

# John Stuart Mill's View on Socialism and Social Reform

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### I. Introduction

It is not sensible to attempt to classify Mill's view on socialism in a particular dogmatic way, nor is to expect to find in Mill any revolutionary assertions in favor of socialism. Sometimes his view might even seem to have so changed as to appear to lack consistency. Once one studies Mill with greater care, however, he would find that his view on socialism had evolved along with the development of his general thought rather than having changed in an inconsistent way.

Mill was a liberal and individualist, and yet he had shown considerable interest in socialism, expressing serious doubts on the prevailing beliefs that the unqualified

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competition of private interests can accomplish a well-ordered public wealth. His eager and zealous attitude toward elevation of the human mind as well as the improvement of social conditions had been reflected in the variety of his writings, and he had endlessly absorbed a variety of thoughts with critical but unprejudiced mind.

The limitations of private enterprise system were always lingering in his mind, and his expressions on socialism, even though in fragmentary form, show evidence that he realized extreme theses of *laissez faire* incompatible with social good. Liberty or freedom could not be considered separately from social welfare. He asks, "How can any part of the conduct of a member of society be a matter of indifference to the other members?" No one is an entirely isolated being; it is impossible for a person to do anything seriously or permanently hurtful to himself, without mischief reaching at least to his near connections, and often far beyond them.<sup>1)</sup> The State, he contends, while it respects the liberty of each individual, is bound to maintain a vigilant control over his exercise of any power which it allows him to possess over other.<sup>2)</sup> One of Mill's great concerns was how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labor. Thus, he welcomed, with great pleasure and interest, all socialistic experiments such as the Co-operative Societies and Fourierism which, whether they succeed or fail, can provide with a most useful education to those who take part in them, by cultivating their capacity of acting upon motives pointing directly to the general good, or making them and others capable of doing so.<sup>3)</sup>

In the first edition of his *Principles of Political Economy*, the whole that of opposition to it. A year or two following the first edition, he devoted considerable time to the study of the best socialistic writers on the Continent and to meditation and discussion on the whole range of topics involved in the controversy. As the result, he extensively revised his previous writing on this subject. The revisions were also partly due to the change of times. The first edition had been written and sent to press before the French Revolution of 1848, after which the public mind became more open to the reception of novelties in opinion and doctrines which would have startled them a short time ago.<sup>4)</sup> Since the *Principles of Political Economy* had been written a rather short time period and there had

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1) John S. Mill, "Society and the Individual," *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*(New York: E.P.Dutton and Co., 1951), p. 183.

2) J.S. Mill, "Applications," *Ibid*, p.215.

3) J.S. Mill, *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*(New York; Columbia University Press, 1924), pp. 163~4.

4) *Ibid*, p. 164,

been subsequent major revisions on his view on socialism, we can not apprehend his view on it by analyzing the book alone. Therefore, in this paper, his published correspondences and selected major writings will be used for this purpose. Furthermore, since his discussions on socialism were not confined to the area of abstract ideology *per se*, but covered the whole range of theoretical considerations and practical applications to the current social problems, this paper will also examine the way in which he applied it to the important social problems of his time such as co-operative movements, parliamentary reform, and land tenure reform.

## II. Evaluation of the Prevailing Socialistic Doctrines

### 1. Owenism

In Mill's time, the Owenism in England and the socialisms on the Continent were the most prevailing forms of doctrine in assailing the institution of private property. Mill divides the assailants of the principle of individual property into two classes: those whose scheme implies absolute equality in the distribution of the physical means of life and enjoyment, and those who admit inequality, but ground it on some principle of justice and not on accident alone. Robert Owen and Owenites belong to the first class, while Saint Simon, Fourier and their followers belong to the second.

The Communism, a word of continental origin, would be the characteristic name for the former economic system, and the Socialism for the latter. Then, he goes on to examine the communistic scheme. First, he criticizes the general belief that labor would not bring about the maximum zeal due to remuneration by fixed salaries:<sup>5)</sup>

"Mankind are capable of a far greater amount of public spirit than the present age is accustomed to suppose possible. History bears witness to the success with which large bodies of human beings may be trained to feel the public interest of their own. And no soil could be more favorable to the growth of such a feeling than a Communist association, since all the ambition and the bodily and mental activity, which are now exerted in the pursuit of separate and self-regarding interests, would require another sphere of employment, and would naturally find it in the pursuit of the general benefit of the community..."

