

Organic Conservatism, Administrative Realism, and the Imperialist Ethos
in the 'Indian Career' of John Stuart Mill

a review-article by

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Lynn Zastoupil. *John Stuart Mill and India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994. viii + 280 pp.

"I was born in London, on the 20th of May, 1806," wrote John Stuart Mill in his autobiography, "and was the eldest son of James Mill, the author of the *History of British India*." James Mill had acquired considerable fame as a philosopher of utilitarianism and as an authority on India; and if it is remarkable that John Stuart Mill, who would eclipse his father, described himself, on the opening page of his autobiography, as the son of the "author of the *History of British India*", it is just as revealing that he virtually obscured his own life-long association with India. It is not commonly known that John Stuart Mill, philosopher of classical liberalism, theorist of political economy, proponent of women's rights, and one of the shapers of modern English prose, spent nearly the entirety of his adult working life drafting "despatches" or official documents on British policy in India. A few terse lines, to which he had practically nothing else to add in his autobiography, describe his association with India: "In May, 1823, my professional occupation and status for the next thirty-five years of my life, were decided by my father's obtaining for me an appointment from the East India Company. . . immediately under himself." Thus was John Stuart Mill's connection with India assured until the demise of the East India Company in 1858.

Having entered "East India House" in 1823, when he was only seventeen years old, John Stuart Mill was placed in the office of the Examiner of Indian Correspondence. It was in this office in London that the East India Company prepared the policy documents that, once they had been approved by the Court of Directors of the Company and the Board of Control, were sent to the Governor-General in India, and it was through this office that the entire correspondence between India and London was funnelled. Though employed initially as a junior clerk, Mill was, owing to his unusual intellectual attainments, very soon allowed to partake in the preparation of "Despatches", and in 1828 he was made one of the assistants to the Examiner. Hitherto he had drafted despatches mainly in the Public Department; after 1828, he was attached to the Political Department, and from 1836 to 1856 he was almost single-handedly responsible for the vast correspondence pertaining to the Company's relations with the Native Indian States. Though Mill did not attain the position of the Examiner until 1856, the trust reposed in him by the Company is suggested by the fact

that he was chosen to represent the Company when it was asked to appear and furnish evidence before a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1852 on the occasion of the renewal of the Company's charter. When the Indian Rebellion of 1857-58 compelled the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, to place a bill before Parliament seeking the dissolution of the Company and transferring the responsibility for India directly to the Crown, Mill was assigned the unenviable task of defending the Company's interests. Mill then prepared an extensive historical defence of the Company's achievements in the form of a *Memorandum on the Improvements in the Administration of India during the Last Thirty Years*, and this was followed by several other petitions. Though the Company's dissolution was unavoidable, no trading organization was ever sent to its grave with a better epitaph. Mill left India House when the East India Company was wound up on 2 September 1858, having "given enough" of his life, as he said, "to India". He was then offered a seat on the India Council, a decision-making and advisory body headed by the Secretary of State for India, but this proposal he declined: as he put it, "the conditions of Indian government under the new system made me anticipate nothing but useless vexation and waste of effort from any participation in it". He never again took up any employment, other than occupying a seat in the House of Commons.

It is not only Mill but his biographers, and many scholars as well, who have been loathe to recognize that Mill's 35-year tenure at the India Office may have something to say about his life and work, his views on political liberty and subjection, the idea of representative government, British imperialism (with particular reference to India), and many of the large number of other subjects on which he penned his thoughts. The standard biography of Mill makes no mention of his time at the India Office, and Bruce Mazlish, in his *James and John Stuart Mill*, an intellectual psychobiography of father and son, is constrained to admit that "India represents a curious lacunae in John Stuart Mill's intellectual life". The scholarship on Mill, which is very considerable, is predicated largely on the supposition that Mill's work at the India Office was merely a diversion, and that it could not have had any bearing on his work as a well-known public philosopher and political economist; and so a recent assessment maintains the distinction between Mill's career at the India House and his "theoretical priorities in economics and social organisation". Most pointedly, Eric Stokes, in his authoritative study on utilitarianism as an aspect of Britain's policy in India, justified the omission of a serious consideration of John Stuart Mill's role in the creation of Indian policy with the argument that the younger Mill had "neither his father's opportunities nor his bent for the practical realization of the Utilitarian theories".

