

# Representative Democracy and Colonial Inspirations: The Case of John Stuart Mill

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*Focusing on John Stuart Mill, a particularly illuminating contributor to modern democratic theory, this article examines the connections between modern democracy and the European colonial experience. It argues that Mill drew on the exclusionary logic and discourse available through the colonial experience to present significant portions of the English working classes as domestic barbarians, whose potential rise to power posed a danger to civilization itself: a line of argument that helped him legitimate representative government as a democratic, rather than an antidemocratic form of government, as it had been traditionally perceived. The article contributes to our understanding of the development of modern democratic theory and practice by drawing attention to the ways the colonial experience shaped core Western institutions and ways of thinking, and it makes the case that this experience remains an essential, if often unacknowledged, part of our collective “self.”*

## INTRODUCTION


There has been a growing recognition in recent decades that “Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself” (Stoler and Cooper 1997, 1). An enormously complex interchange belies any simple understanding of the relations between Europe and its colonies as those of “us” and “them” or “Self” and “Other.” As Groot, among others, has argued, such commonly invoked dichotomies “need also to include the sense of the symbiotic connections joining each apparently opposed pair” (Groot 2000, 39; Hall and Rose 2006). In this article, I discuss such symbiotic connections between the European colonial experience and the establishment of a political system that has been little examined in these terms: representative democracy.

In his classic study on the principles of representative government, Bernard Manin observes that representative democracy “has its origins in a system of institutions ... that was in no way initially perceived as a form of democracy or of government by the people” (Manin 1997, 1). As Manin explains, throughout the tradition of political thought until the end of the eighteenth century, the dominant view was that a form of government based on elections was bound to be elitist or “aristocratic” in nature, as the electing public would tend to vote for the more prominent or distinguished figures in society, and these would tend to be the rich (Manin 1997, 133). Representative democracy has changed in various ways during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most importantly by the gradual introduction of universal suffrage. Yet it remains to a

large extent, as scholars have long recognized, a government by elites. “We are thus left,” Manin concludes, “with a paradox that, without having in any obvious way evolved, the relationship between representatives and those they represent is today perceived as democratic, whereas it was originally seen as undemocratic” (Manin 1997, 236).

Implicit in Manin’s observations is the realization that a reconceptualization of the meaning of democracy took place during the nineteenth century. While other scholars have pointed to the same process, the exact nature of this “reimagining” of democracy is still open to debate (Innes and Philp 2013). In this article, I show that the colonial experience served in this process as an important inspiration. More particularly, I argue that discourse originally directed at the justification of colonialism, such as the distinction between the “civilized” and the “uncivilized,” served to legitimize representative government as a democratic rather than an anti-democratic form of government. I thereby seek to contribute to our understanding of the development of modern democratic theory and practice as well as to our awareness of the extent to which the colonial experience shaped core Western institutions and ways of thinking. I use John Stuart Mill as a particularly illuminating case in point, to show the kind of colonial inspirations for the reconceptualization of the meaning of democracy that can be found when his political thought is examined from this perspective.

To make this case, I present two distinct, interrelated arguments. First, I argue that the extent of Mill’s concern with the possible implications of the suffrage of the lower classes in Britain has generally been underestimated. This is because scholars tend to focus on the mechanisms and institutions that he proposed to limit the influence of the uneducated and overlook his conviction that representative government in itself tends to bring about the rule of an elite. Once this latter presupposition is recognized, Mill’s proposals turn out to be *additional* ways to guarantee the limited influence of the lower classes, thereby shedding new light on Mill’s

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“elitism” when it comes to his understanding and conceptualization of representative democracy.

Second, I demonstrate that in his arguments for limiting the potential power of the lower classes, Mill drew not only on political institutions created by the East India Company in colonial India (as is recognized in scholarship) but also explicitly and implicitly on the exclusionary logic and discourse available through the colonial experience, by presenting significant portions of the lower classes as domestic barbarians or semibarbarians, whose influence on political decision making must be limited. This argument stands in contrast to most of the scholarship on Mill, which tends to assume a fundamental difference between Mill’s views of uncivilized societies and enlightened despotism as the form of government appropriate for them, on one hand, and his support for representative democracy at home on the other. Perhaps the most succinct expression of this tendency has been put forward by Alan Ryan:

Twentieth-century readers may and will flinch at the claim that ‘Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians,’ but if they find the distinction between the most ignorant Englishmen and the best-educated subject of Akbar a difficult one to swallow, they ought at least recognize that that is the distinction Mill has in mind. (1974, 128)

In his celebrated *Liberalism and Empire*, Uday Mehta similarly contends that Mill applied an exclusionary logic to the colonial subjects far removed from his liberalism and democratic politics at home and that it is precisely the distinction between the uncivilized, with their child-like, potential-yet-not-actual capacity for improvement and self-government, and the civilized, with their mature realization of this capacity, that allowed this exclusionary logic (1999). Such interpretations can be found throughout Mill scholarship (for example, Jahn 2005a, 195; Klausen 2016; McCarthy 2009, 174; Pitts 2005, 105).