Therefore, he contends that to what extent the energy of labor would be diminished

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5) J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy: With Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*, 7th ed., with Appendices containing collaboration with earlier editions (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), Book II. Ch. 1, Section 3.

at all must be considered for the present an undecided question.

Secondly, he criticizes the general belief that the Communism would result in over-population:<sup>6)</sup>

“The Communistic scheme, instead of being peculiarly open to the objection drawn from danger of over-population, has the recommendation of tending in an especial degree to the prevention of that evil.”

Thirdly, he discusses the difficulty of fairly apportioning the labor of the community among its members whose abilities and capacities are heterogenous:<sup>7)</sup>

“But these difficulties, though real, are not necessarily insuperable. The apportionment of work to the strength and capacities of individuals, the mitigation of a general rule to provide for cases in which it would operate harshly, are not problems to which human intelligence, guided by a sense of justice, would be inadequate. And the worst and most unjust arrangement which could be made of these points, under a system aiming at equality, would be so far short of the inequality and injustice with which labor is now apportioned, as to be scarcely worth counting in the comparison.”

Thus, he contends that the above cited difficulties are not critical to reject the communistic scheme. However, after means of subsistence are assumed, Mill contemplates, the desire for liberty would emerge as a strong want, which tends to increase as the intelligence and the moral faculties are more developed. He wonders how far the preservation of this characteristic would be compatible with the communistic organization of society:<sup>8)</sup>

“The restraints of Communism would be freedom in comparison with the present condition of the majority of the human race.....”

He goes on to make strong reservation on the scheme, and wants to see it ascertained that the scheme would be consistent with diversity of tastes and talents, variety of intellectual points of view, and multiform development of human nature. Otherwise, the scheme is not recommendable.

## 2. Saint Simonianism and Fourierism

The word Socialism, which had originated among the English Communists and had been assumed by them as a name to designate their own doctrine, was employed in a larger sense on the Continent; not necessarily implying Communism, or the entire abolition of private property, but applied to any system which required that

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6) Ibid, p. 206.

7) Idem.

8) Ibid, p. 209.

the means of production should be the property of the communities or associations, or the government. Among such systems the two of highest intellectual quality were the Saint Simonianism and the Fourierism. The former was defunct as a system even though it sowed the seeds of nearly all the socialist tendencies which had spread so widely in France at that time, while the latter was still flourishing in the number, talent, and zeal of its adherents.

Mill's intensive study of Saint Simonianism was initiated by Gustave d'Eichthal, who provided Mill with the writings of the distinguished Saint Simonians such as Saint Simon and August Comte. Despite d'Eichthal's persistent efforts to convert Mill to Saint Simonian, Mill's continuous resistance to it appears in his correspondences to d'Eichthal. In his letter to d'Eichthal on November 7, 1829, Mill approved and highly commended one of the leading principles of their system; the necessity of a *Pouvoir Spirituel*:<sup>9)</sup>

“They have held out as the ultimate end, towards which we are advancing and which we shall one day attain, a state in which the body of the people, i.e. the uneducated, shall entertain the feelings of deference and submission to the authority of the instructed in morals and politics, as they at present do in the physical sciences. This, I am persuaded, is the only wholesome state of the human mind; and the knowledge that we ought to look to it as the ultimate end has a great tendency to protect us from many errors which the philosophers of 18th century fell into, and which all will be liable to who suppose that the diffusion of knowledge among the laboring classes and the consequent improvement of their intellects is to be the grand instrument of the regeneration of mankind.”

Nevertheless, he objected altogether to the means which the Saint Simonians proposed for organizing the *Pouvoir Spirituel*, because he thought that they could not organize it at all.

