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"Character worth Speaking Of": Individuality, John Stuart Mill, and the Critique of Liberalism

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"Whoever thinks that individuality of desires and impulses should not be encouraged to unfold itself must maintain that society has no need of strong natures—is not the better for containing many persons who have much character"—John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

"The social problem of the future is how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action, with a common ownership in the raw material of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour."—John Stuart Mill, Autobiography

It is a notable peculiarity of our times that a single word—liberalism—prompts consternation from both Right and Left. Since the 1980s, politicians in the United States have gone to ever greater lengths to dissociate themselves from "the dreaded 'L' word," a phenomenon that, according to Geoffrey Numberg, attests to the Right's success in transforming liberalism into a "negative brand." Frustratingly for Numberg, a writer for the American Prospect, liberal positions retain broad political appeal among U.S. voters, even though those who espouse them remain loath to identify as liberals. Yet, for leftists of a more radical stripe, such as intellectuals working in the academy from the vantage of Marxist, poststructuralist, or postcolonial theory, liberalism's dreaded qualities assume a different cast.

Of course, when rightwing partisans ply the "L" word, they have in mind a particular United States lineage: a left-leaning liberalism that took off with the New Deal and includes the civil rights, feminist, and environmentalist movements of later decades. Academic critics, by contrast, construe liberalism in relation to a longer Western genealogy, from about the seventeenth century to the present day. In this older and broader sense, liberalism articulates notions of individualism which are
integral to political stances on the Left and Right. Then too, when critics in the academy speak of liberalism today they often have in mind the “neoliberal” economic doctrines that have dominated contemporary political discourse since 1989, touting “free” market forces as the ultimate arbiter of all human affairs. Insofar as left liberals seek the state’s aid in bridling capitalism, whereas neoliberals propound the merits of laissez faire, liberals and neoliberals are fundamentally opposed. Yet, since the self-styled centrists of the Democratic Party have embraced many aspects of the neoliberal economic agenda, those whom the Right continues to tar as liberals are, from the vantage of the New Deal tradition, anything but. The result has been a diminished difference between the economic policies of the two major parties at a time when “economism”—the tendency, as Regenia Gagnier writes, “to interpret all phenomena in market terms”—has become a dominant worldview (5).

It is interesting to note, therefore, that the story of left liberalism’s pejoration and decline has seemed to be of minimal interest to those who critique liberalism more broadly. Thus, according to John Frow, the liberal social imaginary “draws upon a more or less coherent set of philosophical presuppositions” including negative liberty, methodological individualism, antistatism, and free market capitalism (424-25). By contrast, Wendy Brown describes liberalism as “a nonsystematic and porous doctrine subject to historical change and local variation.” Still, Brown’s feminist critique of liberalism approaches the topic “in a generic fashion,” resulting in an analysis that mainly corroborates the coherent presuppositions postulated by Frow (141). Elaine Hadley’s discussion of the neoconservative “romance” with Victorian liberalism opens with an amusing allusion to Michael Dukakis’s ill-starred 1988 Presidential campaign, during which supporters lamented “that liberal was becoming a dirty word” (“Past” 7). Yet, by the end of the essay, Dukakis’s plight is all but forgotten, his dirty brand of “L” word subsumed into a wider account of liberalism’s effective convergence with neoconservatism. Hadley’s analysis of the nexus between rightwing commentators and the Victorian past is far reaching, but in constructing it, she does not remark on the variations between the nineteenth-century legacy Newt Gingrich embraces, the “L” word he just as avidly decries, and the economic neoliberalism to which he, along with many Democrats, subscribes.

The point of such observation is not to underscore critics’ apathy toward left liberal politics, but to call attention to what may be its unintended effect. In his incisive response to Frow, Michael Warner suggests that the critique of neoliberalism would be even more cogent were Frow to “lay claim to those [other] parts of liberal thought” which can be seen to motivate his own political goals (“Liberalism” 432). What Warner writes of Frow can, I think, be said of many left critiques of liberalism. Thus, my aim in addressing this problem from the standpoint of Victorian studies is not to vindicate left-wing liberalism so much as to consider what a more robust engagement with certain liberal ideas—in particular, the thought of John Stuart Mill—might contribute to the radical enterprise.

As the site of a fervidly individualist and anti-statist political culture with important connections to the present day, mid-Victorian Britain provides a fruitful field for liberal critique. Yet, as we think about the nineteenth century, it is important to remember the “neo” in neoliberalism; for the prefix, which marks a notable feat of ideological resuscitation at the end of the twentieth century, ought to remind us that classical liberal doctrines were, for a long time, discredited. In the decades before the First World War, socialists and New Liberals mounted successful challenges to doctrinaire liberalism. These political movements overturned moralistic understandings of poverty, abandoned laissez-faire orthodoxy, and adopted collectivist notions of social agency. T. H. Green, the mid-Victorian forerunner of such shifts, articulated a positive conception of liberty which has since been identified as a crucial turning point in the transformation from laissez faire to statist forms of liberalism. Whereas classical liberalism had stressed a negative view in which freedom was defined as the absence of interference, nineteenth-century liberals such as Green saw freedom as consisting in the positive ability to realize one’s potential—a more complicated conception anchored to collective quests for self-determination, social justice, and recognition.

Yet, for scholars interested in the ongoing legacy of Victorian ideas, the most important nineteenth-century liberal is Green’s precursor, John Stuart Mill. For while Green regarded himself as a revisionist—acknowledging the role of the state in fostering liberty—Mill had already laid the grounds for a political theory committed to reconciling the negative and positive preconditions for promoting human progress. In On Liberty he argued that “individual and social progress” was crucially dependent on the proliferation of diverse “experiments of living,” including “free scope” for “varieties of character” and “different modes of life” (102). Thus, for anyone interested in liberalism’s porous susceptibility to historical change, Mill is an important transitional figure in many ways: a seminal theorist of positive liberty; a gradual convert to “a qualified Socialism” (Autobiography 115); an early advocate of equality between the sexes; the exponent of a balance between voluntarism and statism, local and centralized modes of governance; a hybrid thinker who blended Enlightenment ideas with civic republican and a Romantic stress on history and diversity; one whose advocacy of individual free
dom was predicated on a non-atomistic social ontology; the propounder of an influential synthesis between utilitarianism and idealism that Raymond Williams has described as “a prologue to a very large part of the subsequent history of English thinking” (49).

In thus urging a reconsideration of Mill among Victorianist (and other) critics of liberalism, I do not suggest that his ideas are beyond criticism. To the contrary, Mill’s thought, which wrestles with some of the most vexing modern quandaries, has incited passionate critique for more than a century. Many of the problems to which his major writings are subject have been described at length: for example, the limits of his feminism, the ambiguities of his famous stance on liberty, and the complications with British imperialism. On Liberty, a text central to the discussion that follows, is, in many respects, a deconstructionist’s field day—a work deeply invested in insupportable distinctions, implicated in the bourgeois ideologies it contests, and prone to shoring up these weaknesses through classist and racist comparisons. That said, as I hope to show, Mill’s ideas have more in common with leftist political aims and more to contribute to left theoretical debates than such observations suggest. Certainly, what Brown has described as “the dream of democracy—that humans might govern themselves by governing together”—was Mill’s dream too (Brown, States 5). Thus, insofar as Mill’s thought is diminished in order to service arguments against liberalism in general, I believe that those very arguments can be strengthened and enriched by a harder and less tendentious engagement.