At the same time, scholarship on Mill in recent decades has increasingly paid attention to the way the colonial experience influenced his reflections on domestic affairs. “Mill’s attention to questions of empire,” wrote Eileen Sullivan, “was a main factor leading to his elaboration of a cultural and historical theory of liberty and of democracy” (Sullivan 1983, 613). Among other influences, it “contributed to his growing dissatisfaction with pure democratic institutions, even for the most advanced nations” (613). More recently, Jahn has forcefully argued that “[t]here is not a single step in his [Mill’s] argument about domestic politics in which his philosophy of history represented through the barbarians does not play a crucial role” (2005b, 610). Other scholars have drawn more specific connections between Mill’s colonial experience and his views on domestic affairs in England (Arneil 2012; Brink 2013, 239; Brown 1999; Campbell 2010; Claeys 2013, 61; Finlay 2007; Jones 2005; Marwah 2011; Mehta 2012; Moir, Peers, and Zastoupil 1999; Smits 2008; Varouxakis 2005; Zastoupil 1994).

In these studies, Mill’s ambivalences and uncertainties about British colonialism as well as about the future of England itself are brought into sharper focus than before (Varouxakis 2013, 105–9; Williams 2020). Moreover, they do much to challenge the sharp distinctions attributed to Mill between the metropole and the colony. Marwah, in particular, has recently argued that rather than a fixed civilizational-intellectual measure, it is the democratic capacity of the population—namely, the extent to which they have learned to care about public affairs—that determined for Mill their preparedness for self-government (Marwah 2019, 137–40; see also Varouxakis 2013, 110). Such concerns occur in Mill’s writings also when he discusses advanced countries such as Britain, particularly when referring to the working classes’ capacity for representative government. Thus, “[f]ar from strictly dividing civilized and uncivilized societies, Mill understands the civilized poor and the uncivilized as sharing in the same democratic deficits, leading to the same pathological outcomes, in spite of their evidently different circumstances” (Marwah 2019, 147). In this sense, Mill in fact recognized that elements of civilization exist among barbarous peoples, “just as civilized peoples retain barbarous propensities” (2019, 198).

Although such insights are clearly valuable and point in the direction suggested in this article, they do not go far enough in questioning the civilizational binaries attributed to Mill. First, interpretations such as Marwah’s (2019) tend to obscure the fact that for Mill, as we shall see, democratic capacity to a large extent depends on rational capacity and education—namely, on the “civilizational-intellectual” measure. Second and relatedly, such interpretations obscure the extent to which, for Mill, the English working classes’ “democratic deficit” was closely bound up with their irrationality, or in other words, the fact that he considered them significantly less civilized. Marwah’s use of terms such as “civilized poor” versus “poorly civilized” to distinguish between English workers and colonial subjects (2019, 146) is an illustration of this tendency to overlook the way Mill treated many of the working people in England as semibarbarians whose possible rise to power might be disastrous. Finally, even in this critical scholarship, Mill’s view of representative government itself as an institution that limits the power of the domestic masses is commonly ignored.

The reasons for these interpretive tendencies are not hard to discern: first, Mill presents in his most famous writings the “civilized” and the “uncivilized” as distinctions pertaining to entirely different societies and therefore to entirely different forms of government. Second and no less importantly, representative democracy is naturally perceived by scholars as positive in essence—namely, as a form of government that, even if it has certain flaws, is the only *democratic* possibility for modern societies. Once representative democracy itself is put in question, I will argue, we realize that in his own version of representative democracy Mill sought not a form of government appropriate for a civilized society, as commentators usually believe, but a form of government suitable for a mixed society, in which highly

civilized and hardly civilized populations lived as part of the same political community. In this process, he powerfully *reconceptualized the meaning of democracy* to make what used to be understood as antidemocratic characteristics of representative government into democratic ones.

## THE RISE AND MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

Contrary to Manin's claim that the aristocratic nature of elections "has prompted no conceptual investigation or political debate since the beginning of the nineteenth century" (Manin 1997, 132), Mill's writings contain a rather rich discussion of this issue, and although it has drawn little attention on the part of commentators, it was of the utmost importance to him. In an essay published in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1823, Mill puts the difference between the reformers and the antireformers in simple terms: "the former are friends to a popular government, and the latter to an aristocracy" (Mill 1986a, 64). He then clarifies what support for popular government means: "The only ground on which Reform can stand, is the assumption that if the people had the power of choosing their representatives, they would make, if not the best, at least a good choice" (Mill 1986a, 64). As we shall see, whether the people the reformers wanted to enfranchise would actually make such a good choice would become a crucial question for Mill in the following years, but already at this point Mill had reasons to be concerned. As he writes to Gustav D'eichthal in 1829,

Much as we have improved in the last 20 years, it is only a part of us that has improved, there remained millions of men in a state of the same brutal ignorance and obstinate prejudice in which they were half a century ago. But this measure [the Catholic Emancipation bill] will bring forward the rear-guard of civilization: it will give a new direction to the opinions of those who never think for themselves, & who on that account can never be changed unless you change their masters & guides. The intelligent classes lead the government, & the government leads the stupid classes. (Mill 1963a, 27–8)

In Mill's view, a large portion of the British population remained at this point hardly civilized, as brutish and ignorant as they had been fifty years before—so much so that in a manner reminiscent of the argument for enlightened despotism Mill would present later in his life, he argues that they cannot improve themselves but rather need a ruling elite to direct them. It is hardly surprising that Mill conditioned a more extensive enfranchisement on the assumption that the newly enfranchised population would be wise enough to elect their betters.