In his letter to d'Eichthal on February 9, 1830, he showed some change in his strong opposition to Saint Simonianism, writing that he no longer adhered to the theoretical objections he formerly made but still retained all his objections to their practical views, to their organization, which appeared to him impracticable and undesirable, if practicable.<sup>10)</sup> Nevertheless, he thought the Saint Simonian doctrine needed to be correctly presented in England where the doctrine had already begun to be talked

9) J.S. Mill, *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812~48*, (ed.) Francis E. Mineka (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, (1963), p. 40.

10) *Ibid*, p. 47.

of and to excite some curiosity. He contributed to publicizing the doctrine, still declaring he was not a Saint Simonian.<sup>11)</sup>

His criticism of the Saint Simonian system appears in his writing:<sup>12)</sup>  
 "It supposes an absolute despotism in the heads of the association; which would probably not be much improved if the depositaries of the despotism were varied from time to time according to the result of a popular canvass. However the supposition is not reasonable that human beings could be qualified to adapt each person's work to his capacity, and proportion each person's remuneration to his merits; to be the dispensers of distributive justice to every member of society."

Notwithstanding his criticism of the Saint Simonian doctrine, Mill admits its influence on his thoughts, stating that he partially owed credit to the speculations of Saint Simonians in developing his view that the economic generalizations which depend on necessities of nature combined with the existing arrangements of society are only provisional and liable to alteration by the progress of the society.<sup>13)</sup>

On the other hand, unlike the Saint Simonianism, the Fourierism was considered to him as the most skillfully combined socialism with the greatest foresight of objections. This system does not contemplate the abolition of private property, nor even of inheritance. It proposes, in production, combined labor efforts, and, in distribution, a minimum assignment for subsistence of every member of the community regardless their capacity. The remainder of the produce is to be shared in certain proportions among the three elements; labor, capital and talent. The remuneration, when received, would be subject to disposition of the individuals, not of common.<sup>14)</sup>

In theory, this system could establish justification for private property, and furthermore render labor attractive. Mill finds that this system does not violate any of the general laws by which human action is influenced, and suggests a trial experiment with it on a moderate scale in order to determine its effectiveness.

### III. On Social Reform

#### 1. Co-operative Movements

Mill's dissent from the prevailing socialists' declamation against competition comes at the end of his discussion of co-operative societies. In contrast to the

11) "Letter to d'Eichthal, March 1, 1831, *Ibid.*, p. 71."

12) J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, op. cit., p. 210.

13) J.S. Mill, *Autobiography*, op. cit., p. 175.

14) J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, op. cit., pp. 211~2.

socialists' view that the principle of competition contradicts with that of cooperation and is a harmful and anti-social one. Mill conceived that even in the current state of society and industry every restriction of competition was an evil, and every extension of it was an ultimate good. To be protected in idleness, in mental dulness; to be saved the necessity of being as active and as intelligent as others.<sup>15)</sup> Competition, innovation and enterprise are the fruits of liberty, the complement of spontaneity.

Mill expected the progress of the co-operative movement to bring about not only a great increase in the aggregate productivity of industry but also the moral revolution in society that would accompany the material benefit; the healing of the existing conflict between capital and labor; the transformation of human life from the class struggle to a friendly rivalry in the pursuit of a good common to all; the elevation of the dignity of labor; a new sense of security and independence in the labor class; and the conversion of each human being's daily occupation into a school of the social sympathies and intelligence.<sup>16)</sup>

He pointed out that eventually, and in perhaps a less remote future than might be supposed, the British people might see, through the co-operative principle, their way to a change in society, which would combine individual freedom and independence with moral, intellectual, and economic advantages of aggregate production; and which, without violence or even any sudden disturbance of existing habits and expectations, would realize the democratic spirit. He further disclosed his optimistic and hopeful view on the consequences of active progress of co-operative movements. As co-operative associations multiply, they would tend to absorb more of laborers, except those who have too little understanding, or too little virtue, to be capable of learning to act on any other system than that of narrow selfishness. As this change proceeds, owners of capital would gradually find it to their advantage to lend their capital to the associations. In this mode, the existing accumulation of capital might eventually become by a spontaneous process the joint property of all who participate in their productive employment: a transformation which, thus effected, would be the nearest approach to social justice, and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good.<sup>17)</sup>

Mill praised the success of the co-operative movement led by Holmes and that of the Rochdale Association in his letter to John Holmes on January 19, 1858, expressing that there were at least two groups of laborers who were sufficiently free from short-sighted selfishness and that they demonstrated the possibility that, with

15) This seems to be the influence of David Hume's analysis of human passions.