My consideration of Mill emerges partly by way of discussing three different accounts of liberalism: Hadley’s (loosely speaking) genealogical analysis of Victorian liberalism; C. B. Macpherson’s still-influential Marxist study of “possessive individualism”; and K. Anthony Appiah’s ongoing work on the ethics of identity. For Hadley, a leading Victorianist scholar of liberalism, Mill is a principal spokesman for a nineteenth-century discourse of character which must be analyzed in order to expose today’s neoconservative appropriations. For Macpherson, on whose work Hadley builds, Mill is the would-be reformer of an unsalvageable ideology. Both readings emphasize the extent to which ownership of property, including one’s own self, organizes liberalism’s tenaciously bourgeois logic. For Appiah, who is largely sympathetic to liberalism, questions of property recede. Thus, whereas “material resources” are seen to shape modern identities, Mill is invoked—as though he were relatively indifferent to such determining conditions—primarily to speak for the value of “self-creation” (Appiah, “Liberalism” 330, 313). Beyond responding to Mill’s appearance in these influential commentaries on liberalism, I hope to provide a sense of the many ways in which greater familiarity with Mill’s ideas may spark useful dialogues among critics of liberalism and between them and their liberal counterparts on the Left both in work on the nineteenth-century and on liberalism today. In particular, I want to elucidate Mill’s articulation of liberty as practice or exercise, to be cultivated within a particular spatial imagining of a modern society.

Character, Individuality, and Self-Ownership

Both liberalism in general and Mill in particular figure in Hadley’s analysis of right-wing cultural politics, which argues that the neoconservative “romance” with Victorian liberalism betrays a telling fondness for the British class system. Yet, Hadley goes on to suggest that today’s conservatives emulate the Victorian past most closely when they deny their classism, rhetorically stressing “inclusion, consensus, and consent” while pursuing policies that further entrench inequality (“Past” 9). This is a surprising claim since the mid-Victorian culture thus described made little pretense to inclusiveness, and overt classism was a staple feature of nineteenth-century liberal discourse. For example, in 1865, when faced with the prospect of working-class enfranchisement, the prominent M. P. Robert Lowe proclaimed, “because I am a Liberal and know that by pure and clear intelligence alone can the cause of true progress be promoted, I regard as one of the greatest dangers with which this country can be threatened a proposal […] to transfer power from the hands of property and intelligence [to] the hands of men whose daily life is necessarily occupied in daily struggle for existence” (qtd. in Roach 324-25). Hadley thus rightly asserts the Victorian bias in favor of property, but insists that such bias was cloaked (as it often is today) in a rhetoric of inclusion. Her readiness to historicize Victorian discourse primarily from the vantage of its neoconservative appropriation thus leads to a conflation of different meanings of “character.”

To be sure, neoconservatives are certain to find inspiration in nineteenth-century classics such as Self-Help (1859), Samuel Smiles’s bestselling paean to the power of individual will. There is also no question that Victorian liberals, like the anti-welfare crusaders of the 1990s, sought to “dispauperize” the poor by preaching self-reliance. Yet, Hadley goes further, arguing that the proprietary logic at work in Victorian discourse provides a genealogical key to liberalism from Locke’s time to our own. Her theorization is influenced partly by Iris Marion Young’s critique of present-day liberalism’s fictitious universality. As Young has argued, liberal democracies profess egalitarian rigor while masking the material effects of difference such as that constituted by race, gender, and class.
With such analysis in mind, perhaps, Hadley argues that nineteenth-century liberals deployed the rhetoric of character to "believe and convince others that they were defining a class-, gender-, and race-neutral criterion for citizenship" ("Past" 13). Hadley develops this bold thesis by exploring the Victorian "cult of character" as illustrated, for example, by Mill ("Past" 9). In what she introduces as a citation in the Oxford English Dictionary's entry on character, Mill is quoted as saying, "A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character" (qtd. in "Past" 10). For Hadley, this formulation illustrates the "tactical slippage" through which liberalism simulates neutrality even as it surreptitiously classifies and excludes. That is, Mill "implies that anyone who has desires and impulses has a character"; yet, because these qualifications are figured as possessions, "in the negative formulation of the term, in reference to those who do not own desires and impulses," Mill reveals that character is actually "a moral virtue of the few" (10-11).

Hadley's analysis thus lays special stress on the fact that the liberal subject—illustrated by Mill's reflection on what it means "to have a character"—is typically figured as both individual and proprietary. In highlighting possessive individualism as a major component of her critique, she draws on C. B. Macpherson's classic Marxist analysis of John Locke ("Past" 11; 35 note 5). Thus, Hadley likens the deployment of character, in Mill's day and our own, to Locke's conception of a natural subject whose formation precedes political society. Her reading of Mill (and of liberalism more generally) directly parallels what Macpherson describes as Locke's "inability to surmount" the "inconsistency inherent in market society": to wit, bourgeois societies generate inequalities of class, yet justify themselves by postulating abstract equality (Political 269). Following Macpherson's analysis of Locke, and presuming the fundamentally Lockean logic of Victorian (and neoconservative) character, Hadley reads Mill as the exponent of a nineteenth-century variation on possessive individualism.

To evaluate such an analysis it is necessary first to say more about character, a concept crucial to understanding the self-consciously anti-materialist and anti-deterministic cast of Victorian liberalism. From this view, Victorian character owes less to Locke than to nineteenth-century civic republicanism, German Romanticism, and Evangelical Protestantism—post-Enlightenment moral discourses that share a common emphasis on the potential for individual development as realized through citizen participation, intellectual cultivation, or spiritual renewal. Self-development is of particular importance to the liberal affirmation of a prescriptive view of character—a notion of subjectivity premised on the limitless improbability of human beings regardless of descriptive features such as class, race, or nationality. Although this perfectionist view of character promises democratic effects, during the Victorian period it was profoundly bound up in existing socio-economic and political hierarchies. That is because Victorian prescriptive discourses often portrayed character building as the outcome of pastor-like relations between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, colonizer and colonized. Such discourses were thus crucial to justifying the Victorian exercise of power—underwriting both the charitable "civilizing mission" of the urban middle classes, and the Anglicist colonial policies deployed in British India. As a result, governing practices that entailed vast inequalities of wealth and power could be conceived—"liberally"—as mutual relations between potentially equal actors. By thus positing equality in moral terms, as a human potential to be gradually cultivated, Victorian writers on prescriptive character recast the bourgeois contradiction that plagues Locke's political theory. In so doing, they abandoned Locke's ontology, including the atomist conception of a "natural" man whose formation precedes politics and society.

That ontological difference is especially evident in Mill's distinctive variation on prescriptive character. Whereas the rationality of Locke's liberal subject is, as Gal Gerson writes, "analogous to teeth" in being invisible but predetermined at birth (795), the subject of Mill's prescriptive discourse is an open story whose capacity for development is potentially great but highly contingent. Mill's romantic and hellenistic liberalism, in contradistinction to Locke's, is preoccupied "with the historicity of nature, the plasticity of identities" and the importance of "social provision" (Gerson 806). Thus, for Mill, subjectivity is not static and pre-political artifact of self-ownership or natural rights, but the contingent product of politically charged character-building practices such as domestic care, education, and citizenship. Fully developed character thus entails positive liberty—a capacity to pursue self-directed ends beyond that warranted by mere non-interference. This way of conceiving character—as the potential basis for a just, vibrant, and participatory democracy—is part of what distinguishes Mill's prescriptive discourse from the merely self-serving and ideological variations described above.

It is in On Liberty, in a chapter entitled "Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being," that Mill writes, "One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character" (106). The word "character" appears here in a particular
sense: not the prescriptive meaning in which character stands for human potential, or a descriptive alternative in which character is the indelible mark of some material determinant such as nationality. For, whereas "character" in either of the latter senses is neutral as to value—either cultivated or uncultivated, desirable or not—"character" in the quotation from On Liberty denotes a sought-after moral attainment. Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary defines this usage as, "Moral qualities strongly developed or strikingly displayed; distinct or distinguished character; character worth speaking of." (2nd ed., def. II.12.a; emphasis added).

