

## J.S. Mill - Considerations on Representative Government

---

LECTURE NOTES — CHAPTER 1

---

Mill observes that there are two types of theories of government. On the one hand, the “Benthamites”, who take government to be an instrument that a society chooses, in order to best fulfill its chosen social goals. The choice of a government thus becomes the choice of the *best tools for political ends*.

On the other hand are those theories (Mill probably had in mind some of Coleridge’s writings), which take governments to be a natural development of society (a “spontaneous product” — p. 206). According to the latter stance, it is not possible to choose or construct a government, but it is rather given to us from the type of society we are in.

After that introduction, Mill applies to his considerations on representative government, some of the methodological principles he had put forth in *On Liberty*. There, when talking about the virtues of disagreement, he had analyzed the case in which the opinion under consideration is neither true nor false, but a mixture of both. When considering the two theories on the nature of government, Mill claims that neither of them contains the whole truth, but rather, each of them contains some elements of truth.

Some facts about governments: [edited from the original text]

1. Political institutions are the work of men (p. 207)
2. Political machinery does not act by itself. It has to be worked (operated), by men; and it must be adjusted to the capacities and qualities of such men as are available. (p. 207)
  - The people for whom the form of government is intended must be willing to accept it, or at least not so unwilling, as to oppose an insurmountable obstacle to its establishment. (“Some nations could not, except by foreign conquest, be made to endure a monarchy; others are equally adverse to a republic.” — p. 208)
  - They must be willing to and able to do what is necessary to keep it [the government] standing. (“Representative institutions are of little value [...] when the generality of electors are not sufficiently interested in their own government to give their vote, or, if they vote at all, do not bestow their suffrages [the right to vote in public elections] on public grounds, but sell them for money, or vote at the beck of someone who has control over them, or whom for private reason they desire to propitiate.” — p. 210)
  - They must be willing and able to do what it requires of them to enable it to fulfill its purposes. (“A rude people, though in some degree alive to the benefits of civilized society, may be unable to practice the forbearance [self-restraint] which it demands: their passion may be too violent, or their personal pride too exacting, to forgo private conflict.” — p. 209)

---

LECTURE NOTES — CHAPTER 2

---

- Main question of the chapter: what are the distinctive characteristics of the form of government best fitted to promote the interests of any given society?
- There is a difficult passage at the beginning of chapter II. Analyze from “For, in the first place ...” to “... interests of humanity.”

- Analyze the distinction made by Comte and Coleridge between Order and Progress.
- Progress = Improvement / Order = ?
  - Order = Obedience (narrower acceptation) — necessary condition, but not the object of government;
  - Order = Preservation of Peace (broader acceptation) — a condition for governing, not its purpose or the criterion of its excellence;
  - “Order as the preservation of all kinds and amounts of goods which already exist, and Progress as consisting in the increase of them.” (p. 219) — “the conditions of Order, in the sense now indicated, and those of Progress are not opposite, but the same” (p. 220).
- Mill states that the institution of a policing system is by itself conducive of progress. About 100 years before, Adam Smith had made the same argument when talking about the wealth, that is, the richness, of nations. Why is personal safety conducive to material progress?
- “It would be more philosophically correct to leave out of the definition of the word Order, and to say that the best government is that which is most conducive to Progress. For Progress includes Order, but Order does not include Progress. . . . Order would find a more suitable place among the conditions for Progress; since, if we would increase our sum of good, nothing is more indispensable than to take care of what we already have.”
- On page 225 Mill leaves the topic of Progress vs. Order, having shown that the two are not separate, but rather, the latter is necessary to the former; he then goes on to consider other possible classifications of the characteristics that make a government “best fitted to promote the interest of any given society”.
- “We may consider then alone, as one criterion of the goodness of a government, the degree in which it tends to increase the sum of good qualities in the governed, collectively and individually;” (p. 227) According to Mill, the *machinery of government* is moved by two elements, the force (and quality) of the governed (the citizens) and the *quality of the machinery itself*. What follows in the text (pp. 227 and 228) is a list of specific arrangements, in a government, which make “whatever moral and intellectual worth exists in the community” contribute to the collective functioning of a government. What are these arrangements (in Mill’s language such arrangements are called ‘contrivances’)?
- What does the “twofold division” mentioned on page 229 consist of? (“twofold division of the merit which any set of political institutions can possess”)