16) J.S. Mill. Principles of Political Economy op. cit, pp. 791~2.

17) Idem.

honest and intelligent management, co-operative establishments could undersell individual dealers. However, he added, the management must be honest and intelligent in order to do this, and emphasized that if the experience of co-operative taught the laborers the value of honesty and intelligence to themselves, it would work as great a moral revolution in the society as a physical one; it would never do the last without the first.<sup>18)</sup>

Mill was so eager to contribute to the achievement of economic justice as well as social justice that he stood positively against unfair competition. This can be illustrated by his letter of March 22, 1865, to the Secretary of the Co-operative Plate-Lock Manufactory, Wolverhampton, in which he encouraged the workers of the co-operative to keep struggling against unfair competition on the part of masters in the trade. and promised them to assist their efforts.<sup>19)</sup>

As to liberty, although he was against unqualified *laissez faire*, he was well aware of the limitations of government controls. He thought that the differences between employers and laborers which gave rise to strikes were a subject which entirely escaped the control of legislation, and that there would be almost nothing which law could do in the matter, except to protect from violation the equal liberty of all to combine or to refrain from combining. He was still maintaining the belief that after a sufficient trial of each other's strength both sides would probably be willing to refer their disputes to arbitration; but even then he thought the arbitrators should not have power to enforce their decisions by law, because it would not be possible to lay down rules of justice and equity which would suit all cases or would obtain universal assent, and the adjustments must generally be of the nature of compromises, not acting on fixed principles, but each side giving up something for the sake of peace.<sup>20)</sup>

Mill recognized that the labor class had a narrow range of thought, and that politics and socio-economic questions would be the absorbing subjects to most of the active labor class. Nevertheless, he thought that they were much more open than either the higher or middle classes to appeals made to them in the name of large ideas and high principles, and, thus, that moral education emphasizing the importance of higher virtues than self-interests could be most effectively done by pointing out to them how much those virtues were needed to enable a democracy and any approach to socialism. In his letter to Auberon Herbert, Mill emphasized this point,

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18) J.S. Mill, *The Letters of John Stuart Mill*, (ed.) Hugh R.S. Elliot (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), Vol. I, pp. 200~1.

19) *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 21~2.

20) Letter to James Beal, April 19, 1865, "*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 26.

and wished the moral lessons could be done so effectively that the political leadership of the labor class could be acquired by those who would make the objectives of labor class their main task in politics, but who would pursue these on the strict principles of justice, and with reference solely to the general requisites of social welfare, and who would use all the influence they acquired with the labor class by advocating their cause to inculcate this as the only admissible mode of discussing and deciding social questions.<sup>21)</sup>

## 2. Parliamentary Reform vs. Revolution

Mill saw that mere liberty without alternatives would not do anything good for the lower classes, and stated in his letter to James Beal that he should be prepared to support a measure which would give to the labor class a clear half of the national representation.<sup>22)</sup> He contended that the virtual extermination of the minority was no necessary or natural consequence of freedom; that, far from having any connection with democracy, it was diametrically opposed to the first principle of democracy, representation in proportion to numbers:<sup>23)</sup>

“It is an essential part of democracy that minorities should be adequately represented. No real democracy, nothing but a false show of democracy, is possible without it.”

As to reform measure, Mill had persistently been concerned with achievement of social reform by gradual measures, not by a revolution. He withdrew his support from the Reform League on account of some inflammatory speeches made by representatives of the League at the meeting in February, 1867, for he believed that any reform bill capable of being passed at that time and for sometime to come should be more or less of a compromise. The speeches delivered at the meeting were characterized by two things; a determined rejection before hand of all compromise on the reform question, even if proposed by the public men in whose sincerity and zeal as reformers they had repeatedly expressed the fullest confidence; and a readiness to proceed at once to trial of physical force if any opposition were made either to their demands or to the particular mode.