There was indeed reason for hope. In his first major series of essays from 1831, titled "The Spirit of the Age," Mill expresses his conviction that it is natural for people to elect those who are fitter and wiser than themselves (Mill 1986, 252–3, 255) and that this has been thus far the state of affairs in the United States

(Mill 1986a, 253–4). At least in normal times, then, representative democracy would tend to bring to power an elite or, as Mill puts it suggestively, "the *most highly civilized* portion of the people" (Mill 1986a, 291, emphasis mine).

Mill therefore agrees at this point with much of the tradition of political thought that a form of government based on elections, such as representative democracy, is inherently an elitist form of government. Moreover, we find him again speaking casually in terms of more and less civilized populations within Britain itself—a discourse supposedly restricted to the distinction between the colonial empire and the colonial subjects—and the natural ascendance of the more civilized to positions of government. However, Mill famously argues, the contemporary age is one of transition, in which people do not recognize those who are fittest to govern: there are "no persons to whom the mass of the uninstructed habitually defer, and in whom they trust for finding the right, and for pointing it out" (Mill 1986a, 304). The question for him was how to ensure this otherwise natural tendency of representative democracy in an "unnatural" age of transition.

The relations between "The Spirit of the Age" and Mill's later work have been debated by scholars due to the influence that the St. Simonians as well as conservatism had on his thought at this early stage of his intellectual development (Hamburger 1982). Granted, as Varouxakis has shown, in his later writings Mill came to dismiss the Saint-Simonian idea that an enlightened minority should rule undemocratically as likely to lead to a "darker despotism ... than even the military monarchies and aristocracies have in fact proved" (quoted in Varouxakis 1999, 297) and to stress the need for balancing competing powers in government. However, regarding the specific issue at stake here—the assumption that representative government based on elections will tend to bring to power an elite, albeit one that is accountable to the masses and replaceable by them—there is, as we shall see, clear continuity between this early essay and Mill's later writings.

In his 1835 essay, "Rationale of Representation," Mill explains that representative government rests on the principle that the interest of the government should be identical, as much as possible, with the interest of the people (Mill 1977b, 22–3). Yet there is another crucial, and potentially conflicting, condition of good government to which representative government must strive: "That it is government by a select body, not by the people collectively: That political questions be not decided by an appeal ... to the judgment or will of an uninstructed mass ... but by the deliberately formed opinions of a comparatively few, specially educated for the task" (Mill 1977b, 23). The challenge, then, is "how best to conciliate the two great elements on which good government depends; to combine the greatest amount of the advantage derived from the independent judgment of a specially instructed Few, with the greatest degree of the security for rectitude of purpose derived from rendering those Few responsible to the Many" (Mill 1977b, 24).



To achieve this, argues Mill, it is not necessary that the “Many” should themselves be perfectly wise but only that they be “duly sensible of the value of superior wisdom” and elect those with superior judgment to govern them. Once this very ordinary wisdom of recognizing the most instructed and electing them is widespread in the nation, states Mill, “the argument for universal suffrage ... is irresistible: for, the experience of ages ... bears out the assertion, that whenever the multitude are really alive to the necessity of superior intellect, they rarely fail to distinguish those who possess it” (Mill 1977b, 24). Such is the tendency of the public, at least in “normal” times. The implication, for Mill, is quite clear:

In every country where there are rich and poor, the administration of public affairs would, even under the most democratic constitution, be mainly in the hands of the rich; as has been the case in all the republics of the old world, ancient and modern. Not only have the wealthy and leisured classes ten times the means of acquiring personal influence, ten times the means of acquiring intellectual cultivation, which any other person can bring into competition with them; but the very jealousies, supposed to be characteristic of democracy, conspire to the same result. Men are more jealous being commanded by their equals in fortune and condition, than by their superiors. (Mill 1977b, 26)

The difference between aristocratic and representative government, we can see, is not so much who rules as the basis of their legitimacy and the interests they serve.

Mill expresses a similar view in his 1835 review of the first volume of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. He concurs with Tocqueville that the rise of democracy is inevitable, but “the choice we are still called upon to make is between a well and an ill-regulated democracy; and on that depends the future well-being of the human race” (Mill 1977b, 56). The path to democracy, contends Mill, has to be carefully prepared, or else the rise of the multitude to power might result in a sort of a Caesars’ tyranny or an Asian despotism (Mill 1977b, 57).

