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Introduction

> [T]hat which remains "unrealized" by the universal constitutes it essentially.
> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*

1.1 HATING MILL, AND A FEW QUESTIONS RAISED BY HATING MILL

The impetus for this book was cemented at a conference where I gave a paper on Kant's and Mill's philosophies of history. The presentations concluded and our discussant began: "Now, I normally absolutely hate John Stuart Mill, but . . . "

What other political philosopher is, today, perceived as so evidently misguided (perhaps downright malevolent) that one might comfortably assume an audience's sympathy – or at the very least, understanding – in treating his views as presumptively detestable? More striking than the strong feelings that Mill elicited was the supposition that his liberalism was so clearly wrong-headed and corrupted by his imperial entanglements that it seemed barely necessary to qualify the opening salvo. This wasn't a unique experience. John Stuart Mill's moral and political philosophy has, in recent years, fallen on hard times, as the hostility toward it has become palpable in many parts of the discipline. Recent work by Jennifer Pitts, Thomas McCarthy, Bhikhu Parekh and Uday Singh Mehta – to name only a few of the best-developed critiques in what has become a substantial literature – has persuasively drawn out his liberal imperialism, and in so doing, thrown into question the viability of his thought.

The charges against him are as varied as they are damning. Critics contend that Mill conjoined an impoverished, reductive account of the Scottish Enlightenment's "four stages" theory of development with a Benthamite utilitarianism to generate a rigid index of social advancement. The resulting civilizational hierarchy provided the theoretical justification for British

imperialism, which Mill's long tenure at the East India Company certainly appears to confirm. In this, he's understood to uncritically reproduce (and even further entrench) his father James Mill's faith in a universal course of human history, carved out by Europe, through which all societies would progress. In the Mills' imagination, history charts humanity's progressive rationalization, our movement from savagery, through barbarism, and upward toward civilization. Beyond justifying despotic colonial rule, this incorporative historicism leaves little space to register the worth of non-European cultures by "assimilat[ing] all 'rude' peoples into a single category of moral and political inferiority"[1] – Europe's own past, frozen in time. John Stuart Mill's view of progress is, then, emblematic of the western tendency to treat "historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West."[2] His liberalism is by consequence taken to be internally – conceptually – bound to a racially inflected gradation of societies sustaining his ambitions as a colonial administrator.

Mill's personal history further compounds these charges. He was the son of James Mill, a principal architect of early nineteenth-century British colonialism in India and the author of *The History of British India*, the period's standard reference work on the subcontinent (proofread in its entirety by the younger Mill at the age of 11), which portrayed Indian society as backward, irrational and in desperate need of European governance. The elder Mill's sway over his son is well documented: as J. S. Mill readily acknowledges, James Mill exercised an outsized influence over his personal, intellectual and professional development. Beyond the "effect my father produced on my character,"[3] documented in his *Autobiography*, he was also drafted by James Mill into the East India Company in 1823, at the age of 17, where he rose to serve as a high-ranking functionary for 35 years. J. S. Mill's accounts of race, civilization, government and progress are as a result commonly treated as substantively similar, if not identical, to his father's.

In short, Mill's is in many critics' view an exemplary imperialist liberalism, taken to carry all of its most objectionable philosophical commitments: a stage-based account of human development blind to the value of non-European cultures; a civilizational discourse securing, in Edward Said's words, Europeans' "positional superiority";[4] a categorical and Manichean distinction between progressive, western societies and retrograde, non-western ones; a hubristic paternalism consigning colonial subjects to a permanent state of "not yet,"[5] as Dipesh Chakrabarty characterizes it; a view of historical progress as universal, inevitable and convergent; a conflation of modernization and westernization; and the list goes on. Still worse, we need only look to *On Liberty*'s restriction of self-government to peoples "in the maturity of their faculties"[6] to see that these troubling features appear central, and not merely peripheral, to his liberalism.

