



**Mortimer Adler in front of the John Stuart Mill residence in Kensington Square, London, 1974.**

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## ‘MILL IS A DEAD WHITE MALE WITH SOMETHING TO SAY’

*Richard Reeves, author of a brilliant new biography of JS Mill, talks to Tessa Mayes about Mill's desire to inject public debate with truth, energy and freedom and give rise to a 'whole society of heroes'.*

‘**H**arm’ is a political buzzword of our age. The spectre of Harm is used to justify smoking bans in public places (to protect people from the harm of smoke), ‘anti-stalking’ measures against people who get involved in shouting matches with their partner or a workmate (in the name of protecting individuals from ‘emotional harm’), censorship (offensive words are said to ‘harm’ our self-esteem) and opposition to consumerism (apparently it ‘harms’ the environment).

All sorts of activities, from boozing to gambling to sexual relationships, are now said to involve harm—either to the person carrying them out or to people caught up in these whirlwinds of harmful behaviour. And thus, it is argued, government intervention into these intimate areas of our lives is not only justifiable, it is necessary. It's as if we're all supposed to be like Woody Allen's neurotic characters, always asking 'what about the harm?' about everything we do, think and say.

At the same time—just to make matters even more confusing—some of those who question the use of the harm principle to censor certain words or police people's relationships also use the idea of 'harm' to back up their arguments. They claim that government intervention 'harms' human rights or individual self-esteem. Arguments about 'harm' are fast becoming a public farce.



What would John Stuart Mill, the Victorian philosopher and political radical (1806-1873), have made of all of this? After all, Mill's own 'harm principle' is frequently cited to justify bans and restrictions today. He invented the 'harm principle' in his political tract *On Liberty* in 1859, where he argues: 'The only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.'

In his excellent, well-timed biography of Mill, British author and commentator Richard Reeves argues that being quoted by both sides in something like the smoking debate 'would have pleased' Mill. Mill was the public intellectual who believed that truth is discovered through argument rather than being established from on high, so that ideas become a 'living truth' through debate rather than a 'dead dogma' handed down by our superiors. And as Reeves draws out in his biography, Mill also revelled in intellectual eclec-

ticism. He thought the truth lay somewhere in *opposing* arguments. As he wrote in *On Liberty*: ‘Conflicting doctrines, instead of the one being true and the other false, share the truth between them.’ Just for the record, he didn’t mean, in a pre-PC relativistic fashion, that ‘all truths are equal’, but rather that truth is arrived at through the clash of ideas, the changing and tempering of views through open debate, rather than being set in authoritarian stone.

Reeves notes that Mill’s views on liberty have been misappropriated by some on the government-suspicious right, who tend to caricature Mill as only celebrating freedom from the state. In fact, Mill’s ire in *On Liberty* was mainly targeted against the stifling effects of majority-led culture and custom and not just against the state. As John Fitzpatrick argues in this issue of *the spiked review of books*, this ‘defence of liberty against public opinion (as well as law) is advanced also by means of an urgent plea for toleration and respect for diversity on the part of all those individuals who comprise the public as they in turn freely form and express their opinions’. Mill was against unwarranted state intrusion and also the conformism of an unthinking public outlook.

What of the misappropriation of Mill by those who put forward policies for interfering in our private lives in the name of preventing ‘harm’? To tease out—in true Millian fashion—the truth about Mill’s view of harm and its current misuse, Reeves agrees to meet up. Sitting in lounge chairs in the corner of the lobby at a central London chain hotel, drinks and crisps at the ready, we begin our exchange.

Does Reeves think that those who argue in favour of the smoking ban and other interventionist New Labour policies misuse Mill’s harm principle? ‘[People who like to ban things] don’t tend to reach for Mill as quickly, because he won’t fit quite as well with their arguments, although sometimes they do use harm arguments’, he says. ‘Sometimes they don’t understand the harm principle when they do use it. I remember a government minister talking about the smoking ban, saying smoking is the most harmful thing you can do to yourself. And I said the whole point about Mill’s harm principle is that it’s about harm to *others*. Not only have you misunderstood the harm principle, you’ve reversed it!’

Reeves makes a revealing observation from his time spent talking to policymakers about how they frame their arguments: ‘What sometimes happens is that if you are doing something that’s actually quite paternalistic, and you don’t want to say so because you want to dress it up as a liberal policy, you might use Mill. And you stretch the harm principle well beyond reasonable usage to justify

what's fundamentally a paternalistic policy. The worst thing is to dress up a paternalistic argument in shoddy, ill-worn, liberal clothing.' Unable to frame public policy in confident or traditional top-down terms, policymakers make elastic use of the harm principle instead, suggests Reeves.

