The New Criterion

Dispatch February 03, 2005 07:10 am

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

by Roger Kimball

2.03.2005

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

[Posted 7:10 AM *by Roger Kimball*]

In 1859, two revolutionary books were published. One was Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. The other was John Stuart Mill's pamphlet *On Liberty*. Darwin's book revolutionized biology and fundamentally altered the debate between science and religion. Mill's book revolutionized the way we think about innovation in social and moral life.

What is your opinion of innovation? Do you think it is a good thing? Of course you do. You may or may not have read Mill on the subject, but you have absorbed his lessons. What about established opinion, customary ways of doing things? Do you suspect that they should be challenged and probably changed? Odds are that you do. Mill has taught you that, too, even if you have never read a line of *On Liberty*.

Mill's essay was ostensibly about the relation between individual freedom and society. Mill famously argued that the *only* grounds on which society was justified in exercising control over its members, whether that control be in the form of "legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion," was to "prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant."

This part of Mill's argument quickly attracted searching criticism. The British judge James Fitzjames Stephen, for example, went to the heart of the problem when he observed that Mill assumed that "some acts regard the agent only, and that some regard other people. In fact, by far the most important part of our conduct regards both ourselves and others." As for withholding "the moral coercion of public opinion," Stephen observed that "the custom of looking upon certain courses of conduct with aversion is the essence of morality."

Stephen's criticisms of Mill were published in his book *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, which appeared about a decade after *On Liberty*. Many of the criticisms are devastating. Intellectually, Stephen made mincemeat of Mill. But that has hardly mattered. Mill's doctrines have taken the world by storm, while Stephen has receded to become a footnote in intellectual history.

Why? One reason is that Mill said things that people wanted to hear. Mill seemed to be giving people a permanent vacation from the moral dictates of society. How often have you heard the argument "It's not hurting anyone else" put forward as a justification for self-indulgence? But it was not simply what he said about the relation between individual freedom and social control that made *On Liberty* such an influential tract. Much more important was the attitude, the emotional weather, of the book.

On Liberty is only incidentally a defense of individual freedom. Its deeper purpose is to transform the way we regard established morality and conventional behavior as such. In brief, Mill taught us to be suspicious of established morality not because what it says is wrong (maybe it is, maybe it isn't) but simply because is established. The tradition that Mill opposed celebrated custom and established morality precisely because they had prevailed and given good service through the vicissitudes of time and change; their longevity was an important token of their worthiness.

Mill overturned this traditional view. Consider what has happened to the word "prejudice." When was the last time you heard it used in a neutral or positive sense? And yet originally "prejudice" simply meant to prejudge something according to conventional wisdom. It was in this sense, for example, that Edmund Burke extolled prejudice, writing that "prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit. . . . Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature."

Mill was instrumental in getting us to associate "prejudice" indelibly with "bigotry." He wanted to take the wisdom out of the phrase "conventional wisdom." He repeatedly argued against "despotism of custom"--not because it was despotic, but simply because it was customary. According to Mill, the "greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history because the sway of custom has been complete." It was against custom--a.k.a. conventional behavior, tradition, established moral and religious practice--that Mill opposed originality, individuality, eccentricity, what he famously referred to as "experiments in living."

How contemporary that sounds! Do you remember the song "They All Laughed At Christopher Columbus"? Everyone made fun of Columbus, but turns out he was right. As the late Australian philosopher David Stove pointed out, today the argument of that song is taken as gospel.

It is a gospel written largely by John Stuart Mill. It goes like this: Throughout history, the authors of moral, political, or social innovations have been objects of ridicule, persecution, and oppression; they have been ignored, silenced, exiled, imprisoned, even killed. But do we not owe every step of progress, intellectual as well as moral, to the daring of innovators? "Without them," Mill wrote, "human life would become a stagnant pool. Not only is it they who introduce good things which did not before exist; it is they who keep the life in those which already exist." Mill's conclusion is

that innovators--"developed human beings" is one phrase he uses for such paragons--should not merely be tolerated but positively be encouraged as beacons of future improvement.

The amazing thing about the success of what David Stove called the Columbus Argument is that it depends on premises that are so obviously faulty. Indeed, as Stove observes, a moment's reflection reveals that the Columbus Argument is undermined by a downright glaring weakness. Granted that every change for the better has depended on someone embarking on a new departure. Well, so too has every change for the worse. And surely, Stove observes, there have been at least as many proposed innovations which "were or would have been for the worse as ones which were or would have been for the better." Which means that we have at least as much reason to discourage innovators as to encourage them, especially when their innovations bear on things as immensely complex as the organization of society.

The triumph of Mill's teaching shows that such objections have fallen on deaf ears. But why? Why have "innovation," "originality," etc., become mesmerizing charms that neutralize criticism before it even gets started when so much that is produced in the name of innovation is obviously a change for the worse? An inventory of the fearsome social, political, and moral innovations made in this century alone should have made every thinking person wary of unchaperoned innovation.

One reason that innovation has survived with its reputation intact, Stove notes, is that Mill and his heirs have been careful to supply a "one-sided diet of examples." It is a technique as simple as it is effective:

> Mention no past innovators except those who were innovators-for-the-better. Harp away endlessly on the examples of Columbus and Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno, Socrates and (if you think the traffic will bear it) Jesus. Conceal the fact that there must have been at least one innovator-for-the-worse for every one of these (very overworked) good guys. Never mention Lenin or Pol Pot, Marx or Hegel, Robespierre or the Marquis de Sade.

Mill never missed an opportunity to expatiate on the value of "originality," "eccentricity," and the like. "The amount of eccentricity in a society," he wrote, "has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage it contained." But you never caught Mill dilating on the "improvement on established practice" inaugurated by Robespierre or the "experiments in living" conducted by the Marquis de Sade.

The fate of Mill's teaching harbors a number of important lessons. One lesson concerns the relative weakness of reasoned arguments when they are pitted against a doctrine that exercises great emotional appeal. Critics like James Fitzjames Stephen and David Stove pointed out fatal weaknesses in Mill's teaching about freedom. By any disinterested standard, Mill lost the argument. But he won the battle for our hearts and allegiance. What does that tell us about the power of philosophy?

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).