Thus, Mill's formulation of the character-less steam-engine, is not, as Hadley writes, a reference to "those who do not own desires and impulses" ("Past" 10) but, to quote Mill, to those "whose desires and impulses are not [their] own." What Mill had in mind is clarified by a proximate quotation: "He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice" (Liberty 104). From Mill's prescriptive viewpoint, everyone, including the human steam-engine, has a character of some kind. But those whose desires and impulses conform to custom—"are not [their] own"—lack the kind of character that is, as the dictionary says, strongly developed or "worth speaking of." Mill's intent here was to connect character in this desirable sense to individuality, another valorized notion of developed subjectivity, imported from the Romantic thought of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Indeed, this very concept represents what is most distinctive in Mill's hybrid nineteenth-century liberalism. For by anchoring liberty to a notion of Bildung that is at once broadly social and committed to diversity, Mill distinguished his thought from the laissez-faire orthodoxy of classical liberalism, the abstract universalism of Enlightenment forerunners such as Kant, and the thinly conceived hedonism of utilitarian precursors such as Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. So far from instancing bourgeois propriety, Mill wrote to castigate the "pinched and hidebound type of human character" that had become the "strong tendency" of his contemporaries (Liberty 108). It is not, he warned, "by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth," that human beings "strengthen the tie which binds every individual to the race" (109). As described in On Liberty, individuality represents the attainment of what the OED calls a "character worth speaking of."

It is, therefore, important to recall that individuality also figures throughout Marx's writings. In the German Ideology (1845-46), communism was described as the means by which to alleviate "the suppression of individuality" (464). In the Manifesto (1848), Marx and Engels looked forward to "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (491)—a statement that antici-
challenge the liberal boundary between public and private spheres in order to restructure those crucial nurturing processes that Locke had relegated to a mystified nature. Equal rights would transform both sexes, liberating women from “exaggerated self-abnegation,” while curing men of imperious “self-worship” (158). Such transformation was urgent because “the true virtue of human beings,” their “fitness to live together as equals,” was, under present circumstances, vitiated by insidious gender divisions. Although citizenship inculcated social equality, it “fill[ed] only a small place in modern life.” The family, meanwhile, remained “a school of despotism,” even though, “justly constituted,” it would become “the real school of the virtues of freedom” (160). Mill thus demanded that what recent feminists have described as an ethic of care be stripped of its pernicious feminization and placed on equal footing with liberalism’s falsely masculinized ethic of justice.  

Of course, neither On Liberty nor the Subjection of Women entirely succeeded in promoting the liberty, equality, and diversity that Mill set out to justify on utilitarian grounds. By assuming that wives would opt for domestic pursuits, and ignoring the material consequences of such essentialism, Mill weakened the Subjection’s zealous critique of separate spheres. In On Liberty, which is somewhat narrowly focused on the middle classes, he said too little about equality. For that reason, the text can be interpreted as implying that diversity consists in a free-market competition of ideas, or that individuality can flourish irrespective of economic oppression. In both texts, moreover, emancipatory aims such as equality, diversity, and individuality were sometimes cast in invidious contrast to non-Western “barbarity” and “stationariness”—a rhetoric that linked Mill’s high-minded liberalism to practices of imperial domination.

Yet, for some critiques of liberalism the gist of what is problematic in Mill rests elsewhere: on the evidence for his proprietary logic. Mill’s legacy may seem to subtend a nineteenth-century liberal subject whose privileged “mental property” becomes a means to satisfying Victorian predilections for “unique persons” and “moralized” self-interest (Halden, “Pass” 11-12). Such an analysis grasps Mill’s social agenda, but rejects it as an ideological ruse. As a utilitarian ethicist, Mill valued self-development both for its own sake (as an enhancement to individual happiness), and as a means to social improvement (as that which encouraged individuals to identify their interest with the common good). Thus, he deliberately cast Bildung as a dialogical process requiring propitious conditions such as the egalitarian family and an active citizenry—as though deliberately to distinguish his socially embedded subject from Locke’s prefabricated monad. Still, it is possible to insist that though Mill may not have intended to promote individuality as a form of property, property is nonetheless what such individuality reduces to. On that view, conceiving the individual as even minimally self-owning reproduces the atomized possession that Macpherson traces to Locke.

Written in 1962, Macpherson’s landmark book describes possessive individualism as an unstable political ideology that fails to meet human needs and desires. Possessive individualism emerged in the seventeenth century, Macpherson argues, because its assumptions corresponded to the reigning market society. Freedom could be defined in terms of self-ownership, a “conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them.” The possessive society consists in self-interested relations of exchange between putatively free and equal proprietors (Political 3). Although these bourgeois conditions persist in the present day, the political consensus that legitimates them has diminished. Whereas eighteenth-century political power was vested exclusively in a cohesive “possessing class,” nineteenth-century democratic movements enfranchised a class of workers able to recognize that market relations were neither equal nor inevitable (273-74). Mill is integral to this story because he typifies the Victorian effort to “repair” liberalism by moralizing and socializing the individualism upon which it depends (275). Yet, considered closely, Mill’s works provide several grounds on which to question Macpherson’s assumptions.

It is notable, for example, that On Liberty explicitly rejected the absolute doctrine of self-ownership which Macpherson ascribes to liberalism. Whereas Macpherson stipulates a self-ownership so unconditional that individuals are said to “owe nothing to society,” Mill insisted that individuals “may rightfully be compelled to perform” “many positive acts for the benefit of others” including “any [...] joint work necessary to the interest of the society” (Liberty 53). Similarly, by assuming that bourgeois conditions reduce society to a series of market exchanges, Macpherson ignores unremunerated relations between fellow citizens including those between wives and husbands, parents and children. By contrast, Mill not only noticed the feminized space of the home, he also sought to equalize power within it and, in so doing, to promote relations of care both inside and outside the domestic sphere. Of course, it is reasonable to object, as would many Marxists, that such goals cannot be realized under capitalism. Yet, since Macpherson is providing a political history, one purpose of which is to assess the ideological stability of possessive individualism, it is notable that he never mentions the transition from laissez-faire liberalism to the welfare state. By contrast, in a 1981 editorial on neoconservatism, Macpherson explains that the welfare state
allowed liberals to support capitalism “in good conscience”; he cites Mill, “the great reform liberal,” as an early proponent of “the enlargement of all the citizens’ abilities to live more fully human lives” (“Reagan”). Yet, the welfare state, which is at bottom a mechanism for redistributing property, depends precisely on a modified concept of self-ownership such as that articulated in On Liberty (which is why libertarians, not liberals, are the chief upholders of the purist self-ownership doctrine Macpherson describes). Both the positive conception of liberty immanent in Mill’s thought on Bildung, and the ethic of care adumbrated in the Subjection helped to justify what neoconservatives deride as the “nanny” state. Thus, by casting Mill’s reformism as a futile intellectual exercise, Macpherson’s influential book obscures Mill’s role in promoting those changes within liberalism that, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, helped to modify possessive individualism.

Though Hadley follows Macpherson in ignoring the liberal turn toward the social and the corresponding shift toward a positive conception of liberty, there are other respects in which her analysis is compellingly subtle. According to Macpherson, the alleged subordination of everyone to market forces has provided the main ideological foundation for equality throughout liberalism’s three hundred year long history (Political 272-76). By focusing on character, Hadley points to an alternative discourse of equality which, over the course of several centuries, translated the Protestant notion of individual moral worth into the modern liberal conception of universal citizenship. Nineteenth-century notions of character, writes J. W. Burrow, adapted the eighteenth century’s valorization of a property-owning electorate “to a wider, less exclusive, more mobile, more competitive, and certainly no longer necessarily landed society” (89). As the bearer of prescriptive human potential, character was integral to a liberal teleology that promised the eventual enfranchisement of all adult males. Victorian character can thus be understood, rightly, as a category through which the requirements of citizenship were figured as moral rather than material possessions.

When, for example, an 1864 Liberal commission applauded public schools for “moulding [ . . . ] the character” of English gentlemen, it anticipated the ways in which working-class enfranchisement could be attended by descriptive discourses that tied self-possession—the “capacity to govern others and control” oneself—to an educated elite (qtd. in Clark 271). In its prescriptive form, character places the onus on individuals or classes to meet (or, as Hadley prefers, to “possess”) the qualifications for citizenship; in its descriptive deployments, character concretizes the social particularities of such individuals and groups, classifying them so as to appraise the moral fiber of classes, races, genders, and so forth.