Mill contemplated the possible justifications for an attempt at revolution: one would be personal oppression, tyranny and consequent personal suffering of such intensity that to put an immediate stop to it would be worth almost any amount of current evil and future danger. The other would be when either the system of government

21) “Letter of January 29, 1872,” *Ibid*, Vol. II. p. 330.

22) *Ibid*, p. 23.

23) “Representation of ‘Minorities,’ *Utilitarianism’ Liberty and Representative Government*, *op. cit*, p. 350.

did not permit the redress of grievances to be sought by peaceful and legal means, or when those means have been perseveringly exerted to the utmost for a long series of years, and their inefficacy had been demonstrated by experiment. He concluded, however, that no one could say any of these justifications existed in the current case.<sup>24)</sup>

He no more favored compulsory measures than revolutionary one. He did not regard the compulsory insurance of labores proposed along with the National Friendly Society as agreeable measure. He preferred non-compulsory measure to compulsory one unless long and through previous discussions had led the laborers themselves to demand it, because he felt it unjust to take compulsory measures against the improvidence of the labor class, leaving that of all other classes free.<sup>25)</sup>

His hopeful expectation on the parliamentary reform and his readiness to devote himself to it were somewhat deterred by his defeat at Westminster. He regreted that there were elements of unfair competition in electoral campaign: He thought one of the real causes of the failure of labor class candidates and of so many of the advanced liberals in the late contests was the inordinate expense of elections which caused injustice in the electoral competition, which should be removed by united appeal of the labor class to parliamentary reform.<sup>26)</sup> Despite his failure in election and strong obstacles in the way to parliamentary reform, Mill did not give up his hopeful expectation on the social reform through parliamentary reform, and did not contemplate revolution to be desirable even at that stage.<sup>27)</sup>

### 3. Land Tenure Reform

In late 1868, he warned of some danger concerning the question of land. There were signs of a rapidly growing conviction in the operative classes that the land should not be private property but should belong to the State. In case where this opinion came to maturity before the land owners were prepared to pay attention to it, some violent class-animosities might occur. Even in such a case, he expected, the probability would be in favor of the settlement of the question by a succession of compromises without coming to an explosion.

As the Land Tenure Reform Association was considering adoption as its purpose the resumption of all the land from its proprietors in 1869, he warned them that it would be premature to discuss on taking possession of all the land and managing it by the state. He pointed out that the active spirits in the labor class might think

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24) J.S. Mill, *The Letters of John Stuart Mill*, op. cit. Vol. II, pp. 77~8.

25) "Letter to James Trask, April 22, 1868," *Ibid.*, pp. 109~110.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 153.

27) "Letter to George Howell," *Ibid.*, P. 168.

nothing short of preparation is worth trying and might consequently withhold their support from the Association, and that a great deal of preparation would be required to induce all other classes even to listen to it patiently.<sup>28)</sup> Here again he preferred a rather gradual approach to this problem by gradually limiting the power of individuals over land through the imposition of more and more condition on behalf of the people at large.

In the subsequent year he expressed his more advanced opinion on the program of the Land Tenure Reform Association: The provision for the purchase of land in the market by the State would be chiefly applicable to neighbourhoods in which there were neither common lands, nor lands belonging to public bodies, sufficient to give a fair trial to small holdings and to co-operative agriculture. He thought quite worth a trial to see how the State could manage landed property, and nothing but a trial on a large scale for a considerable period would convince the labor class that such a system would be unsuccessful.<sup>29)</sup>

To the question of nationalization of land he held an opposition. He assumed those who supported the nationalization of the land were bound to state the plan on which they would have it managed for the public account. In the current low state of political morality and administrative habit, however, he expected that the land department would become corrupt jobbing, that democratic institutions were no an effective security, and that it would be complete failure as a financial measure, the proceeds realized being probably not sufficient to pay the amount of compensation.<sup>30)</sup> He contended that it would not just to take land without sufficient compensation, and concluded the resumption program of the Land Tenure Reform Association was more legitimate which proposed that the alternative should be allowed to the holders, surrendering their land at its selling value.<sup>31)</sup> He suggested, however, that lands not yet appropriated by individuals should by no means be allowed to pass into private ownership, but should be sacred to public purposes, and made a means of trying all possible modes of collective management with a view of testing their practicability and the effects of those modes on the capacities of collective management in general.<sup>32)</sup>

As the question of the constitution and limits of property in land had more closely came to the front and a majority of liberal politicians found it desirable to include

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28) Ibid, pp. 214~5.