His views on international law and transnational relations fare no better: as Jennifer Pitts observes, Mill explicitly excluded "barbarians" from the "moral rules" governing interactions between civilized states.[7] "To be a Millian liberal," Bhikhu Parekh concludes, "is to take a condescending and paternalistic view of non-liberal societies."[8] Analysts of liberalism and empire are not alone in their criticisms. Dana Villa and Charles Larmore, for instance, find in Mill's liberalism a perfectionism particularly ill-suited to the pluralistic societies we have come to inhabit.[9] His readiness to use "laws and social arrangements"[10] to harmonize individual happiness with the social good sits as uncomfortably with late modern diversity as with liberal-democratic commitments to state neutrality. In total, then, Parekh's view exemplifies what has become the default position in liberal political theory: Mill is no longer the wellspring of moral, political, normative or institutional insight to which liberals turn in navigating ethical and political dilemmas – and still less so when those pertain to the challenges presented by present-day pluralism.

Our wellspring, today, is Kant. Since 1971, Kant's stature in liberal political theory has become virtually hegemonic. Current liberal theory is shaped by his moral and political philosophy and adopts many of its presumptions (albeit in importantly renovated ways). This is, of course, due to its operating almost entirely within the normative, methodological, vernacular and ideational space carved out by John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls's Kantian constructivism gave Anglo-American political philosophy the shot in the arm it so desperately needed in the early 1970s, and in so doing carved out the questions and approach steering liberal political thought that remain with us today. Since then, Kant's influence – alongside Rawls's – has only become more firmly entrenched in mainstream liberal theory, spreading far beyond Rawls, his followers and his critics. As William Galston puts it, contemporary normative theory "has rested to an extraordinary degree on Kantian foundations . . . Kant [has] unexpectedly become the preeminent practical philosopher of our day."[11]

Kant also figures prominently in international and cosmopolitan political thought.[12] "In recent years," David Armitage observes, "Kant has become variously the theorist of democratic peace, the avatar of institutional internationalism and the grandfather of globalisation."[13] From Habermas's cogitations on perpetual peace to Seyla Benhabib's hospitality-based cosmopolitanism, Kant's dream of a law-governed global order continues to inform contemporary reflections on international justice, right and law.[14] A suitably chastened Kant also provides the normative direction for certain strands of recent critical theory, such as Thomas McCarthy's critical theory of global development (which I engage throughout this book, particularly in Chapter 6). Kant's "approach to the tasks of universal history," McCarthy holds, "is a more viable option today than more strongly theoretical approaches descended from Hegel, Marx, or the evolutionary theories that succeeded them."[15] Kant's credibility as an international theorist is further buttressed by his explicit and oft-cited opposition to European imperialism. Imperialism was,

in his view, a fundamentally irrational mode of global intercourse, detracting not only from present and future peace, but also from commerce, a much more fruitful form of transnational relation.[16] It was also unwarranted from the perspective of right: a state's interest in interfering with an existing legal order, he argued, "can no more annul that condition of right than can the pretext of revolutionaries within a state."[17] Given this principled resistance to political expansionism, Sankar Muthu and Pauline Kleingeld take Kant's cosmopolitanism to anchor "his defence of non-European peoples' resistance against European imperial power."[18] Kant thus retains a marked currency in contemporary cosmopolitan political thought, framing the relationship between states and peoples in important ways.

Even critics of liberal political theory can't help but to engage Kant and neo-Kantianism. As James Miller observes, Michel Foucault – an exacting expositor of liberalism, neoliberalism and post-Enlightenment humanism, if there ever was one – "never ceased to consider himself a kind of Kantian."[19] That Kantianism floated to the surface in his late life, when he drew on "What is Enlightenment?" to sketch "a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era."[20] Kant's project of radical critique, Foucault confessed, initiated the line of inquiry – driven by the question: "in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?"[21] – within which he situated his own efforts. William Connolly, conversely, treats liberal theory's endemic Kantianism as its principal failing. Kant's misbegotten fantasy of isolating reason from the vagaries of the phenomenal world is reflected in the "bland intellectualism" of neo-Kantian liberalisms that "neglect [thinking's] affective sources, somatic entanglements, and effects."[22] The deficits of liberalism, Connolly tells us, are really deficits of its Kantianism. The broader deficit, you might say, is that contemporary liberalism *is* Kantian liberalism.