It is the career of John Stuart Mill at the India Office, and its possible relation to his more widely known career as a philosopher of liberty, theorist of government, and political economist that is the subject of Lynn Zastoupil's study, which is uniquely

based on the 1,713 despatches (and most certainly some more) that Mill wrote in the Examiner's Office at India House. It is scarcely possible, as Zastoupil reasonably maintains, that Mill's work for the Company left no impression on his mind or that he effected a complete divorce between his intellectual interests and his working life. John Stuart Mill is supposed to have been part of the "utilitarian deluge" that engulfed Indian administration, and in consequence he is seen as having done little else except to follow his father. Zastoupil disputes this conventional reading and suggests that "at India House Mill found both ample reinforcement for and significant opportunity to employ the ideas that mattered most to him" (p. 5). Far from maintaining a consistently utilitarian or liberal position on Indian affairs, or following the views associated with his father, Mill adopted independent views and was swayed by numerous other intellectual considerations. Thus, for example, the teachings of Herder, Coleridge, and Saint-Simon, though they seem to be at great remove from Indian affairs, were to have an extraordinary impact on Mill's Indian despatches; and Mill's Indian writings "owed more to the [eighteenth-century] Whig tradition" than has been commonly allowed; on the other hand, Zastoupil is also prepared to argue that Mill's more general political positions may have been considerably impacted by his knowledge of British India.

Though Zastoupil appears to be offering a more complex reading of Mill's Indian writings, his thesis is a rather simple one -- indeed, not merely simple, but unfortunately simple-minded. The brunt of his argument is easily encapsulated in a few formulations. As long as his father was alive, the younger Mill could not but espouse his father's views, and the radical change in John Stuart Mill's views on Indian policy in 1836 coincides with the death of his father that year. This argument is repeated *ad infinitum* and seems reasonable enough (p. 31, 40, 49, 93, 95, 98, *passim*). A case in point is the well-known Anglicist-Orientalist debate over Indian education in the 1820s and 1830s. The Anglicists proposed that the government's funds be used exclusively for the propagation of English-language education; the Orientalists insisted that money also be spent on reviving and supporting classical Indian learning in Sanskrit and Arabic: and the issue was resolved when Governor-General Bentinck, influenced in part by Macaulay's now-infamous "Minute on Indian Education", where the languages and literatures of India are summarily dismissed as worthless, scarcely worthy of the attention of even children, ruled in favor of the Anglicists. James Mill, however, while he harbored nothing but contempt for classical Indian learning, was none too enthusiastic about English literary texts either: the aim of education, as of government, was to promote 'usefulness', and he thought that 'useful knowledge' was best spread through vernacular Indian languages. That seems consistently to have been the position of both James and John since 1824. But, in 1836, when John Stuart Mill was asked to prepare a response to Bentinck's decision, he unabashedly and rather surprisingly took

up the Orientalist cause. Mill decried the attempt to denigrate Indian learning and demean the integrity and knowledge of the country's traditional intelligentsia. "The testimony of the most competent witnesses", Mill wrote, "affirms that the lettered classes are still held by the people of India in high estimation, and their degradation and extinction cannot be received with indifference by their countrymen nor submitted to without resentment by themselves" (p. 42). Mill took the view, in the words of the Orientalist H. H. Wilson, that "a command of the English language, sufficient for the ordinary purposes of life, is quite compatible with gross ignorance and inveterate superstition" (p. 45). The President of the Board of Control, John Hobhouse, was not prepared to tolerate the defence of an unseemly cause, and refused to send Mill's despatch to India (p. 40); when at last a despatch was sent, it bore so little the impress of Mill's views that Mill crossed it out from the list of his despatches.

What might have moved Mill to so radically change his views? Zastoupil rightfully notes that Mill had, by 1836, absorbed for nearly a decade "the views of romantics, conservatives, Saint-Simonians, and others" (p. 40). In 1826, as Mill was to detail in his *Autobiography* (chapter 5), he experienced an extraordinary crisis in his mental life, and thereafter slowly came to the realization that the education received at the hands of his father had been, while intellectually strenuous and fulfilling, wholly deficient -- indeed reprehensibly narrow -- in many other respects. His father had not enough of an appreciation of art, poetry, and literature; nor did he recognize that ratiocination is no substitute for sensibility, or that the relentless and exclusive focus on reason and logic is detrimental to the development of the life of emotions. Mill increasingly turned to the romantics, particularly to Coleridge, for intellectual and emotional sustenance. He was now to believe that the sentiments of a people, however fanciful and seemingly opposed to rational and pragmatic plans for governance, were not to be ignored, and thus utility could not be the end of all government and social reform; he also came to hold the view that reform was best effected by working with, not against, the social customs and institutions of a people, and that in this endeavor it was imperative "to enlist the support of those learned classes to whom Indians customarily looked for leadership in intellectual matters" (p. 41). Some people exercised a "natural influence over the minds of their countrymen" (p. 37), having something of an organic bonds with the masses, and their leadership was more easily accepted than the rule of foreigners. This is one view that Mill was to maintain with tenacity, and if anything Zastoupil does not emphasize enough its importance in providing a cornerstone to British policy in India, which particularly after the Rebellion of 1857-58 was rooted in the assumption that the safety of British rule in India was no better assured than by seeking out the 'natural leaders' of Indian society and maintaining good relations with them. It is for these reasons that, as Zastoupil holds, John Stuart Mill came to espouse the Orientalist cause, thereby repudiating the views that both he and his father had held since 1824. But that was not all: "perhaps