Perhaps one reason why everyone quotes Mill today is not because they are upstanding Millian defenders of liberty, but rather because in the post-left/right era all sorts of weird alliances and arguments can crop up in public debate. Reeves nods. Mill is useful today because his works were written when the ideological left/right poles were not yet established, he says. 'Today those poles are weakening and Mill speaks to current politicians and politics in a way he didn't in the 1940s, which could be good for liberalism', Reeves claims. Mill is seen as a lofty intellectual outside of the political realm, so all sides think it's safe to grab him. You'll see him quoted in speeches by Gordon Brown and David Cameron.

'But if people knew the real Mill they might think twice about having him on their side! Mill has been attached to a few arguments that he himself would have been surprised by or found hilarious. Mill's also very quotable as an early exponent of the soundbite... but he's often taken out of context.'

I suggest that Mill would actually have been outraged by the exploitation of his harm principle today. Mill argued that where there was no harm to others, 'the public has no business to interfere'. Surely he would have supported freedom of choice on an issue like smoking?

Reeves agrees. Mill would have opposed a total ban, he says. 'He would have taken a lot more convincing about the evidence of harm [from passive smoking] than the government has. Mill's pretty clear that the harm's got to be identifiable and clear. How clear is the evidence on passive smoking? It's there, but is it strong enough for a centrally imposed ban? I'm not sure.'

In his book, Reeves mentions that Mill argued in favour of introducing non-smoking carriages on trains. Perhaps Mill was doing one of his many seemingly contradictory acts, saying one thing in his private letters or philosophical texts and another in political life? Reeves shakes his head. 'He argues for separate carriages rather than a total ban', he says: in other words, Mill rather consistently backed freedom of choice.

In many ways, the promiscuous use of the harm principle to justify bans and state intrusion into our lives sums up just how illiberal

our era is. Mill had a view of men as capable and energetic, who, when given the chance, could progress to become serious and even ‘heroic’ individuals. Thus, he had a quite narrow view of harm: in his view, it would take quite a lot to harm individuals who were possessed of free will and very often grit, and therefore he argued that only clear cases of harm could justify restrictions.

Today, by contrast, individuals are viewed as weak and vulnerable. The term ‘the vulnerable’ is used to refer to whole swathes of society. We are considered to be easily damaged and fragile creatures who must be molycoddled by political leaders, social workers and health practitioners in order to keep our self-esteem intact. So almost everything is seen as ‘harmful’ to us today. The difference between Mill’s view of harm and the popular view of harm today is the difference between a view of mankind as generally good and capable of freedom, and a view of mankind as weak and degraded. So where Mill emphasised the necessity of liberty, today many officials and commentators talk about the ‘dangers of unadulterated liberty’.

Mill’s emphasis in *On Liberty* was on the freedom to cultivate individuality, which he believed would spur progress; the ‘harm principle’ was actually a fairly minor part of his thesis, a way of acknowledging that we live in a society of mixed interests and clashing outlooks and not on a desert island. Mill was a sophisticated thinker, seeking to generate an understanding of individuality that did not ignore other people and the context in which we progress our individual selves: his was a true understanding of individual liberty, as opposed to today’s cries of ‘individual rights’ which are frequently about erecting a legal forcefield around individuals to protect them from the alleged harm and poisons of their unthinking fellow men.

Mill opposed state intrusions on liberty as well as the stifling effects of public conformity. In 1855, as he was developing his ideas on liberty, he wrote to his wife Harriet: ‘Almost all the projects of social reformers of these days are really *liberticide*.’ For Mill, any half-decent conception of the state had to be considered in line with individual liberty and social progress. As he writes in *On Liberty*: ‘A State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes, will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished.’ This is a lesson that both the left and the right of contemporary debate, who push the state to help us watch our language, raise our kids and even manage our emotions, should take on board: such an intrusive state might make cautious, fearful creatures of us all.

Mill cherished the freedom of people to make diverse, even ‘eccentric’ choices in their private lives. As an Enlightenment thinker, he saw the virtue of allowing people to experiment with their lifestyles in order to develop character. The clash of opinions and the flowering of life-experiments were crucial for individual and social progress, for making man a ‘complete and consistent whole’, he argued. As Reeves points out in his biography, Mill used organic language to describe how repression diminished man: it ‘compressed’, ‘cramped’, ‘pinched’, ‘dwarfed’, ‘starved’ and ‘withered’ mankind, he argued.