I want to argue that there are problems with this state of affairs that we can tease out of my erstwhile discussant's comments, and that shed light on this book's central concerns. The first is historical and exegetical: the presumption that Mill's commitments as an imperialist directly impugn his moral and political philosophy, and that they clearly reflect his views on human diversity more generally (the converse also holds true: Kant's anti-imperialism is taken to demonstrate his openness, tolerance, or benign indifference toward social, cultural and racial heterogeneity). Mill is an imperialist, his political thought is qualified by that imperialism, and as such it is constitutively closed to the claims of difference. The second problem concerns the wider issue of liberalism's relationship with pluralism. The ease with which my discussant dismissed Mill bespeaks a tendency in certain postcolonial, decolonial and critical literatures to treat liberalism, either explicitly or implicitly, as inextricable from colonial depredations and political domination. Liberalism's historicism, the argument goes, makes it structurally antipathetic to non-liberals (and more specifically to non-Europeans); its inbuilt Eurocentrism renders it ill-equipped to register

human multiplicity, at best folding it awkwardly into its own conceptual horizon.[23] Finally, my discussant's comments carried an evident normative weight: Millian liberalism, specifically, cannot sustain a politics responsive to deep social, cultural, racial and gender-based diversity.

There's a lot happening here – a wide range of assumptions lying just beneath the surface. How, for instance, do seminal thinkers' biographical and personal entanglements shape the theoretical vocabularies they developed? How should we, as contemporary interlocutors, treat philosophical doctrines historically enmeshed with practices of domination and exclusion? Are given traditions of political thought such as liberalism internally bound to those historical injustices, or is the relation contingent? Given its internal variability, is liberalism amenable to such generalizations? Are Kant's and Mill's responses to the world beyond Europe's gates assimilable to one another, as distinctively liberal visions of heterogeneity and difference? Do their views on imperialism reflect their broader understandings of human diversity? Are contemporary liberals warranted in fencing off their bigotries as time-bound prejudices extricable from otherwise freestanding moral and political philosophies? Or, conversely, are contemporary critics warranted in treating liberalism as conceptually bankrupted by its historical shortcomings?

These are the questions that this book addresses and hopes to clarify. These and related questions are shrouded in confusion if they are disentangled at all, and accordingly liberalism's relationship – historical and contemporary – with human diversity is unclear. Their conceptual stakes and distinctions are often elided, conflated or simply disregarded by detractors and defenders of Kant, Mill and liberalism alike. As long as these ambiguities persist, we will be unable to understand very much about liberalism and diversity.

This book is about liberalism and pluralism – most simply, about how certain particularly influential strands of liberal political theory encounter, respond to and incorporate the fact of human diversity and difference. That liberalism's universalist pretensions have invariably exceeded their reach, both theoretically and practically, is no surprise. The boundaries of moral and political communities are demarcated by an age's norms, and – without relinquishing our critical perspective – there's little to be gained, other than charges of presentism, from faulting them for falling short of our standards. Anachronistically treating Kant, Mill or any other such historical figure as "racist" or "sexist" *tout court* doesn't answer many questions. My aim, rather, is to examine how distinctive strains of liberal political thought respond to human heterogeneity in more or less productive, capacious and receptive ways.[24] In other words, I aim to consider how these liberalisms encounter human difference – to consider not just who they might exclude, but the conceptual apparatus through which those forms of difference are incorporated (sometimes through exclusion) into given visions of moral and political life. This approach pursues the conviction that what we inherit from Kant and Mill, and what ought to concern us, is less their own prejudices than

these theoretical frameworks; what's of interest is not the *fact* of those prejudices but rather where they *fit* within their philosophical systems.

