). See also Mill, *Cooperation*, pp. 5–9.

¹³¹Miller, 'Mill's "Socialism"', p. 213.

¹³²Riley, 'Capitalism versus Socialism', p. 41.

¹³³Kurer, 'Mill and Utopian Socialism', p. 229.

¹³⁴Kurer, 'Mill and Utopian Socialism', p. 229.

¹³⁵Kurer, 'Mill and Utopian Socialism', p. 229; Mill, *Principles*, p. 672.

before 'finally' from 1867, Kurer argues that Mill no longer thought society would, or would need to, transition to socialism to achieve his ideal. However, eradication of class antagonism, though an important goal for Mill, does not entirely encapsulate his 'ideal', or why he supported cooperation. The changes to a part of *Principles* where Mill makes what are always tentative predictions about the future seem to reflect as much his changing view as to the *speed* at which society might transition (that is, whether, and to how many, socialism is not only 'available as a present resource', but is one which will be utilized) than to affect whether such a transition would be necessary to achieve the 'ideal'. Moreover, the direction of the change is still towards socialism (the main issue of this article), even if – as with the North Star itself – society never reaches it. (And, as Kurer himself notes, 'in the other passages his old prediction still stands' in the same, later, editions.¹³⁶) I concur with Persky when he writes of 'Mill's conviction that the laissez-faire capitalism of his day ... would ultimately be replaced by an economy built on a more cooperative base', and argue that not only did Mill think such 'developments possible and even likely', he also thought them desirable.¹³⁷

Though in 1845 Mill called reforms which involved 'raising the labourer from the mere receiver of hire – a mere bought instrument in the work of production, having no residuary interest in the work itself – to the position of being, in some sort, a partner in it' his 'Utopia',¹³⁸ in *Principles* and the *Autobiography* profit-sharing is no longer Mill's 'Utopia'. Rather, cooperative socialism was, at the very least, 'the nearest approach to social justice', and there were even better options including, as shown above, cooperation adopting Blancian principles of distributive justice.

Mill might not have been *certain* that there would be the wholesale transformation he eulogizes in *Principles*, but that does not mean he did not hope a certain form of it would develop. Nor is his reluctance to favour the immediate, universal transformation of society into small, self-supporting communist communities (which would, as he notes, involve 'seizing on the existing capital, and confiscating it for the benefit of the labourers', and which he never fully endorsed because of his concerns over individuality¹³⁹) over gradual reform of individual property a sign that he did not also hope this gradual reform would, 'honestly, and by a kind of spontaneous process', become a form of socialism as closely approximating to the ideal as proved expedient. We ought to take seriously the thought that a socialist ideal was directing and informing Mill's desire for reform of individual property, showing the way it ought to go even if he remained unsure we would ever really get there.

IV. Conclusion: understanding the role of 'utopia' in Mill's thought

Understanding the role of 'utopia' or the 'ideal' in Mill's thought gives us a new way of understanding his 'utopian socialism'. That is, not only did he endorse experiments in specific forms of utopian socialism in the here-and-now, but the 'North Star' by which he thought we ought to navigate social reform was a form of socialism. This was not identical to any particular form of utopian socialism, but certainly encapsulated Blancian principles of distributive justice as well as more generally avowed principles of social harmony, working for the common good, independence and female emancipation, alongside Mill's long-standing commitment to maximizing opportunities for

¹³⁶Kurer, 'Mill and Utopian Socialism', p. 229.

¹³⁷Persky, *Progress*, pp. xvi and xix; Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 239–41.

¹³⁸Mill, *Claims*, p. 382.

¹³⁹Mill, *Principles*, pp. 775 and 210; Mill, *Communism*, pp. 1179–8.

‘the free development of individuality’ and general utility. Cooperatives (and particularly producer-cooperatives), then, democratically run by the workers themselves, and preferably adopting Blancian principles of distributive justice, are Mill’s ‘ideal’.

That socialism was the ‘ultimate’ in social improvement and human progress is not a sign of Mill’s lack of real engagement with socialism – he did not think it so far-off as to be remote from questions of immediate reform, even if achievement of full-blown socialism was ‘remote’ in time from where he stood. Rather, it had a direct role in helping us navigate reform of contemporary regimes – socialism might have been as remote as Polaris, but we ought still to use it to guide our navigation, as Mill says, be it only in order to travel safely from London to Hull.

Moreover, Mill’s assessment of the desirability, feasibility and availability of different forms of socialism ought to impact how we understand Mill’s radicalism concerning political, social and economic reform. They also have wider implications within his political theory, showing there is a stronger emphasis than is sometimes realized in his work on distributive justice, egalitarianism, working-class independence, social harmony and the common good. I have shown elsewhere how this has implications for how we understand his feminism and the idea of ‘perfect equality’ between the sexes.¹⁴⁰ But this new way of seeing his view of a socialist ‘ideal’ guiding social reform suggests we ought to pay more attention to his writing on education, religion, historical change, and perhaps also the social role of poets who posit the ends towards which we ought to aim, while scientists find us a route there.¹⁴¹ It also means we ought to reconsider some of the received wisdom on Mill’s view of democracy, his ‘elitism’, his perfectionism and his liberalism, including the meaning and application of the harm principle. A socialist ‘ideal’ guiding this ‘paradigmatic liberal’¹⁴² casts both liberalism and socialism in a new light. It also raises interesting questions of the extent to which Mill thinks we can be made to benefit others (rather than just prevented from harming them in the negative sense of causing damage to their interests through our actions); to what extent taxation counts as a ‘harmful’ burden, and why; and the emphasis he places on the good done to society more generally by apparently wholly individual goods such as freedom of expression.