most important[ly]", Zastoupil argues, "James Mill was dying and away from his India House desk, leaving his son with considerably more freedom to express new views on India that he might have been developing" (p. 40).

It is remarkable and almost incredulous that the younger Mill was so firmly in the grip of his father's influence that he should have been subservient to his father's ideological platform, while in private adhering to views that James Mill would have treated with contempt. This tyrannical relationship should pose considerable problems for how we are to understand a philosopher known principally as the exponent of liberty, much as it also compels us to attempt to reconcile Mill's intellectual prowess with what can only be described as moral cowardice. This is not only a conundrum for psychologists and psychoanalysts, but a problem in English intellectual history. What was the general tenor of father-son relationships in nineteenth-century England, and what relation do private histories have to public life? How did John Stuart Mill himself keep apart the public from the private, and how did he reconcile reverence with opposition? What can we say about Victorian intellectual practices from the relationship of James and John Mill? Zastoupil does not allow any of these questions to enter into his discussion, and it merely becomes axiomatic for him that John Stuart Mill's radically altered views after 1836 about Indian society and the nature and progress of British rule in India are accounted for by the death of his father. He needs to take a more nuanced view of this famous relationship: if James Mill represented the dominant phase of imperialism, John Stuart Mill represented its hegemonic phase. Where Zastoupil sees opposition, he might also try to seek complementarity: in Ronald Inden's phrase, father and son constituted the "loyal opposition", sharing numerous underlying assumptions about Indian society.

To complement his argument, Zastoupil advances the claim that Mill increasingly came under the influence of what he calls the "empire-of-opinion" school of Indian governance, and that he allowed this influence to flow freely after the demise of his father. James Mill throughout had argued vehemently for direct rule by the British in India. The object being to promote good and useful government as soon and effortlessly as possible, he saw no reason why the British should not directly take over the reins of administration in territories that came under their jurisdiction, stripping native rulers, whom he thought of as despicable and squalid despots, of their power. His son, predictably, adopted a similar line of argumentation, and as late as 1832-34, had drafted three despatches on Mysore where he objected to allowing the Indian prince to retain his throne on the promise of delivering good administration to his subjects. How is it then that in January 1837, six months after the death of his father, John Stuart Mill was to draft a despatch on the troubled native state of Jaipur in which he advocated that the British, despite the murder of one of their officials, adhere to a policy of non-intervention?

Though John Stuart Mill was emboldened by his father's death to repudiate views with which he did not wish to be associated, Zastoupil additionally points to the influence on him of certain administrators who proposed that the opinions, habits, and prejudices of a people constituted the very basis of a stable civil society. This clumsily termed "empire-of-opinion" school, whose most well-known proponents were four highly-placed Scotsmen -- Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras (1820-26); Mountstuart Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay (1819-27); John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay (1827-30); and Charles Metcalfe, Resident at Delhi (1811-19) and Hyderabad (1820-5), and Acting Governor-General (1835-36) -- felt it bound to preserve native Indian institutions, pay heed to the opinions of Indians, show "a generous consideration of the feelings [most evidently among Muslims] of fallen greatness", conform to native usages, abstain from innovation (which Munro described as "the ruling vice of our government"), and involve Indians in the administration of their country by cultivating the association of India's 'natural' elite. Viewing India as a collection of village communities, deemed to have existed from time immemorial, these 'romantics', while not condoning social evils, were concerned about the possible effects of modernization and Westernization upon Indian society, and feared that rapid changes would render Indians hostile to British rule (pp. 56-86).