I undertake this by mounting a qualified defense of Millian liberalism against the Kantian liberalism that has come to predominate in contemporary political theory.[25] I argue that Mill's liberalism is far more complex and generative than the prevailing view suggests, that it articulates a political philosophy that is in important respects preferable to Kant's, and that it is well placed to navigate a pluralistic world. Against Thomas McCarthy's contention that Kant's universal history comprises "a mode of empirically informed, practically oriented, reflective judgment which ... provides a better indication of what might still make sense today than do the more extravagant views that followed,"[26] I argue that Millian liberalism is fallibilistic, culturally sensitive (even if he was not), and responsive to late-modern social diversity. Many critics see the ambivalences in Mill's liberalism as disjunctures entailed by his attempt to square imperialism with liberty and self-government. I suggest, conversely, that the critical focus on his imperialism has over-determined the embeddedness of hierarchy and exclusion in his liberalism, obscuring his nuanced treatment of human heterogeneity. Despite his own evident chauvinisms, Mill's liberalism registers the worth of cultural difference, recognizes the contingency of social progress and understands the task of politics as enabling self-determination.

Over the course of the book, I defend a few central claims, structured around three arguments. The first is historical and exegetical. I argue that Kant's and Mill's accounts of human diversity are subject to important interpretive deficits stemming from a failure to properly situate their conceptualizations of difference – racial, cultural, gender-based, class-based – within their respective philosophical systems. These deficits have led to miscasting their liberalisms, and more particularly the place of exclusion, hierarchy and domination within them. The preponderant emphasis on both thinkers' relationship to empire, as important as it is, has overshadowed and distorted their views of human diversity more generally. By widening the analytical lens, my reconstructions challenge many of the orthodoxies that have come to surround their treatments of pluralism.

The second argument is conceptual, addressing liberalism and pluralism. By unpacking the breadth of liberalisms represented by Kant and Mill, I dispute the claim that liberalism comprises a singular, cohesive doctrine intrinsically linked to imperialism and political domination. Kantian and Millian liberalisms are substantively dissimilar: their visions of moral, social and political life are philosophically distinctive and in many ways irreconcilable. Most significantly, for my purposes, they respond to human diversity in importantly different ways, with importantly different consequences. I argue that critics charging liberalism with the "continental chauvinism and implicit and explicit racism ... inherent to the Western canon"[27] tend to obscure more than they reveal. The profound

divergences in Kant's and Mill's incorporations of pluralism undermine the contention that liberalism is driven by an impulsion to dominate non-liberals that we might trace throughout its history and into the present.

Finally, I make a normative claim, drawing out the historical argument's contemporary stakes. Millian liberalism, I argue, avoids problematic dimensions of Kantian liberalism and is particularly well equipped to respond to late-modern pluralism. Properly understood, it is more receptive to diversity than is commonly recognized; it is attuned to the political import of individual and national character, treating social variation as embedded in the human condition, and anchored in a "Social Science" pushing irreducibly idiosyncratic societies to seek their own ends. Millian liberalism's distinctive features, as I elaborate them, dispose it to encountering human difference with generosity and openness. It is, then, a liberalism well worth recovering.

This is not to defend Mill's views, or liberalism more generally, root and branch. Mill's political philosophy justified imperialism, and his professional life was dedicated to its extension. In an impassioned speech before Parliament in 1858, he lauded the East India Company's achievements and lamented its demise, proudly noting its beneficence toward the subcontinent's native inhabitants.[28] Many other liberals shared in his views, and many other liberalisms bear the marks of their presumptions. He (and they) readily advanced a wide range of Eurocentrist confabulations that shaped the modern world and continue to resonate in contemporary global relations. As postcolonial scholars have demonstrated, a wide swath of western thinkers – liberals, Marxists and others – adopted historicist frameworks and civilizational hierarchies upholding injustices ranging from the dispossession and extermination of Indigenous peoples, to slavery, to imperial and colonial domination.[29] Still further, critics of neo-colonialism have drawn out their ongoing impacts, as the imperial era's structural foundations – legal, political and economic – endure, cementing the subjugation of subaltern peoples through uneven global institutions and associations.[30]

My argument does not neglect, resist or minimize these harms and inequities. It is in no way set against the spirit and ambitions of postcolonial theorists, critics of liberal imperialism or scholars of neo-colonialism, neither does it discount or devalue their efforts. On the contrary, my interests are continuous with their driving impulse: to critically examine traditions of political thought so as to shed light: (a) on their exclusions, injustices and blind spots (b) on the conceptual mechanisms through which these were operationalized and integrated into wide-ranging visions of social and political life, and (c) on their legacies, traces and ongoing implications in contemporary politics and political thought. This is, then, no reactionary defense of liberalism against postcolonial critique. Much of the book agrees with critics of liberalism about its worst impulses and tendencies.[31]

Of course, many critics will regard any defense of liberalism as a non-starter, treating it as inescapably Eurocentric, both historically and conceptually.