Thus, character’s most anti-democratic and excluding effects often occur when the tensions between these meanings are exploited. Victorian liberals could (prescriptively) foretell and delay an expanded franchise while (descriptively) fortifying existing hierarchies against impending democratization. In a comparable though not identical vein, today’s neoconservatives pay lip service to an ethos of inclusiveness while casting aspersions on citizen character as (descriptively) to naturalize and/or (prescriptively) to erase the politico-economic impacts of class, race, and gender.

Still, it is crucial to recognize that Mill’s notion of character as individuality, though sometimes complicit, can no more be reduced to a conservative rhetoric of self-possession than it can to a libertarian thesis of absolute self-ownership. As Amanda Anderson has argued, character is a complex category that is “neither exhausted nor fully defined” by its deployments on behalf of “exclusivity and power”; to dismiss character too readily is thus to ignore the “potential for a creative rethinking” of civic discourse (“Pragmatism” 300). In conceiving of character as a human potential, and of individuality as the realization of that potential, Mill’s intent was to theorize the foundations of a more just, equalitarian, and democratic society. The flourishing of democracy and socialism, he believed, required “an equivalent change of character” in both capitalist and working classes (Autobiography 138). In his unfinished “ethology,” or “science of character,” Mill sought to produce a sociological framework to augment such progress (System 4). That he ultimately abandoned ethology illustrates the limits of his faith in positivism. Instead, Mill’s normative commitment to individuality, conceived as both end in itself and as means to that end, took the place of such social-scientific theorizing. For, as Mill understood it, individuality both required and consummated the social bond. Whereas building individuality entailed the collective development of individual capacities, the culmination of individuality was the personal embrace of public good. Individuality so conceived looked beyond the paradoxes of classical liberalism.

Unsurprisingly, in translating this complicated ethical ideal into the basis of a utilitarian political theory Mill introduced many inconsistencies. So, for example, Mill supported democracy because he believed that political participation was fundamental to building character; he favored equality, not only on grounds of justice, but also because he thought dominatory relations were corrupting. Yet, Mill also feared that under modern conditions democracy might devolve into a tyranny of the majority—the government of “each by all the rest” (Liberty 46). In that case equality might exacerbate the tendency “to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind” (112). Thus, the function of individuality
sometimes assumed a more Nietzschean cast; for though he was careful to deprecate the rule of the strong, Mill nonetheless argued that the counterpoise and corrective to mass mediocrity was the pronounced individuality of those who stand on the higher eminences of thought (Liberty 113). For all his advocacy of diversity, Mill seemed to doubt that either middle-class "pollards" or the working-class "herd" had much to contribute to the progress of humanity (Liberty 108; Autobiography 138). Thus, despite his sincere belief in the character-building effects of democracy and equality, Mill tended to valorize a hierarchy of intellect which is comparable to the discourse of self-possession which Hadley brings to light.

Mill's elitist tendencies and his ambivalence toward democracy are widely discussed features of his thought. There is little question that his prescriptive view of character justified forms of political exclusion, including paternalistic imperialism, or that his notions of qualified citizenship privileged elite European culture. Yet, if from one vantage Mill seemed poised to install an intellectual aristocracy, from another he was arguing that a democracy founded on substantive and not merely formal equality is both attainable and ethically imperative. Thus, when Hadley reads the Victorian discourse of character as premised on a pretense of inclusivity, she is, perhaps, thinking more about today's neoconservative tactics than about Mill, who—precisely because he was sometimes so hair-raisingly classist—did not tend to deny the impact of social, economic, and cultural difference. I do not argue, of course, that today's critics should applaud Mill's classism or adopt elitist and Eurocentric notions of Bildung. But what I do argue is that we recognize that Mill was as concerned as we are to contest the presumptions of a Lockean ontology and to belie the utopian pretense of a merely formal political equality. Thus, if Mill's discourse on individuality was elitist, that is partly because he took the conditions for positive liberty very seriously, believing that an egalitarian society required much more than an equivalent package of political and legal rights. It is our task to imagine individuality as an ideal that is as capacious in its valorization of difference, including cultural and racial difference, as it is demanding in its commitment to substantive equality. But that is a task that can, I believe, be aided by serious engagement with Mill's thought.

Romanticism, Authenticity, and Spaces of Development

What, then, is the import of Mill's stress on the components of character being one's own? In his unfinished ethnology Mill defined a "confirmed character" as one directed by self-willed purposes that are relatively independent of hedonistic incentives. His aim in so doing was to defend such cultivated habits of "willing" against would-be social engineers such as Jeremy Bentham who, in Mill's view, had touted the benefits of mechanical conditioning. In thus identifying confirmed character with a measure of will, as against the dystopic prospect of hedonistic tutelage, Mill invoked Romantic thinkers such as Novalis and Thomas Carlyle (System 842-43). In On Liberty, Mill's efforts to visualize a robust modern subject involved syncretizing the Romantic ideal of individuality and the civic republican ideal of citizenship. Indeed, Mill was so convinced that civic participation was constitutive of individuality that this particular fusion was, arguably, his most cogent. Thus, according to Alan S. Kahan, Mill's notion of Bildung, with its strong republican emphasis on citizenship, did not promote "a concentration on the self to the exclusion of society" (101). Still, in calling for the development of one's "own" character, Mill seemed, at least momentarily, to privilege a problematic Romantic view in which individuality was "to do with being an authentic self," "developing spontaneously according to one's inner being" (Staunford 94). Like self-possession, the romantic discourse of authenticity is shot through with classism; it constructs a privatistic view of subjectivity potentially at odds with the call to public participation and social relations of care.

Writing in a similar vein, Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued that the notion of authenticity is both monological and essentialist since it ignores the profoundly social and dialogical dimensions of identity. It is all the more remarkable, then, that Appiah's recent work on the ethics of identity, which invokes the concept of individuality, offers an essentialist interpretation of Mill's views on the matter. Appiah's analysis draws on the character of Mr. Stevens, the butler in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, Remains of the Day (1989). Though Stevens is typically read as a sad failure who devotes his life to a self-deluding ideal, Appiah argues that he illustrates Mill's beliefs about the inherent value of choosing one's "own mode" of "existence," however wrong-headed or lamentable ("Liberalism" 316; cf. Mill, Liberty 114). In so doing, Appiah attempts to delineate two distinct arguments for liberty: a utilitarian argument in which liberty is seen as a means to moral growth, and—what interests him more—a non-utilitarian argument in which liberty is valued for its own sake. Stevens perfectly illustrates the latter view, because, though his life has been somewhat pitiable, it is "good [. . .] because it [has been] lived his way" ("Liberalism" 317).

The problem with this argument is its Romantic essentialization of choice which confers the status of freedom on all individual decisions, irrespective of their content or the conditions that gave rise to them.
Thus, Appiah assumes that because Stevens identifies strongly with his delusive ideals that Mill would applaud his individuality. Yet, if that were so, Mill would also praise the middle-class “pollard” who might be just as identified with his or her regime of bourgeois propriety as Stevens is with his reactionary working-class ideology. Appiah is, perhaps, conflating On Liberty’s valorization of eccentricity with its neutral plea for the tolerance of behavior that, however otherwise undesirable, does no harm to others. Thus, Mill argued, “Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable […] that people should be eccentric” (Liberty 113). Yet, Mill attributed no such desirability to more generic forms of ill conduct (e.g., licentiousness). Such behaviors must be tolerated, Mill reasoned, not because they contribute much to diversity, but because diversity could not flourish in a society that permitted their repression. Moreover, Mill wrote disparagingly of rigid codes such as that which Stevens upholds. He protested that most working-class people “have as little choice of occupation,” “are practically as dependent on fixed rules and on the will of others, as they could be on any system short of actual slavery” (qtd. in Ashcraft, “John Stuart Mill” 180). Thus, Appiah misrepresents Mill’s position when he argues that, according to On Liberty, “it is intrinsically good, other things being equal, when people live according to their own plan” (“Liberalism” 317; emphasis added). Since the “other things” in this statement concern the quality of individual plans, and since Mill believed that the mass of people in modern societies were (like Stevens) pressured to lead lives of crushing conformity, Appiah has, in effect, relegated to a proviso what, for Mill, was the nub of the matter.