John Stuart Mill, Zastoupil argues, likewise "came to believe that Indian participation in government was an essential component of lasting improvement in that part of the world" (p. 87). Mill was responsible for correspondence pertaining to the affairs of native Indian states, and for many years after 1836, he advocated non-intervention and indirect rule by the British. Native princes were to be allowed to govern their states, and only in the most extreme circumstances was intervention conceivable, though even then Mill counseled restraint. Zastoupil summons the case of Awadh: by the terms of a treaty signed in 1801, the British agreed to protect the Nawab from internal and external threats, while extracting from him a promise that he would work for the welfare and security of his people. The Company's relations with the Nawab over the next five decades were a constant point of tension, and the alleged negligence of the various Nawabs (later Kings), who were said to be more interested in nautch girls, music, poetry, and minor amusements such as kite-flying, towards their subjects sorely tempted the British to intervene on many an occasion and annex the kingdom to their territories. At first, as one might expect, John Stuart Mill displayed resentment that the British were allowing a native despotism to flourish, and even lending it their support; and in 1834 he went so far as to draft a despatch that authorized Bentinck to annex Awadh on the grounds that its inefficient administration was imposing an intolerable burden on the people (pp. 93-96). But in 1838, Mill expressed "concern about [the] erosion of royal authority" in Awadh, and he was willing to allow that the King of Awadh was doing all in his power to ameliorate the situation. Mill would have agreed with the opinion of John Low, Resident at Awadh in 1842, that "the

general system of the Native Govt. is in its theory well suited to the genius and habits of the people of Oude" (p. 102). Mill took this position not only on Awadh, but also on Kathiawar and other Native States (pp. 104-117).

By the mid-1840s, Zastoupil argues, Mill had moved to a more moderate position, one that characterizes the most 'mature' phase of his thinking. For a number of reasons, he was to come to the recognition that he had erred in uncritically embracing the views of Coleridge, Herder, and other romantics, much as he had mistakenly disowned rather too much of his father's teachings. The more crucial point, which Zastoupil acknowledges but rather inadequately, is that Mill -- much like many other nineteenth-century European and American thinkers -- readily adopted the openly racist doctrine that all civilizations were to be judged along an evolutionary scale. On this scale, some civilizations were advanced, others primitive or (in today's jargon) 'under-developed': and progress lay in having the primitive nations trod the path that aeons ago had been followed by certain European nations with evident success. Mill diluted, when he did not abandon, the teachings of the empire-of-opinion school, certainly for pragmatic if not ideological reasons, and took on the mantle of a radical reformer. He came to attack the principle of indirect rule, urged intervention in despotic states, and saw in rapid modernization a panacea for India's social and political evils. While still eager that British officials work with the 'natural' elite of India, Mill approved of Dalhousie's doctrine of lapse, which allowed the British to take over a state where there was no biological heir to the throne, and he supported the British annexation of Satara, Awadh, the Punjab, and other Native States. In one fundamental respect he continued to adhere to the principle of indirect rule and even non-intervention. Eager to explain why he had not approved of Dalhousie's annexation of Kerouli, while allowing all others, Mill wrote in a private letter to John Morley in 1866: "My principle is this. Wherever there are really native states, with a nationality, & historical traditions and feelings, which is emphatically the case (for example) with the Rajpoot states, there I would on no account take advantage of any failure of heirs to put an end to them." But "in modern states created by conquest", such as the "Mahomedan" and "Mahratta kingdoms", or the "foreign dynasties" of Scindia and Holkar in central India, Mill "would make the continuance of the dynasty by adoption not a right nor a general rule, but a reward to be earned by good government . . ." (pp. 153-54). Why should Mill, however, at all have maintained the invidious distinction between 'real' native states and others, and would we not have to know what Mill meant by a 'nation' before we can reasonably infer what he might have meant by "really native states"? Is there an implied distinction between the 'organic' and the 'inorganic' here in Mill's adumbration of the 'real', and if so, what is the intellectual history of that distinction? Unfortunately, these queries form no part of Zastoupil's study.