Duncan Bell characterizes this view as the "necessity thesis," which "asserts that imperialism is an integral feature of liberal political thought"[32] and traces an internal linkage between the philosophical tradition and the forms of domination accompanying its development. Liberalism's deficits, the claim goes, are endemic, pervasive and persistent: its rationalism, its moral universalism, its possessive (or atomistic) individualism, its embroilments with capitalism and free markets, its developmentalism, its complicity in colonial and imperialist practices – each singly, or in combination, are taken to entail its unavoidable expansionism. A non-dominating liberalism, then, isn't just a historical anomaly, but a contradiction in terms; liberalism's categories and foundational assumptions carry the taint of its provincialism.

A still-deeper issue, raised by postcolonial and comparative political theorists, concerns the narrowness of the moral and political imagination on which a project such as mine draws. From this standpoint, my turn to Kant and Mill would both reflect and reinforce the discipline's longstanding inwardness by addressing human diversity within the confines of western theory, rather than engaging non-western sources of political reflection. The problem lies in "a mode of philosophic investigation that presupposes the basic sufficiency of its own moral-intellectual resources,"[33] as David Scott puts it, and so resists the "labor of learning how to read from *within* another tradition."[34] To defend any form of liberalism, then, is to avoid the task of "*unlearning* the presumptive privilege of one's own moral-intellectual traditions, and ... *learning* something of the internal composition of questions and answers through which the relevant traditions of others have been historically shaped."[35]

Much of the criticism is undoubtedly warranted and points to important limitations in my project, and more broadly, in the field of political theory. And yet, it is also qualified by certain considerations. While entirely agreeing with Scott's injunction to widen beyond the discipline's near-total focus on western thinkers, texts and contexts, his remarks concern the imperatives of postcolonial and decolonial theory. As pressing an endeavor as it is, it is not my intention here to contribute to the decolonization of political theory.[36] While imperialism and its legacies are central to my analysis, I treat them in the service of a sustained engagement with two thinkers in the liberal tradition, in order to reflect on that tradition. I also resist the argument tying liberal epistemology to the domination of non-Europeans by showing, in Chapters 5 and 6, the incommensurability of Kantian and Millian epistemologies. None of these efforts oppose the aims of postcolonial theory (even if I am critical of certain of its presumptions): I neither defend liberalism generally, nor suggest that all societies ought to be (or aspire to be) liberal ones, nor that Millian liberalism is *the* way to think about human diversity, rather than one especially generative approach among others. My task here is to demonstrate that certain forms of liberalism *are* defensible, that distinctive liberalisms integrate pluralism in markedly different ways, and that it is worth our while, as both critics and analysts, to pull them apart. As such, I see this

project as contributing to efforts in the history of political thought, postcolonial theory, and intellectual history to better understand colonialism's wide-ranging political impacts and after-effects – historical, conceptual, normative and disciplinary.