Indeed, as described in On Liberty, the greatest threat to individuality in mid-Victorian Britain was the “tyranny of opinion”: a product of the homogenizing tendencies of modernization and embourgeoisement (Liberty 113). Thus, when Mill asserted that one’s “own mode […] of existence is best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is [one’s] own mode” (114), his reasoning was—contra Appiah’s stress—precisely utilitarian. Mill was not arguing for the equal or intrinsic dignity of all self-chosen plans, but for the social benefit of endowing individuals with a maximal ability to choose, and the collective gains to a society that enabled diversity to flourish. Mill’s understanding of liberty as “practice” or “exercise” was thus evoked in quasi-physiological terms, as though the habitual willing described in the ethology were, on the model of a Bourdieuvian habitus, an embodied act:

He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are, improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it. (Liberty 104)

As such passages make clear, Mill privileged one’s “own mode” over mere adherence to custom on practical grounds: as a means to an end. Such choices were beneficial because individuality—what one Mill scholar defines as the “developed capacity to undertake experiments in living”—was in Mill’s view, cultivated largely through liberty’s exercise (Berkowitz 32).

Yet, liberty’s exercise could not, Mill made clear, flourish in a culture of isolated indifference. In On Liberty Mill thus confronted a terrible modern paradox: atomization and privatization were inimical to the civic participation on which individuality depended, yet bourgeois social relations tended to exert a toxic effect on individual variety. Mill’s response to this impasse was to imagine a respatialization of modern life. On the one hand, individuals required spaces of development in which to exercise their faculties untrammeled by conformist pressures; on the other hand, since development was a deeply social and often public endeavor, such spaces had to be porous, embedded, and dialogical.

Mill’s arguments in On Liberty, which were designed to facilitate such protean spaces, thus involved a number of complicated distinctions. Mill not only distinguished between the “legal” powers of the state and the “social” powers of the public, he also offered important distinctions within the latter category. For, though he insisted that the public posed as great a threat to liberty as did the state, he was simultaneously at pains to explain the ways in which public power might be wielded in salutary ways. Strong social penalties, Mill insisted, must be limited to cases in which individual conduct was “hurtful to others” (53). Yet, in thus urging society to restrain its coercive powers, Mill made clear that he was not prescribing a merely negative view of liberty, or an atomized and indifferent social culture. To the contrary, there is need of a great increase of disinterested exertion to promote the good of others. But disinterested benevolence can find other instruments to persuade people to their good, than whips and scourges, either of the literal or the metaphorical sort […] Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and
avoid the latter [. . . .] But neither one person, nor any number of persons, is warranted in saying to another human creature, of ripe years, that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it.

(123)

Clearly, Mill did not envision a society that mutually tolerated (and still less romanticized) the problematic choices of its individual members. And yet, to ensure forbearance while promoting sociability he constructed a number of fraught distinctions. Thus, Mill placed great weight on the difference between persuasion, a beneficial social practice, and the figurative scourging or “general disapprobation” that could be sanctioned only to punish harm to others (53). Later he expanded the menu of “justifiable” social responses to include “advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance” (143). Yet, these freighted distinctions do not hold up. How much “avoidance” can a person endure before she becomes the victim of “general disapprobation”? How much “advice, instruction, [and] persuasion” is tolerable before an individual—especially one who is socially or economically vulnerable—has, in effect, been told that “he shall not do with his life [. . . .] what he chooses to do with it”? Part of what Mill did not consider here was that, since his social conception presupposed normative judgments (requiring one to encourage the choice of “better” over “worse”), the mere act of evaluating others according to one’s own moral standards would involve mobilizing relations of power. Hence, such relations would likely produce normalizing effects even if individuals set out to persuade rather than coerce—indeed, even if they had no conscious intent to exert influence of any kind. Mill might have done better to admit the tenuosity of his distinctions. His ideas would have been more consistent had he enjoined his readers not only to tolerate, but also, whenever possible, to appreciate difference in others just as he enjoined them to cultivate their own experiments in living.

Yet, Mill had another motive for wishing to shore up the distinction, as he saw it, between repressive and exhortative social practices. This was the notoriously difficult problem of deciding at what point individual conduct became sufficiently harmful to others to require serious (legal or social) penalties. Mill recognized that it was often “impossible” for individuals to harm themselves without producing far-reaching social consequences (Liberty 127). Yet, he worried nonetheless that overzealous interpretations of social harm would result in unnecessary coercion. His attempt to resolve this problem involved further elaborating that protean space of development which would insulate individuals from normalizing relations of power, even while embedding them in the social rela-

tions and civic practices on which individuality depends. Space so configured not only entailed abandoning the pre-social, pre-political subjectivities postulated by Locke and Kant, it also involved rejecting the (deeply gendered) public/private distinction mobilized in such theories. It is, therefore, crucial to recognize that Mill’s ideas on liberty, unlike those of Locke and Kant, did not depend on dividing public and private life, political and domestic practices, justice and the good life. Rather than designating certain spaces (such as the home) for the private exercise of freedom—a distinction that reifies gender difference and reduces liberty to a personal pursuit—Mill opted instead to anatomize life. “To individuality,” Mill wrote, “should belong the part of life in which it is chiefly the individual that is interested; to society, the part which chiefly interests society” (122).

As Cerson has argued, the shift from a liberalism that protects so-called private spheres to one that protects “any act that concerns the actor alone, wherever it is performed” was momentous and, in many ways, desirable (802-03). Not the least of its potential benefits was to justify the regulation of harm to others in spheres (especially the domestic and commercial) that had hitherto been designated as beyond interference. Mill’s efforts to cordon off certain aspects of life about which society need not concern itself much, also aimed to encourage evaluative practices that would judge harm primarily in terms of its social impact, without undue attention to the moral orientation that inspired such harm. Thus, Mill observed, “George Barnwell murdered his uncle to get money for his mistress, but if he had done it to set himself up in business, he would equally have been hanged” (Liberty 129). Such distinctions are important because they help to make clear that what motivated Mill’s tenuous opposition between (undesirable) repression and (desirable) persuasion was the vision of a deliberative approach to shared norms which would be relatively unhampered by moral reccrimination.

Yet, Mill’s ambitious efforts to curtail Victorian moralizing, deprivatize the home, re-publicize liberty, and neutralize the gender ideologies of classical liberalism came at a certain cost. For by dividing life into parts in which either the individual or society was “chiefly” interested, Mill created a troubling rift between the two. Elsewhere, Mill had described individuality as both productive of and produced by sociability: “the tie which binds every individual to the race” (Liberty 109). By contrast, the division of life into its self-regarding and social parts exacerbated society’s threat to the individual, while discounting individuality’s social provenance. This contradiction has led some commentators to conclude that “sociability” was “not constitutive of [Mill’s] view of individuality,” just as it has led to essentialist interpretations such as Ap-
A better way of reading Mill, I think, is to recognize that in attempting to produce a framework for the encouragement of protean spaces of development, he sometimes erred by portraying a too monolithic conception of society. In such formulations, as though to personify the tyrannous power of public opinion, Mill gave society the form of a supra-individual agent whose hostility toward individuality required the construction of a fictitious boundary between self-regarding and social acts. Though Mill qualified that boundary (the interests he described were "chiefly," not absolutely, divided), and though he may have intended it as a heuristic corrective to Victorian moralizing, his arguments in On Liberty were more cogent when (as they frequently did) they foregrounded society's collective investment in liberty's exercise. Indeed, to argue otherwise is to privilege the most individualistic aspects of Mill's essay at the expense of the whole.