However, Mill finds some of the dangers that Tocqueville identified in the rise of democracy not entirely justified. In particular, the danger of a shortsighted and hasty policy, as well as abuse of power by the masses over minorities, need not necessarily happen so long as the masses will come to hold the right idea of democracy. The idea of a rational democracy, explains Mill, is “not that the people themselves govern, but that they have *security* for good government” (Mill 1977b, 71, emphasis in the original). This security is achieved, first and foremost, by their ultimate control of the government—namely, by having a governing class that is accountable to the people through the possibility of its dismissal in elections. But this, stresses Mill, “is the only purpose for which it is good to intrust power to the people” (Mill 1977b, 72). Once the mechanism of popular elections is in place, “the best government ... must be the government of the wisest, and these must always be a few” (72). In a rational democracy, then, the people elect the “most instructed and the ablest

persons” as their rulers, and “allow them to exercise their knowledge and ability for the good of the people freely, or with the least possible control” (72). These few will constitute an “enlightened minority” who have the interest of all in mind and hold the most advanced wisdom of governance of the time (72).

The question arises, however, of how one ensures that the masses will not use their control of government to force government officials to implement policies that reflect the masses’ judgments and desires rather than their own. In a rarely noted footnote to this discussion, Mill clarifies this danger and adds a warning. Some well-intentioned people underestimate the possible perversion of democracy into the despotism of the majority, as they believe that lending the actual decision-making powers to the multitude themselves would encourage the more enlightened of the community to make an effort to make the masses more instructed and informed about the truths of politics (Mill 1977b, 73). However, explains Mill, this vision is based on the false assumption that once these political truths are discovered, they can easily be made accessible to the common sense of anybody. In fact, there are more than a few truths of politics—Mill gives political economy as an example—that require much more study, instruction, and thought to become convincing. Much more often, common sense will rebel against these truths and will tend to adhere to false views. Enlightening and instructing the multitude, then, is a great good, but it is insufficient to ensure that government is wisely administered (Mill 1977b, 73). That can only be ensured by the intellectual and moral authority of the few, at a time when the latter will have sufficient knowledge to be in accord on those matters:

The multitude will never believe these truths, until tendered to them from an authority in which they have as unlimited confidence as they have in the unanimous voice of astronomers on a question of astronomy. That they should have no such confidence at present is no discredit to them; for show us the men who are entitled to it! But we are well satisfied that it will be given, as soon as knowledge shall have made sufficient progress among the instructed classes themselves, to produce something like a general agreement in their opinions.... When there shall exist as near an approach to unanimity among the instructed, on all the great points of moral and political knowledge, we have no fear but that the many will not only defer to their authority, but cheerfully acknowledge them as their superiors in wisdom, and the fittest to rule. (Mill 1977b, 73–4)

Here again Mill argues that democracy, when properly understood and structured, will tend to bring about the rule of a meritocratic elite. This is, in fact, the very meaning of rational democracy, in contrast to other ideas about the meaning of democracy, which Mill formulates in terms of delegation versus representation. The false understanding of democracy is that it is a form of government in which the people elected are supposed to function as delegates of the people in the sense that they are supposed to implement the policies decided upon or preferred by those who elect them.

The true understanding of democracy, in contrast, is that it is a form of government in which the elected function as representatives of the people in the sense that they act for their benefit, are accountable to them, and can be dismissed by them after their term ends, but they decide on policies according to their own judgment and the most advanced knowledge of the time, which naturally only a few would possess. This is, for Mill, the crucial difference on which the very institution of democracy hinges. “The substitution of delegation for representation,” he writes, “is therefore the one and only danger of democracy” (Mill 1977b, 74).

Later in his review, Mill reiterates this point in even stronger terms:

If democracy should disappoint any of the expectations of its more enlightened partisans, it will be from the substitution of delegation for representation; of the crude and necessarily superficial judgment of the people themselves, for the judgment of those whom the people, having confidence in their honesty, have selected as the wisest guardians whose services they could command. All the chances unfavourable to democracy lie here; and whether the danger be much or little, all who see it ought to unite their efforts to reduce it to the *minimum*. (Mill 1977b, 79–80, emphasis in the original)

Mill’s belief that the masses would gradually come to accept this rational meaning of democracy was one of the reasons that led him to support a gradual increase in the working class’s representation in government. He was also genuinely concerned with the just grievances of the workers and knew that unless they were represented their concerns would not be properly voiced. Representation of the working classes in government thus served to establish a positive “systematic antagonism” (Varouxakis 1999) that would balance the power, the interests, and the one-sided perspective of the higher classes. Furthermore, Mill saw participation in government by representation, as well as by active participation in local government, as having important educational effects. Finally, as we have seen, he saw the process of democratization as inevitable and thought that only a gradual increase in the representation of the masses would make this process peaceful and beneficial for all.

At the same time, while he first saw Tocqueville’s warnings as somewhat exaggerated, Mill increasingly came to doubt that representative democracy would indeed produce the “natural” result of electing the best persons, even in “normal” times, particularly as long as the meaning of democracy was misunderstood among the masses. In a short review from 1839 titled “Essays on Government,” Mill notes that the question whether the people in a democracy would know where to find the natural aristocracy and wish to be governed by them or would prefer to treat their representatives as mere delegates to carry out their own preconceived opinions “appears to us the great question which futurity has to resolve” (Mill 1977b, 152).