My critique of certain facets of the postcolonial literature in Chapter 6 is, then, a sympathetic one, aiming to advance these efforts while resisting the charge that liberalism is implicitly bound to imperialism. First, the contention hinges on an over-general depiction of liberalism (itself often conflated, still more generally, with Enlightenment, modernity, the West and other cognates) that obscures its variability, ideological fluidity, internal rifts and outright contradictions. This kind of flattening conceals what Amanda Anderson characterizes as "the self-critical and transformative nature of liberalism throughout its history, its responsiveness to ethical, philosophical and historical challenges." Liberalism, she observes, is "a philosophical and political orientation that has more existential density than it is often presumed to possess."[37] Second, it fails to clarify what it is within liberalism that ought to concern us. Kant, Mill and many others perceived non-Europeans in deeply problematic ways, but those problems are distinctive, and not recognizing them as such diminishes our understanding of them. The tendency to generalization also papers over liberalism's emancipatory tenors, which surface even in colonial contexts. As Christopher Bayly observes, for instance, "Indian liberal ideas were foundational to all forms of Indian nationalism,"[38] "a broad field on which Indians and other South Asians began ... to resist colonial rule."[39] Liberalism has traveled widely, undergoing wholesale transmutations along the way; to paint it with broad brushstrokes is to lose track of its utility in resisting political domination. Finally, a wide range of liberal commitments – to individual and political autonomy, to self-government and self-direction, to non-paternalist independence and to sustaining the conditions for freedom – are well aligned with the postcolonial scholarship's ambitions. I argue, still further, that particular features of Millian liberalism are congruent with many of its philosophical assumptions and concerns.

My aim here, ultimately, is to get what's wrong right, to elucidate how and why certain liberalisms are more open and receptive to human diversity than others. It's to understand precisely what, historically, sustained profound injustices in given liberalisms so that we might recognize and redress shortcomings in our own political thinking and practices. This requires an analysis attuned to the specific features of certain liberalisms, without which the nature of the problem is oversimplified. In Chapters 2–5 I show how such oversimplifications miss important distinctions in Kant's and Mill's liberalisms; Chapter 6 shows how they miss what we might draw out of them. The overall idea is not to resist the postcolonial critique of liberalism but rather to extend it by distinguishing the tradition's problematic features from those that advance its freedom-enhancing character.

1.2 WHY KANT AND MILL?

There is no shortage of contemporary political theory addressing liberalism and pluralism – since Rawls, liberalism's central preoccupation is, arguably, precisely how best to manage social, cultural and religious diversity. Why then approach the question historically? Why turn to the history of political thought rather than current debates?

Let's start by considering what the historical approach offers. To begin, the contemporary literature on liberalism and pluralism is framed almost entirely in Kantian terms. For over four decades, liberal political theory has operated in a neo-Kantian landscape that has shaped its relationship with pluralism. By turning away from it, I aim to enlarge our view of liberalism beyond Kantian strictures whose narrowness renders it singularly unreceptive to the claims of difference. Moreover, it is by turning and returning to its historical foundations that we comprehend and constitute the liberal tradition.[40] Defenders and critics of liberalism alike persistently draw on its seminal philosophers not only as rich repositories of reflection on ethics and politics, but also to assess those philosophers' impacts on current political thinking and institutions. And yet, the linkages between historical figures, ideas and texts and their contemporary uptake tend to remain murky.[41] In order to clarify this murkiness, my reconstructions of Kantian and Millian liberalisms work through what we might reasonably carry forward from bodies of political thought mired in historical injustice, recognizing their deficits and parochialisms – past and present – without over-determining them.[42] Finally, given the long shadow they cast, it's worth getting these thinkers right. Without clearly understanding the moorings of our political ideas, we're more likely to reproduce their failures.

But why focus on Kant and Mill specifically? First, they are among the liberal totems whose ties to race and empire have been most extensively addressed in the scholarship. For better or worse, their accounts of race, gender, culture, civilization, class and empire are among the most influential and widely debated by liberals and their critics. While Duncan Bell has persuasively argued in favor of widening its ambit, much of the critical literature centers on a relatively narrow cast of characters within which Kant and Mill figure prominently.[43] Second, from a methodological standpoint, I suggest that more panoramic treatments of liberalism tend of necessity toward sometimes thin and selective readings of given thinkers that skew their views of human difference (among other things).[44] By focusing closely on two theorists – rather than on liberalism's supposedly implicit proclivities, or on a wider range of its exponents – I aim to situate their conceptualizations of diversity within their respective systems of thought. Third, as noted, Kant and Mill are subject to important and now-common misinterpretations that I challenge by looking beyond their respective connections to empire. Treating Kant's anti-imperialism as symptomatic of his valuing "cultural agency"[45] or Mill's