### The State and Power

Mill's position on the state is complicated and often misunderstood. On Liberty is often misread as a libertarian text in part because Mill firmly believed that the audience to which he addressed had more to fear from the "modern régime of public opinion" than from state interference (Liberty 119). Nonetheless, as Britons became less habitually "jealous" of state power, he prophesied, "individual liberty will probably be as much exposed to invasion from the government, as it already is from public opinion" (50-51). In the final pages of On Liberty, Mill made clear that the question of government's pastoral function—of whether or how much the state ought to act for the benefit of its citizens—was a preeminent modern concern. In the Principles of Political Economy (1848) he asserted that a "general practice" of laissez faire is the best way to ensure active citizenship, but he simultaneously argued that exceptions to the rule may be made whenever "required by some great good" (945). Hence, the difference between Mill's stance and that of an avowed statist is always provisional—for, in theory, intervention may always be justified so long as convincing evidence of its merits can be adduced. Yet, though Mill was not the doctrinaire libertarian he is sometimes taken for, it would be misleading to ignore his chariness toward the state and toward statist welfare in particular. The state's most useful function, Mill believed, was to circulate and diffuse the "experience" generated by the "varied experiments" of civil society. But while the state should facilitate such trials in various ways it must never be permitted to suppress all "experiments but its own" (Liberty 160-61). Mill thus laid persistent stress on the need to offset centralized governance with local control, voluntary association, and vigilant, participatory citizenship.

Mill's hopes for a post-bourgeois social order involved a gradual transition to collectively owned, democratically managed worker cooperatives, enabling the elimination of an "idle" capitalist class. Under such conditions, he believed, the economy could, like the egalitarian family, become "a school of the social sympathies" (Principles 792-93). Mill thus envisioned socialism as a radically decentralized, diffusely empowering, and broadly civic form of economic organization. Profoundly influenced by Tocqueville's vision of bureaucratic dystopia, Mill's cautious view of the state stood in contrast to Hegel's notion of a realm of universality, Comte's positivist regime, the socialist technocracy of the Fabians, and, in a different way, Engels's confidence in the state's obsolescence under communism. In works such as Considerations on Representative Government (1861), Mill insisted that only "a small portion of the public business of a country" can be "safely attempted by the central authorities," for "hardly any language is strong enough to express" the importance of "the public education of the citizens" (286, 288).

In all of these respects, Mill can be described as a committed humanist, determined to combat modern tendencies toward homogenization, bureaucratization, and embourgeoisement by fortifying the social and political foundations of positive liberty. Throughout his works he endorsed the empowering potential of education and citizenship, and pressed still more enthusiasm for the progressive aims of domestic equality, gender equity, and cooperative socialism. Yet, there was also a recurrent worry in Mill that modern power is too elusive to be harnessed to character-building projects or managed by political reforms. Beginning with "Civilization," he described modernity as attended by a "mass of influences"—diffused through commodifying representational forms such as advertising, and articulated within complexly intricated relations of dependence (Liberty 117; cf. "Civilization" 126-34). Through such means, Mill believed, modernity diminished the scope and value of individuality. Thus, even in anti-statist cultures such as Victorian Britain, a "tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression" was developing, "penetrating much more deeply into the details of life and enslav[ing] the soul itself" (Liberty 46). In such writings, Burrow remarked, with their salient "references to the moral enfeeblement of the modern world, and the incapacity of the middle classes for heroism and struggle," Mill "can sound prospectively like Nietzsche" (77).

Indeed, Mill's works also anticipated Foucault's analysis of modernity as it was reformulated in those later (post-genealogical) essays and
interviews in which Foucault addressed the contemporary turn toward neoliberalism. In essays such as “The Subject and Power,” Foucault emphasized the importance of subject making processes, or “the way a human being turns him—or herself—into a subject”; he defined power as that which is exercised over agents for whom a degree of choice is possible (208). In so doing, Foucault amended the most troubling features of his genealogies: the reduction of subjectivity to a derivative effect of power, and the corresponding elevation of power to the status of an “ontological absolute.” Yet, these revisions not only clarified the potential for human agency, but also articulated a resurgent interest in individuality—a shift from a focus on docile bodies to an exploration of “the inside of people’s minds [and] souls” (“Subject” 214). With such thinking in mind, Foucault expressed a Mill-like conviction that liberty, which can never be guaranteed by laws and institutions, “is what must be exercised” (“Space” 245; cf. “Governmentality” and “Social”). “How,” Foucault asked, “can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?” (“What Is Enlightenment” 248). Describing the “perverse effects” of twentieth-century welfare regimes (“Social” 160), he evoked precisely the pastoral dilemma that Mill had called “one of the most difficult and complicated questions in the art of government” (Liberty 164). In thus noting the constitutive relation between liberty and individuality, and in highlighting the difficulty of fostering self-making capabilities without normalizing selves, Foucault’s later works on governmentality can be seen as a posthumanist revisiting of Mill’s ethological project.

Liberalism “Worth Speaking Of”

Mill’s notions of character, individuality, and liberty demand rigorous study and critique. For Appiah, Mill is central to an understanding of liberalism’s efforts to articulate “a life of dignity.” Though this vision of liberalism has broad appeal, the more contentious question, Appiah notes, is the way in which to organize “the state and society” so as to make such dignity possible (“Liberalism” 332, 329; cf. Ethics 26-32). Appiah thus fully recognizes that transforming positive liberty from an attractive idea into a lived social reality is a political challenge that must be thought through and fought for. It is all the more disappointing, then, that his interpretation of On Liberty at times obscures Mill’s similar awareness. Appiah’s Mill is ready to vouch for the worth of any self-chosen identity even when, as in the case of Stevens, such ostensible choice can be seen to have emerged within a powerful class system. Appiah thus seems to miss the distinction between Mill’s prescriptive

...point—his belief that human beings have an equal capacity to develop characters “worth speaking of”—and the use of “individuality” to designate the attainment of that goal. But to portray Mill as endorsing an impoverished individuality such as Stevens’s is inadvertently to cast him in the light of a naive apologist for socio-economic inequality. Yet, if Appiah, at times, makes too little of Mill’s stress on moral and intellectual development as the prerequisites for positive liberty, Hadley, perhaps, makes too much. Taking Mill as an exemplar of Victorian liberalism, Hadley argues, in effect, that because developed character is a form of self-owned (mental) property, it invariably reproduces Macpherson’s proprietary subject. Such a reading of Mill can stand so long as one acknowledges that it is as damning of Marx (who also sought to nurture the free development of each”) as of Mill. To cast individuality as mere proprietorship is therefore to obscure a distinction of considerable importance both to Millian liberals and Marxists. For, from both vantages, absolute self-ownership was a thoroughly bourgeois construction of personhood, entailed to a negative conception of freedom which, in practice, perpetuated widespread inequality and social injustice. By contrast, individuality was conceived as that which required socializing ownership in the interest of warranting precisely those conditions that give positive substance to human liberty. Whereas post-Millian liberals such as Green and J. A. Hobson came to believe that such a project entailed state intervention, Marx and Engels saw communism as the only way to end “the domination of material relations over individuals,” a change so transformative that it would, they believed, render bourgeois self-ownership obsolete (German 464). Of course, Green and Marx were influenced by teleological conceptions of history which are no longer credible. Yet, few left critics of liberalism, I think, have forsaken the political quest for “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

With that goal in mind, it seems worthwhile to ask what we gain from deconstructions of character so exacting that they leave us unable to articulate the degree of individual autonomy on which political action purely depends. According to Young, formal enfranchisement has failed to produce social equality in large part because citizens cannot fully control the bourgeois conditions in which they live and labor. Yet, irrespective of the roots of inequality are manifest in liberal theory, “a concept of differentiated citizenship” can help to make bourgeois democracies more inclusive and participatory (“Polity” 118). The goal of singling out marginalized groups for special representation is not to help such people return to some normal, but, rather, “to denormalize” the democratic process (“Polity” 136 n.20; cf. 140). Critics of liberalism’s failures understandably
seek to defend oppressed groups, such as single mothers relying on welfare support, against the neoconservative posture of neutrality. Yet, is it possible to defend such groups effectively while overlooking the ideological changes to liberalism that enabled the welfare state to emerge? Can such people be served by any analysis that ignores the plight of left liberalism, implying effective convergence between those who eagerly reinstate laissez-faire and those who, historically, have promoted the state's obligation to assure basic needs for all citizens? Finally, can one facilitate the political participation of marginalized groups, as Young seeks to do, while assuming that liberal democracies produce none but irremediably proprietary and monadic subjects—subjects for whom such participation would amount to meaningless simulation.