Above all, the limiting of individual experimentation and growth hinders what Mill refers to as ‘self-creation’ and ‘*l’autonomie de l’individu*’. If, as is the case today, our everyday behaviours and thoughts are circumscribed by the harm-hunting authorities, then how can individuals be truly autonomous?

Reeves adopts a refreshing approach to biography-writing. Many contemporary biographies seem to revel in dissing the Dead White Males of centuries past. They focus as much on the bad things that key thinkers did in their private lives as on their beliefs and arguments. By contrast, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* offers an engaging and lively story of how Mill’s *ideas* developed. The book charts Mill’s intellectual U-turns, revelations, inspirations and the tension between his private deliberations and his testing of ideas in the public arena.

Why this emphasis? Reeves explains: ‘Mill is a shining example that dead white males have something useful to say. I focused on his ideas because he was a public intellectual above all. The development of his ideas has to be the centre of the book, interwoven with his life. His writings read so freshly and address so many of our current concerns, and his life was so interesting, so I wanted to bring him *back to life*.’

There are moments in the book when Reeves’ description of Mill sits uneasily with the historical context in which Mill wrote. For example, it seems odd to describe Mill as a ‘feminist’. Surely Mill would never have called himself such a thing? Apart from anything else, this assumes that only feminists support women’s rights, when actually socialists, Marxists and liberals like Mill did, too. Reeves says that what he means by feminist is the generally accepted sense of ‘somebody who believes in gender equality, that women are intellectually, financially, politically and socially equal to men’. ‘So was Mill a feminist? Yeah’, he says. ‘Would he have

used the term? No. However there are certain definitions of feminism that would exclude Mill.’

I volunteer an alternative title for Mill: a liberal advocate of women’s equality—admittedly a little more wordy than Reeves’ neat description of Mill as the ‘father of feminism’. Reeves considers this: ‘Mill didn’t just theoretically agree with women’s equality; he did something about those views as a founder member of the Suffrage movement, introduced a bill in to the House of Commons, and was a women’s rights campaigner. “Feminist” captures that’, he says.

It’s midnight in the hotel, and we’ve been talking for hours. I ask Reeves, given that he has read more than most about Mill, what were the most surprising things he discovered about him?



**Harriet Taylor Mill**


‘His passion for Harriet, the long-term love of his life’, he says. ‘His willingness to wait for her, showing his love for her was real, is a moving story.’ Mill dedicated *On Liberty* to Harriet, the ‘inspirer and part author of all that is best in my writings’.

‘Also quite surprising was his view of liberalism as *control* over your life, extending to your workplace with worker-owned firms being the future—that remains a salient challenge to the way we construct our economy’, says Reeves.

‘But the most emotionally engaging aspects of this project’, he continues, ‘were in reading about Mill’s parliamentary years and the courage he showed in his speeches. If I’ve brought anything to life in the book, I hope it’s to challenge the idea that to be a liberal means not to engage in partisan politics in difficult circumstances. And if you’re not getting death threats—as Mill did—then you’re probably not doing your job properly!’ Reeves describes how, at first, Mill couldn’t get the hang of the House of Commons. But on reading his speeches delivered to audiences of 3,000 in St. James

Hall, ‘you hear what he said and how much he was interrupted with people throwing hats up in the air and cheering. It’s inspiring.’

In the book, Reeves describes one speech that Mill gave about the Fenians of Ireland, who were being arrested and executed for carrying out political agitation and attacks in England: ‘It is important that the world should know that you, the people of England, abhor the idea of staining the soil with the blood of political offenders.’ When he spoke these words, Mill was cheered and cries of ‘hang the government!’ rang out. ‘[Reading this speech] you find yourself almost in the room’, Reeves tells me. ‘Here’s this elderly man standing on this stage and rousing the crowds, it’s incredibly strong and moving for me. It said something very important about Mill’s willingness to put ideas out there and not retreat to the academy. It’s incredibly inspiring. Why would his contemporaries feel the need to slice him up in his obituaries for god’s sake? Because he was seen as dangerous.’

Mill’s firebrand impulse is a welcome reminder of the importance and power of ideas. This public intellectual reminds us what it is to take risks, both political and personal, and what it means to be human and free—issues that should be at the very heart of politics. As Reeves writes in his biography, Mill wanted to fill society with ‘truth, energy and freedom’. He wanted ‘not just a handful of heroes, but a whole society of them’. I can throw my hat in the air to that sentiment. 

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***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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