The framework I argue we can see in Mill for analysing ‘ideal’ theories in terms of desirability, feasibility and three kinds of availability also has wider implications for the contemporary debate regarding ‘ideal’ theory – or at least for important subsections of that debate. I do not mean to say that just knowing that Mill thought the ‘ideal’ could play this guiding role in immediate reform and political philosophy will persuade anyone who is currently unconvinced that it can, indeed, do that. But his ‘North Star’ metaphor, though expressing a controversial view,¹⁴³ is a useful

¹⁴⁰Helen McCabe, ‘Good Housekeeping? Re-Assessing John Stuart Mill’s Position on the Gendered Division of Labour’, *History of Political Thought* 38.1 (2018), pp. 135–55, and ‘John Stuart Mill, Utility and the Family: Attacking “the Citadel of the Enemy”’, *Review Internationale de Philosophie/International Review of Philosophy* 272.2 (2015), pp. 225–35.

¹⁴¹Mill, *Coleridge*, CW X (Toronto, 1969), pp. 147–8.

¹⁴²Cf. Stafford, ‘Paradigmatic Liberal’.

¹⁴³John Rawls, *Theory of Justice* and *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); David Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (Princeton, 2008); Gerald Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal* (Princeton, 2016); Colin Farrelly, ‘Justice in Ideal Theory’, *Political Studies* 55 (2007), pp. 844–64; Gilbert and Lawford-Smith, ‘Political Feasibility’; Liam B. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Ideal Theory* (Oxford, 2003); Charles Mills, ‘“Ideal Theory” as Ideology’, *Hypatia* 20 (2005), pp. 213–38; Amartya Sen, ‘What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006), pp. 215–38; John Simmons, ‘Ideal and

one (indeed, Simon Caney opened a chapter on ideal theory with this very quote from Mill).¹⁴⁴

A similar tripartite schema to the one discernible in Mill is already to be found in the work of Erik Olin Wright, Alan Buchanan and David Leopold.¹⁴⁵ Disambiguating between these terms – and particularly separating out immediate, eventual and conceivable accessibility – is helpful in clarifying the debate. First, it allows us to get a clearer idea of what a particular author means and where they might be mistaken (perhaps their scheme is feasible, but not as accessible as they think). Second, it allows us to understand better the focus of critiques, and make more apposite ones – accusations of inaccessibility or infeasibility, for instance, can be irrelevant to some forms of ‘utopia’ where the author makes no claim apart from that of desirability. Third, it allows us to understand better what, precisely, is ‘ideal’ about an ‘ideal’ theory; what sorts of facts about the world it recognizes as constraints; what kinds of ‘compromises’ with reality it is making, and why; and how it might, or might not, have reference for actual political reform, and in what ways.

This is evidently only a very brief sketch of the use to which Mill’s framework might be put in clarifying, and furthering, contemporary discussions in political theory regarding ‘ideal’ theory, though the foregoing discussion of Mill’s assessment of ‘utopian’ socialism fleshes out a little more what using this schema might look like, and deliver, in practice. Even such a brief sketch, however, shows that understanding the role of ‘utopia’ in Mill’s political philosophy, through his metaphor of it being the ‘North Star’, not only reveals a number of interesting things regarding the content and development of his political philosophy, but has useful implications for contemporary political theory and the ongoing debate regarding the role of the ‘ideal’. It is an aspect of Mill’s theory of social progress, and his preferred social reforms, which would repay much more attention.¹⁴⁶

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Nonideal Theory’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38.1 (2010), pp. 5–36; Zofia Stemplowska, ‘What’s Ideal about Ideal Theory?’, *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008), pp. 331–40; Alan Hamlin and Zofia Stemplowska, ‘Theory, Ideal Theory and a Theory of Ideals’, *Political Studies Review* 10.1 (2010), pp. 48–62; Adam Swift, ‘The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances’, *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008), pp. 362–87; Ingrid Robeyns, ‘Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice’, *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008), pp. 341–62; Laura Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (2009), pp. 332–55.

¹⁴⁴Simon Caney, ‘Climate Change and Non-Ideal Theory: Six Ways of Responding to Non-Compliance’, *Climate Justice in a Non-Ideal World*, ed. Clare Heyward and Dominic Kelly (Oxford, 2016), pp. 21–42, at 21.

¹⁴⁵Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London, 2010), pp. 20–5; Alan Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy and Self-Determination* (Oxford, 2007), p. 61; Leopold, ‘Marx and Engels’, pp. 433–66; Leopold, ‘On Marxian Utopophobia’, p. 133; Leopold, ‘A Cautious Embrace’, p. 29.

¹⁴⁶My thanks for comments on this article by several anonymous reviewers, Dale E. Miller, David Leopold, Matthew Clayton, Adam Swift, Ben Holland, members of the CELPA seminar group at the University of Warwick, and participants at a workshop on Mill held at the University of Southampton where I presented an early version of this article, especially Brian McElwee, Ben Saunders, Chris MacLeod and Piers Norris Turner. And in fond memory of Erik Olin Wright, who died the day I found out this article had been accepted for publication.

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