Though liberalism is surely not the "end of history," it is, for the present, a horizon that leftists must be able deftly to render in all its historical and ideological complexity in order to articulate their own visions of what is to come. Indeed, according to Warner, to "pretend that neoliberalism reigns unchallenged as the true expression of the liberal ethos, that similar criticisms have not long been audible within serious liberal thought," may "produce a kind of political and rhetorical weakness" ("Liberalism" 432). Thus, to locate a future beyond liberalism, critics must make certain to look at liberalism. As genealogists seeking to rupture the present, we need to look thoroughly at the past. Mill's complex writings on liberty and individuality may, despite their manifest flaws, challenge us to experiments in thinking. For Mill takes us back to a crossroads in the history of our present. His legacy asks us to think about the origins of social welfare as a liberatory idea, prior to the unlovely history of the welfare state. It challenges us to think anew about the state's pastoral role, "one of the most difficult and complicated questions in the art of government" (Liberty 164), and to visualize the means to promoting spaces of development. At the crux of such meditations, Mill offers a compelling account of the modern person as the subject of individuality, a subject cultivated through egalitarian social relations and ardent civic participation. Insofar as individuality so figured represents an ideal toward which all leftists aspire in some fashion, it demands not only our ever-sharp readiness to critique, historicize, and deconstruct, but also our provisional willingness to affirm.

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Notes

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1 See Nunberg who cites Ronald Reagan's notorious 1988 remarks on liberalism, "The masquerade is over; it's time to [...]

2 Indeed, according to Warner, to "pretend that neoliberalism reigns unchallenged as the true expression of the liberal ethos, that similar criticisms have not long been audible within serious liberal thought," may "produce a kind of political and rhetorical weakness" ("Liberalism" 432). Thus, to locate a future beyond liberalism, critics must make certain to look at liberalism. As genealogists seeking to rupture the present, we need to look thoroughly at the past. Mill's complex writings on liberty and individuality may, despite their manifest flaws, challenge us to experiments in thinking. For Mill takes us back to a crossroads in the history of our present. His legacy asks us to think about the origins of social welfare as a liberatory idea, prior to the unlovely history of the welfare state. It challenges us to think anew about the state's pastoral role, "one of the most difficult and complicated questions in the art of government" (Liberty 164), and to visualize the means to promoting spaces of development. At the crux of such meditations, Mill offers a compelling account of the modern person as the subject of individuality, a subject cultivated through egalitarian social relations and ardent civic participation. Insofar as individuality so figured represents an ideal toward which all leftists aspire in some fashion, it demands not only our ever-sharp readiness to critique, historicize, and deconstruct, but also our provisional willingness to affirm.

3 This U. S. variety of liberalism is largely absent in Europe where, during most of the twentieth century, more avowedly socialist and labor-oriented forms of democratic politics took the place of a left-leaning liberalism so-called.

4 Such ideologies are "neoliberal" because they reject socialism and the welfare and regulatory state in favor of the laissez-faire tenets of classical political economy. Yet, as Regenia Gagnier has demonstrated, few eighteenth and nineteenth-century political economists "were prepared to say, as free marketers have been boastful" in the post-Soviet era, that the market "was the highest form of society" (9; see also 61-89). The economist Joseph Stiglitz concisely describes neoliberalism as a "simplistic model of the market economy" in which "Adam Smith's invisible hand works, and works perfectly" (74). As he and many others have recognized, the so-called free market of today is, in fact, heavily subsidized by government, while industrializing economies have historically relied, and continue to rely, upon concerted state activity.

5 There are, of course, many reasons why leftists in the academy might choose to part company with left liberals, and there is as well a tendency for such liberals to censure what they perceive as the pernicious influence of theory in the academic Left.

6 On New Liberalism, a British political movement that emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century and flourished at the turn of the century, see, for example, Freedon, Searle, and Simhony and Weinstein. For recent discussions that distinguish between neoliberalism and its historical forebears see Brown, "Neo-Liberalism" and Clarke.
Green argued that negative conceptions of liberty—or the freedom "to do as we like" without "restraint and compulsion"—were insufficient to guarantee the "full exercise of the faculties" upon which "true freedom" depends; qtd. in Nicholson 485; see also Bellamy and Simhony. Of course, liberalism's gradual embrace of state welfare must also be understood as a political response to the nineteenth-century enfranchisement of working-class men and the threat of socialism's more radical challenge to private property.

On Mill's feminism, see, for example, Shanley and Di Stefano. For a reading of On Liberty as authoritarian see Hamburger; for a view of the same text as relativist and anarchistic see Himmelfarb. For readings that cast On Liberty in a libertarian light, as concerned primarily with negative freedom, see Stephen's 1873 book-length critique; Berlin, and Wolff. Mill's concern with positive liberty is elaborated by, among others, Collini, "Liberalism" and Public; Semmel; Berkowitz; and Ryan. For examples of the burgeoning work on Mill and imperialism see Zastoupil, Habibi, Mehta, Pitts, and Mantena. For an important Victorianist critique of Mehta see Thomas 16-22, and for a detailed response to Mehta and Pitts see Kohn and O'Neill. I discuss the problems posed by Mill's support for the imperial "civilizing mission" in a forthcoming work, "Victorian Alternative Modernities: J. S. Mill and the Temporality of Progress."

The reading of Mill which appears in the latter article has been expanded and republished as part of the first chapter in The Ethics of Identity. Although the book identifies Mill as an important "traveling companion" and promises to take "seriously Mill's notion of individuality" (xiv), the discussion that follows, for reasons of space, is largely confined to the arguments that originated in the article.

Note that classicalism was only marginally less apparent in the pro-reform rhetoric of W. E. Gladstone who, in 1864, argued that the qualities necessary for the working-class voter were "self command, self control, respect for order, patience under suffering, confidence in the law, [and] regard for superiors" (qtd. in Parry 209). For a literary example, see Plantagenet Palliser's peroration on liberalism in which social equality is represented as a millennial concept to be approached incrementally, in chapter 68 of Trollope's The Prime Minister (1876).

See also Young, "Polity." Note that Young herself is highly aware of the difference between nineteenth and twentieth century contexts: prior to the twentieth century, she writes, the "exclusion of groups defined as different was explicitly acknowledged" (119). In a footnote ("Past" note 10) Hadley herself allows that liberalism has "a much longer and deeper history [...] than is indicated in my text," suggesting that she would appreciate the arguments my essay offers for revisiting her seminal critique.

See, for example, Collini, Public and, more recently, Goodlad.
ideal model of capitalism which poorly matches the seventeenth century’s mixed economy ("Two Treatises" 87, n.21). Although recognizing the persistence of civic republicanism is important to understanding the history of liberalism, Macpherson’s analysis of possessive individualism, Weberian though it is, remains a valuable tool for Marxist analysis.