29) "Letter to J.B. Kinner." Ibid, pp. 263~4.

30) "Letter to John stapleton." Ibid, pp. 313~4.

31) "Explanatory Statement of the Programme of the Land Tenure Reform Association," Dissertations and Discussions: political, philosophical and Historical. Vol. V (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1875), pp. 230~7.

32) J.S. Mill, The Letters of John Stuart Mili. Vol. II. p. 352.

in their program some improvement in the existing arrangements on that subject. Mill discussed two proposals affecting property in land which engaged a considerable and increasing amount of public attention: one, the abrogation of the right of primogeniture and the abolition or great restriction of the power of making settlements of land; the other, that corporations and endowed institutions should be required to sell their lands, and invest the proceeds in the funds or other public securities. The difference between these two projects afforded an illustration of the principles which should guide the judgement of land tenure reformers in matters of this nature. He regarded the former of the two to be entitled to their full support; the latter should be strenuously resisted by them.<sup>33)</sup> Thus, in the land question he also preferred gradual reform, minimizing the sacrifice of the existing system and without violating justice.

#### IV. Summary

In the formation of Mill's thoughts on social reform, the prevailing socialistic doctrines such as Owenism, Saint Simonianism, and Fourierism provided him with considerable amount of mental resources, particularly the speculations of Saint Simonians, including Saint Simon and August Comte, had a considerable influence on the formation of his social philosophy. Though he thought those doctrines were neither true nor desirable to the full extent, he highly regarded their sincere objectives and their educational values. He suggested those schemes, particularly Fourierism in his later years, to be tested on a small scale to be judged of their worth. Thus, his philosophical empiricism, which was well revealed in his statement that "The conclusions of theory can not be trusted, unless confirmed by observation; nor those of observation, unless they can be affiliated to theory....."<sup>34)</sup> had been consistently reflected in his view on these doctrines.

In the matter of social reform, Mill imposed great expectation on cooperative movements which promised the achievement of welfare community in the near future, in which all the difficulties and conflicts inherent in the existing system and the prevailing socialistic schemes would be resolved. In his welfare commune, there would be some compromises between the liberty of individuals and the welfare of the society. The compromises can be successfully achieved not by the forces of

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33) "Advice to Land Reformers, January 4 and November 11 1873. *Disseratations, and Discussions*, pp. 255~6.

34) J.S.Mill. *A System of Logic*, 8th ed. (New York: Harper Brothers, 1881). Book V, Ch. IV.

any centralized state but by spontaneous cooperation of members of the society. Elevation of the human mind through moral education and practical educations by co-operative movements and participation in other social activities would greatly enhance the rise of the spirit of cooperation and justice. Competition, innovation, and enterprise are the fruits of liberty, the complement of spontaneity. Here, Mill dissents from the other socialists who declaim against competition. These views of his had been continuously reflected in his writings on the practical social problems such as the co-operative movements, parliamentary reform, and land tenure reform.

He did not expect that the ideal state of society could be achieved in short time period, because he well recognized the current state of labor class characterized by ignorance and selfishness primarily due to imperfect education and degraded environment. He thought, however, the potentiality of improvement in the labor class in the future to be stronger than that of the higher and the middle classes, because the former had a more open mind than the latter.

Although he suggested some measures going beyond conventional democracy, he had never recommended revolution as a desirable measure for social reform, especially in England at that time.

His reconciliation of possible conflict between the liberty of individuals and welfare of the society should be highly regarded, and his zealous devotion to the elevation of the human mind as well as the improvement of social conditions should be warmly received.