In his final chapter on "J. S. Mill and the Imperial Experience", Zastoupil attempts to take on some larger and mainly unresolved questions. One might have expected that he would say something of how influential, if at all, Mill's despatches were in the formulation of Indian policy, but he is surprisingly silent on this point. One scholar, as far back as 1964, came to the conclusion that "all the important principles for governing the great dependency of India were laid down by Mill in the documents he drafted for the Company", but Zastoupil does not hazard so bold a judgment. The English imperial enterprise in India was of such a magnitude that some measure for stating just how important the "important principles" were would have to be stipulated. The more difficult point, as Zastoupil of course recognizes, is that the despatches prepared by Mill were amended by the Court of Directors, and it remains uncertain how far Mill actually helped to shape British policy on India. But that is no reason why we ought to be precluded from attempting to assess Mill's writings as furnishing tropes that were to become critical in the formulation of colonial discourse. British administrators, particularly in the period of the Raj after the Indian Rebellion of 1857-58, came to hold the view that critics in England were in no position to understand the difficulties faced by what came to be called the men-on-the-spot. The excesses committed by the British in putting down the Rebellion and in subsequent 'disturbances' (such as in the Punjab in 1919) were easily criticized by arm-chair critics, but -- it was claimed -- often administrators had no choice except to put down rebellions by a display of brute force. The man-on-the spot always knows best, or so the maxim proclaimed. Mill himself did not use this phrase, but there can be little doubt that he was likewise inclined to this view; he also insisted that the administration of the country was to be turned over to professionals, and not to be left to mere amateurs or gentleman-politician types. Arguing against Crown rule in India, Mill suggested that the administration of India was best left in the hands of the Company, "chiefly composed of persons who have acquired professional knowledge of" Indian affairs. Mill was, in other words, one of the earliest exponents of the man-on-the-spot theory. That is easily understood, given the English predilection for a crude kind of empiricism; yet this quintessential form of Englishness does not sit easily with English politics' self-representation of itself as an affair of amateurs. The distinction between amateurism, one of whose iconic heroes was to be the figure of Sherlock Holmes, and professionalism, which the English came to associate with the greatly loathed Germans (and particularly Prussians), lay at the heart of the British empire. These are the larger questions that merit attention, but Zastoupil shows no awareness of their centrality or, at times, even presence.

It is to the question of imperialism that we must return. Though Zastoupil takes a few digs at Said, after the conventional acknowledgment of the undisputed importance of his work, as well as at those -- Bernard Cohn, Ron Inden, Gauri Viswanathan, among others -- whose work has done most to show the hegemonic processes through which

the British established themselves as the paramount power in India, he has little to say on Mill's imperialism or on its epistemological constructs and imperatives. He conflates imperialism with Orientalism, and gets mired in the rather unnecessary enterprise of arguing that Mill was not a complete Orientalist, and most likely not a bad or ill-intentioned one (pp. 173-89). There could have been no more Orientalist proposition than Mill's articulation of India as the raw data, with Europe being the fount of theory: as a "theoretical reformer of the opinions and the institutions of his time", Mill had noted, he appreciated the insights into the "practical conduct of public affairs" that his service with the Company brought him. Zastoupil provides a valuable commentary on how Mill's views on land reform in Ireland, and most particularly his arguments against the prevailing consensus in favor of the landed aristocracy, were shaped by his Indian experience (pp. 183-88). However, he has absolutely nothing else to say about Mill as a spokesman for the British empire, or about the relation of Mill's Indian writings to his other writings on imperialism or imperial affairs, and to the end he remains fixated on the 'influence' (an intellectually lazy word) of the 'empire-of-opinion' school on Mill. Mill did have a great deal to say about imperialism and about British imperial practices, and it is surprising that Zastoupil does not seek to explore the relation between Mill's defence of the Company and his endorsement of professional bureaucrats, and such imperialist events as the notorious repression by Governor Eyre of the Jamaica Rebellion of 1865. Nor does Zastoupil recognize that Mill was the most important player, as one student of Mill puts it, "in transforming English liberalism from a dominantly anti-imperialist theory to a very sophisticated defense of an expanding British empire."

Zastoupil's study, nonetheless, provides the necessary backdrop to Mill's Indian career and thus paves the way for more complex studies. Mill's writings encapsulate those central tropes of imperialist discourse, such as 'natural leaders', 'fair play', and the 'man-on-the-spot', but the contours of their operation in his discourse have barely been articulated. Mill was an advocate of free trade and an opponent of monopoly, but he defended a trading company which had forcefully to be divested of its monopolistic practices. He is remembered as the philosopher of liberty, but rather unimaginatively, in keeping -- as they say -- with the times, used a primitive evaluative scale to judge civilizations. He is loudly cheered as one of the principal theorists of parliamentary democracy, but it is indubitably certain that he was willing to countenance certain forms of despotism. Mill attempted, not uniquely, to reconcile a universalist reading of liberty with a particularist reading of Indian 'despotism'. These paradoxes, and numerous others, have to be unraveled so that we might all the more successfully probe the received conception of Mill as the philosopher of liberty. India was the grave of many British officers, but it may also turn out to be the grave of one whose stellar place in the intellectual history of the West has so far been assured.

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