In his review of the second volume of *Democracy in America* from 1840, Mill again mentions the common

notion among proponents of democracy that it would tend to bring to power “the wisest and worthiest,” as the people would recognize that their own interest required it, as well as Tocqueville’s rejection of this view, based on his observations of the “general want of merit in the members of the American legislatures, and other public functionaries” (Mill 1977b, 173). Mill notes, however, that this lack of talent in government is widespread in most states, representative or absolute (Mill 1977b, 174). Nevertheless, in a letter to Napier in the same year he clarified that his critical remarks on this point in Tocqueville’s book “were only intended to moderate the strength with which he claims admission for that opinion, & suggest grounds of hesitation & further examination; not to contradict the opinion itself for on the whole I to a great degree coincide in it, though not to the extent to which he carries it” (Mill 1963b, 444).

While some commentators have claimed that the 1848 French revolution further exacerbated Mill’s concerns (Urbinati 2002, 100), I would argue they had more ambivalent lessons for Mill. In his comments for the *Daily News* on the debate on reform in 1848, Mill explained to “the more reasonable class” of the opponents of a reform that would extend the franchise to more of the working classes that they were wrong to assume “that the crude opinions and unguided instincts of the working classes would be the directing power in the state” (Mill 1986b, 1104). Mill argues to the contrary, that

we have no such expectation from any extension of the franchise. Reformers have always maintained, and the example of France is now before us to show, that views of things taken from the peculiar position of the working classes are not likely to predominate, or to have at all more than their just influence, even in a legislature chosen by universal suffrage. After a revolution made by workmen, not twenty members in an assembly of nine hundred are working men. Scarcely in our own parliament do opinions with any semblance of an anti-property character meet with a more hostile reception; and it is evident that the errors of the assembly are more likely to be on the side of conservatism than of revolution. (Mill 1986b, 1104–5)

The 1848 revolution in France demonstrated to Mill that even when the working classes are the majority of voters, the inherent tendency of elections to bring to power prominent figures who are neither from the working classes nor share their more radical views persists. The lesson he drew was that the admission of many more working people to the franchise would “not consist in turning the propertied classes out of the government and transferring it to the unpropertied, but in compelling the propertied classes to carry it on in a manner which they shall be capable of justifying to the unpropertied” (1986b, 1105).

Nevertheless, Mill did not fail to take into consideration the concerns of the conservatives and the possibility that they would turn out to be right and he therefore sought further mechanisms to ensure that government would be managed by the best persons

possible. As he puts it in his Autobiography, referring to the influence of this period on his and his wife's thought, "We were now much less democrats than I had been, because so long as education continues to be so wretchedly imperfect, we dreaded the ignorance and especially the selfishness and brutality of the mass: but our ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists" (Mill 1981, 239).

Here too, it is a kind of socialism whose meaning must be properly understood. As Mill explains in *Principles of Political Economy*, socialism might be the better future of mankind, but it is not socialism in the sense of the abolishment of private property or of competition. Rather, it is progress toward more collective ownership of the means of production by associations of workers (Mill 1965, xciii). The only serious objection to attempts to realize this vision was "the unprepared state of mankind in general, and of the laboring classes in particular; their extreme unfitness at present for any order of things, which would make any considerable demand on either their intellect or their virtue" (Mill 1965, xciii). Indeed, writes Mill, "the deficiency of practical good sense, which renders the majority of the laboring class such bad calculators—which makes, for instance, their domestic economy so improvident, lax, and irregular—must disqualify them for any but a low grade of intelligent labor, and render their industry far less productive than with equal energy it otherwise might be" (Mill 1965, 107).

To improve the intelligence and skills of the workers, Mill supports a much more extensive popular education (Mill 1965, 108; 183–4). The end of such education, as Mill puts it elsewhere, is "converting these neglected creatures into rational beings—beings capable of foresight, accessible to reasons and motives addressed to their understanding; and therefore not governed by the utterly senseless modes of feeling and action, which so much astonish educated and observing persons when brought into contact with them" (Mill 1967, 378). Because many of the British working classes were not yet "rational beings," they posed a problem: "As soon as any idea of equality enters the mind of an uneducated English working man, his head is turned by it. When he ceases to be servile, he becomes insolent" (Mill 1965, 109).

Mill's high hopes for the future, then, were matched only by his concerns for the present, and these revolved around the gradual rise of the masses to power. Indeed, as Reeves notes, by 1853 Mill's fears of mass democracy were at their peak (2007, 239). In the 1859 essay "Recent Writers on Reform," Mill adds several important caveats about universal suffrage. Responding to Austin's warning that universal suffrage would lead to extreme class legislation, as the working classes were "imbued" with socialist principles, Mill clarifies that "those who look the most hopefully to universal suffrage, seldom propose to introduce it otherwise than gradually and tentatively, with the power of stopping short wherever a tendency begins to manifest itself toward making legislation subservient to the misunderstood class interests of labourers and artisans"

(Mill 1977a, 350). While no rational person, adds Mill, "would entrust the preponderant power in the State to persons aiming at the objects which Mr. Austin describes, there is no reason why even these should not be represented as one class among others" (Mill 1977a, 350).