20 According to Locke, “every man has a Property in his own Person,” and “no one has any Right to [this] but himself” (328). Note that, as G. A. Cohen stresses, self-ownership in the Locke sense was rejected by Kant who, in his Lectures on Ethics, argued that since a man “is not a thing; he is not his own property” and “so cannot be a thing which can be owned” (qtd. in Cohen 211; cf. 238-41). As we shall see, Mill does not, like Kant, categorically reject self-ownership, but, rather redefines it in such a way as to socialize it.

21 Thus, according to Macpherson, Mill rejected possessive assumptions but retained the market conditions that engender them. That, however, is a debatable characterization of Mill’s position. Although the cooperative institutions to which he looked forward differed greatly from Marxist socialism, Mill recognized that market conditions were inimical to social development. In the Principles of Political Economy he wrote that human improvement could only continue if laborers were enabled to associate “on terms of equality, collectively owning [their] capital,” and “working under managers elected and removable by themselves” (775). For suggestive accounts of Mill’s progressive economic agenda see Ashcraft, “Class Conflict” and “John Stuart Mill.”

22 Indeed, as Cohen has argued, liberals are less vulnerable to libertarian appeals to self-ownership than are Marxists. According to Cohen, Marxist theory, which describes capitalist exploitation as the theft of workers’ self-owned labor power, unwittingly reinscribes a doctrine of absolute self-ownership, in effect, condemning “capitalism on the bourgeois grounds that condemn serfdom” (159). By contrast, redistributive liberals abandon absolute self-ownership in the interests of equality, a principle that they, unlike Marxists, are prepared fully to explicate and justify.

23 Descriptive discourses of self-possess[ure] thus evoke the hierarchical processes of cultural distinction described in Bourdieu’s Distinction.

24 Mill hoped that ethology would spur political progress by providing a social-scientific bridge between individual socialization and social progress. But Mill resisted the growing trend toward positivist arguments grounded in, for example, statistics or physiology. As Janice Carlisle has argued in her authoritative study, Mill’s ultimate failure to proceed seemed to derive from his sense that his efforts “would only confirm the determinism he so vehemently and so consistently rejected” (John Stuart Mill 166). Winter reconsiders Mill’s ethological project which aims to develop its potential as a non-positivist humanities discipline.

25 See also Utilitarianism, in which Mill elaborated the idea that the result of mental cultivation was “to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest” (305).

26 On Mill’s elitism see, for example, Kahan. On his views on democracy as they developed throughout his career see, Ten, and, for a related discussion of Mill’s arguments in support of the working-class franchise, see Carlisle, “Mr. J. Stuart Mill.”

27 On such grounds Mill’s legacy should be distinguished from the “paltry” conception of liberal equality described by Lisa Duggan—an “equality disarticulated from material life and class politics,” which derives from liberals’ increasing willingness to separate economic from identity politics (xvii).

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It is significant that Mill never developed a notion of privacy which might have helped him to make a somewhat different and more consistently utilitarian case for limiting social power over the individual: Mill might have argued, for example, that there are certain aspects of personhood which, though socially embedded, are best developed with minimal social intrusion. The point would not be that society has no interest in individual privacy, but, rather, that society’s interest in privacy is best served by preserving privacy. See, for example, the many ways in which privacy figures throughout Warner’s chapter, “Public and Private” in Publics and Counterpublics. A glance at the Oxford English Dictionary suggests that the use of “privacy” to denote freedom “from public attention, as a matter of choice or right; freedom from interference or intrusion” (2nd ed., def. 1) did not gain ground until the end of the nineteenth century. Although Mill occasionally used descriptive terms such as “private life” and “private conduct” (e.g., Liberty 55), he seemed to avoid depending on them, doubtless because such terms tended to reinscribe the notion of freedom as pertaining to particular spheres, and to reinforce the very un-Millian division between private individuals and public citizens. A notion of privacy would, I think, have enabled Mill to avoid such reinscriptions as well as to curb Victorian moralizing without overstating the tension between individual and social interests.

Though Mill had begun to explore the power of the state in his lengthy review of Alexis de Tocqueville, his views on Victorian Britain’s relatively decentralized and anti-statist governing culture prompted him, in addressing On Liberty to his contemporaries, to focus on “moral and intellectual” rather than “political” freedom (see Letter to Comperz, excerpted in Mill, Liberty 178). On Victorian anti-statism, see Goodlad; on Tocqueville’s influence, see Mill, Autobiography 115-16, “De Tocqueville [1]” and “De Tocqueville [2].”

Wolff makes a similar argument in his critique of On Liberty, arguing that modern welfare liberalism and Millenian anti-statism “derive from similar philosophical presuppositions,” differing “only in their evaluation” of the relevant social conditions. Twentieth-century anti-statists are thus “nineteenth-century Millians who have refused to admit the facts, and have elevated to the status of absolute and inviolable principles the doctrines which Mill sought to maintain on empirical grounds” (21). It is worth noting that no less a libertarian guru than F. A. Hayek believed that Mill was not an “effective exponent” of the “individualist minimum state.” Rather, by advocating “distributive justice” and a “sympathetic attitude towards socialist aspirations,” Mill “prepared the gradual transition of a large part of the liberal intellectuals to a moderate socialism” (Hayek 128-29). Cf. Appiah: “Certainly the author of On Liberty wasn’t any kind of libertarian” (Ethics 27).

See Hegel; on Comte see Mill, “Auguste” and On Liberty 56; on the Fabians see, for example, Searle; for Engels’s remarks on the state see Socialism 713.

John Skorupski has also compared Mill and Nietzsche arguing that each sought to affirm human self-making in a world in which there is “no ‘beyond,’” in presenting two different alternatives to Hegelian idealism (2-3).

See Kudic 14-15, in which he notes Jeffrey Weeks’s similar critique in Sex, Political Society. In Foucault’s later works power is theorized within a framework of human relatedness: a “relationship of power” consists in a “mode of action” that indirectly influences the action of others (“Subject” 214). By “genealogies” I particularly to Foucault’s Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality. Here it is important to recognize the distinction between individuality in the mean sense—which, as in Foucault’s later work, involves the potentially liberating processes through which human beings turn themselves into subjects—and simply cognate terms such as individualization and individualism. In the genealogies Foucault uses the latter terms to designate the objectivizing effects of more or precisely those disciplinary aspects of modernity which make Millenian individuality a mere illusion.

Deleuze, The Ethics of Identity is a multi-faceted work in which the Ishiguro reading of On Liberty is but a small part. Nonetheless, though there is to learn from Appiah’s rich range of references to Mill, the book’s specific definition of individuality seems to me to diverge from a Millenian notion in which ethics and politics are consistently fused. Whereas Mill’s individual is distinctive for its republican emphasis on active citizenship, Appiah consistently distinguishes between one’s distanced relation to “social just the “thick relations” to concrete others from which identity is seen primarily to emerge (Ethics 231). Appiah’s readiness to insist on the “individuality” of one’s politically immobilized butler thus connects to a version of liberalism which tends to restore the division between public and private, justice and social life which Mill’s thought so vigorously contested. That said, Appiah’s compelling discussion of “rooted cosmopolitanism” is specifically described as a “composite project,” consisting in “a negotiation between disparate ethical and social realms” (232).

Indeed, if one accepts Cohen’s arguments about Marx’s inadvertent reinscriptions of the doctrine of absolute self-ownership, one might argue that Hadley’s view is more devastating for Marx than for Mill (see above note 22).

And Hobson’s critique of capitalism, which is indebted to Mill’s utilitarian theory thus calls for special political mechanisms to represent marginalized By insuring that all perspectives have “a voice” such mechanisms intro-
duce fairness, diversify democratic discussion, and "promote practical wisdom" ("Poltix" 133, 131).

Even Francis Fukuyama who popularized this notion does not seem to accept the finality of what he has (narrowly) defined as liberalism; much of his book is devoted to advancing a conservative Nietzschean critique of liberalism's failures.

That is a task to which Victorianist scholars, in recent years, have productively contributed, including "On a Darkling Plain," a thought-provoking essay by Hadley; and Robbins.

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