Mill makes a similar point in the 1859 essay "Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform," where he writes that "[i]f there ever was a political principle at once liberal and conservative, it is that of an educational qualification" (Mill 1977a, 327). This is because

None are so illiberal none so bigoted in their hostility to improvement, none so superstitiously attached to the stupidest and worst of old forms and usages, as the uneducated. None are so unscrupulous, none so eager to clutch at whatever they have not and others have, as the uneducated in possession of power. An uneducated mind is almost incapable of clearly conceiving the rights of others. (Mill 1977a, 327)

Indeed, he concludes, "no lover of improvement can desire that the *predominant* power should be turned over to persons in the mental and moral condition of the English working classes" (Mill 1977a, 327).

Improvement, we must remember, is the most important criterion of good government, as Mill insists in *Considerations on Representative Government* and elsewhere (Mill 1977a, 394, 403). It is the very justification of enlightened despotism that only a civilized foreign power can improve the subject populations (Tunick 2006, 592). In a similar vein, the question how representative democracy would be structured is essential to its prospects of improving the governed population on the scale of civilization. This is why Mill was so enthusiastic about Thomas Hare's proposal for proportional representation, which would increase the chances of gifted individuals to win a seat in parliament. As Mill wrote to Hare in March 1859, "You appear to me to have exactly, and for the first time, solved the difficulty of popular representation; and by doing so, to have raised up the cloud of gloom and uncertainty which hung over the futurity of representative government and *therefore of civilization*" (Mill 1972a, 598–9, emphasis mine).

Much of Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* is dedicated to such mechanisms that would limit the power of the working classes and ensure expertise and intelligence in government. Denying illiterate persons and those who relied on charity the right to vote; plural voting, which would give the more educated more votes (Mill 1977a, 470–9); and Hare's proportional representation (Mill 1977a, 448–66)—all were meant for this purpose. As Mill famously put it, "though every one ought to have a voice—that every one should have an equal voice is a totally different proposition" (Mill 1977a, 473). This is because "[i]t is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge" (478); and, more generally, because of the problem of "general ignorance and incapacity... in the controlling body..." (436), as well as



the need to secure “an adequate amount of intelligence and knowledge in the representative assembly” (441).

Mill also insisted that only a few could be charged with the powers to do the actual work of national governance. A network of professional civil servants based on experience, knowledge, and expertise would propose and implement legislation and policies, whereas the function of the elected representatives would be to deliberate and, with respect to legislation but not to administration, to decide on them, as well as to represent the various opinions and interests of the groups within society (Mill 1977a, 422–34). Fortunately, Mill had a model to draw on. The East India Company proved to be successful in providing India with a government based on knowledge and expertise while allowing the opinions and interests of the population it governed to be increasingly represented. Indeed, some of Mill’s proposals, such as a Council of Legislation or the need for professional civil servants to propose and implement policies, can be traced directly to the institutions of the East India Company (Mill 1977a, 522–3; Stokes 1959, 177). As Finlay points out, the fact that Mill recommends the same institutional remedies for the problems of power posed by both colonial and representative government, “suggests that we should be careful about making sweeping contrasts between his attitudes towards colonial subjects and his attitudes towards the subjects of the colonizing power” (Finlay 2002, 215; see also Bell 2010). But of course, the fundamental differences between the societies at stake did not allow any simple engrafting of the East India Company’s institutions onto England itself. The government of India served for Mill as a source of inspiration, rather than of imitation, in his proposals for representative government at home.

Conscious that despite all the mechanisms he proposed the masses might still be tempted to abuse their power, Mill points in *Considerations* to the importance of educating the working classes about the right, rational idea of democracy to ensure they would act in accordance with it:

In that falsely called democracy which is really the exclusive rule of the operative classes ... the only escape from class legislation in its narrowest, and political ignorance in its most dangerous, form, would lie in such disposition as the uneducated might have to choose educated representatives, and to defer to their opinions. Some willingness to do this might reasonably be expected, and everything would depend upon cultivating it to the highest point. (Mill 1977a, 512)

The discussion above points to the importance of these comments. Mill not only sought to cultivate this inclination to elect one’s betters among the masses; he had important reasons to believe that this was indeed the natural tendency of representative government based on elections. In this sense, Mill’s institutional proposals were intended to be *additional guarantees* that the power of the working classes in government would be limited. Finally, it was also crucially important to

educate the lower classes about the “right,” rational meaning of this form of government, or else they would adhere to a false notion of democracy according to which delegates of their own had to implement policies preferred by their constituencies. As Mill put it also in *On Liberty*: “No government by a democracy or a numerous aristocracy ... ever did or could rise above mediocrity, except in so far as the sovereign Many have let themselves be guided (which in their best times they always have done) by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few” (Mill 1977b, 269).

## AT HOME AND ABROAD

The “false” idea of democracy was not merely a theoretical one: it was prominent enough among the working classes to worry Mill. It should be recalled that one of the demands of the Chartist movement was an annual parliament—namely, the ability to replace representatives after a short period and therefore to make sure that they act as delegates of those who elected them and represent their positions rather than act independently of them (Epstein and Thompson 1982, 8).

Moreover, already during the Reform Bill crisis of 1832, as E. P. Thompson suggested in his classic study on the making of the English working class, the mass agitation could have resulted in a revolution that might well “have prefigured, in its rapid radicalization, the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune” (1965, 817). Increasingly, workers were interpreting Robert Owen in their own terms, turning his proposed “Villages of Co-operation” into self-governing workers’ associations (Cole and Postgate 1966, 242). Their objective appears to have been a “form of Syndicalist Government founded on a pyramid system of representation from local lodge to district, and so on to the Trades Parliament” (Gregg 1972, 173–4; see also Thompson 1965, 829–30). We are dealing here with what Hannah Arendt called “the hidden treasure of modern revolutions”—namely, the vision of a radically participatory democracy, usually based on a pyramid of workers’ or citizen councils (Arendt [1963] 2006; Lederman 2019)—only without an actual revolution happening other than in the consciousness of many of the English workers. The conviction that representatives should serve as delegates was crucial in this vision.

Mill’s views on domestic reforms in England are commonly examined in comparison with the views of conservatives as well as other middle-class reformers, and much less attention has been paid to the way he seems to argue against democratic alternatives prominent among the working classes. The result is that certain positions he held are discussed for the most part in theoretical terms and their actual context and importance are overlooked. His argument against the notion of delegation is an important example of this problem. Obviously, he was familiar with the Chartists’ demands and the broader prominent views about the meaning of representation among workers, and he evidently had these views in mind when he argued

against the “false” and “irrational” idea of democracy. Moreover, as he prided himself on his interactions with the workers and his familiarity with their situation and opinions, one can plausibly assume he was aware also of the more radical views some of them held about the form democratic government should take, and of their possible implications. A letter Mill wrote during the Reform Crisis to Brougham about a speech by the Birmingham socialist Attwood is important in this context:

The nonsense to which your lordship alludes about the rights of the labourer to the whole produce of the country, wages, profits, and rent, all included, is the mad nonsense of our friend Hogkins ... These opinions, if they were to spread, would be the subversion of civilized society; worse than the overwhelming deluge of Huns and Tartars.” (quoted in Packe 1954, 101)

The connection Mill draws here between the rising power of the workers, the threat of the ideas spreading among them, and the possible implications for civilization itself, as well as his use of archetypes of barbarity and savagery that might wash civilization away to alert his readers to this threat, are significant.

We find Mill doing something similar in his call for a reorganization of the reform party in England, in an essay from 1839 bearing this title, where he insists that universal suffrage should be dropped as a demand of a newly organized reform party. The extension of the franchise to the entire middle class, possibly with a few representatives of the working classes, is all one can expect at this point, first because only this is politically possible but also because it is politically wise. “One great experiment in government,” Mill writes, “is as much as a nation can safely make at a time”; and besides, the middle class cannot be expected to let themselves be “induced to swamp themselves, and hand over to unskilled manual labour the entire powers of the government” (Mill 1982, 482). Instead, the middle class should rule *as if* there is a universal suffrage, that is, they should address the legitimate grievances of the working classes, and the motto of the radical politician should be “Government *by means of* the middle for the working classes ... to govern the country as it would be necessary to govern it, if there were Universal Suffrage and the people were well educated and intelligent” (Mill 1982, 483).

Mill praises, at this point, the more intelligent, enlightened, and moderate parts of the working classes and calls on the middle class to listen to them instead of being afraid of every working-class demand and activism. These working-class leaders, he argues, are the partners of the middle class rather than their enemies. To convince his readers, Mill puts forward a suggestive argument:

[A]re the great and intelligent portion of the Operative classes of whom the London Working Men’s Association is representative, are even they themselves free from apprehension of the mass of brutish ignorance which is behind them? of the barbarians whom Universal Suffrage would let in? Do they never think of the state of the

agricultural labourers? of the depraved habits of a large proportion of the well-paid artisans? Can they wonder that the middle classes ... should tremble at the idea of entrusting political power to such hands? Cannot the intelligent working classes be persuaded, that even for themselves it is better that Universal Suffrage should come gradually? that it should be approached by steps bearing some relation to the progressive extension of intelligence and morality, from the higher to the lower regions of their own manifold domain? (Mill 1982, 488)

This rarely cited passage is one of the few occasions on which Mill speaks explicitly about the working classes—or rather, a certain portion of the workers—as domestic barbarians. More often, as we have seen, he speaks in terms of the civilized versus the less civilized—which is important enough, as I have suggested, seeing that his use of such terminology is usually perceived as being reserved for the distinction between the metropole and the colony. On many other occasions, Mill employs patterns of behavior and levels of education and intelligence—drunkenness, crime, immorality, ignorance, and so on—to bring about the same psychological effects among his readers, treating the full and equal enfranchisement of the workers, at least in the short run, as a major threat to civilization itself. It is indeed important that, as Pitts points out, Mill characterized the English working classes “in many of the same terms he used elsewhere to describe the ‘semi-barbarous’ people of India: they were enslaved to custom and superstition, incapable of sustained effort, and hostile to progress and innovation” (2005, 253). But taking this similarity seriously problematizes Pitts’s own view that for Mill “there was a sharp dichotomy between civilized and uncivilized nations” (2005, 105).

It is useful to note, in this context, that the distinction “between the most ignorant Englishmen and the best-educated subject of Akbar,” in Ryan’s words, is more complex than Ryan and other commentators commonly make it to be. At least if service in ranks that require knowledge and prudence is any indication—and for Mill it certainly was—there were quite a few Indians he thought were fairly “civilized.” He believed that more Indians could serve as counsels to the government of India and that an even better way to receive the opinions of Indians on government measures would be to cultivate “a greater degree of intercourse between intelligent natives and the members of the Government, or the holders of public offices” (Mill 1990, 51). Indeed, Mill argued that such intelligent Indians were “very largely eligible to judicial offices,” as well as to clerkships positions (Mill 1990, 62). More broadly, Mill thought, referring to the covenanted civil service, that it was “of the greatest importance to admit the natives to all situations for which they are fit; and as they are constantly becoming fit for higher situations, I think that they should be admitted to them” (63). Positions outside the covenanted civil service should be open to educated Indians as well: “If a native, being qualified in point of integrity, and having, as many of them have, a previous knowledge of that which a European has to learn, is fit for one of the higher



appointments, let him have it without going through the covenanted service" (64).

Certainly, even those educated Indians need to become "very much improved in character," and European supervision remains a condition for any position (Mill 1990, 64). But there is a constant tendency, as Mill reports approvingly, to allow them to serve in positions of authority and responsibility, particularly in Bengal and Agra (64). Mill thought it perfectly possible to open a "very large share of the civil government" to native Indians (65). In the future, in proportion to how trustworthy and qualified they became, Indians could be appointed to many of the higher offices, and even serve as members of the council consulting the Governor-General (65), which in Mill's view was of the highest importance to the administration of India, being the body where expert knowledge about India that the governor could rely on was concentrated. Similarly, in the 1858 "Memorandum of the Improvements in the Administration of India during the Last Thirty Years," Mill emphasized the creation of native courts of justice and the gradual extension of their powers as "the greatest practical improvement made in the administration of justice in our older provinces during the last and present generation" (112).

There were, then, gradations of intelligence, education, and civilization among the Indians. And although the Indian elite Mill mentions in these statements were in his mind a tiny minority in an ocean of Indian backwardness, ignorance, and passivity, which did not allow for any kind of representative government, it is unlikely that Mill would have approved the appointment of many of the English workers to the positions that he was willing to assign to intelligent and skilled Indians. In other words, Mill seems to have regarded certain Indians as *more* "civilized" than many of the laborers in England.

It could be argued that, unlike in the case of Indians, Mill advocated the participation of as many English citizens as possible, including the lower classes, in local government—a point that indicates that what he was willing to grant to even the "most ignorant" English worker was far above what he envisaged for even the "most intelligent" Indian. Indeed, following Tocqueville, Mill praises the American townships as schools of political training and wisdom, where American citizens were trained in local self-government. Mill insists that only by the habit of superintending their local interests, "can that diffusion of intelligence and mental activity, as applied to their joint concerns, take place among the mass of a people" (Mill 1977b, 60). "[I]t is only by practicing popular government on a limited scale," he goes on to say, "that the people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger" (63).

It should be noted, however, that Mill treats here participation in local government as an *alternative* to full and equal participation in national government, as far as the foreseeable future is concerned. Indeed, scholars such as Thompson and Pateman noted long ago that given Mill's high regard for the educational benefits of civic participation, the actual opportunities

for participation he prescribes are disappointing (Pateman 1970, 31; Thompson 1976, 178). Duncan put it more bluntly: "Mill's democracy permits citizens to participate and agitate on the fringes of power, while major political decisions are taken by an unrestrained elite" (1973, 264).

Something similar can be said about the way Mill treats the prospects of socialism in England. In the "Chapters on Socialism," written in 1879 and published posthumously, Mill commented that while experiments in socialism were beneficial, any attempt to realize socialism on the national level would be disastrous. Apart from the injustice it would constitute to the current property owners, the population was not prepared for it (Mill 1996, 748), and such an attempt would inevitably lead to a Hobbesian state of nature. Mill proceeds to quote Hobbes's famous description of this state, where there is no industry, no navigation, no building, no knowledge, and so on, due to the insecurity each person feels. Mill's conclusion is instructive: "If the poorest and most wretched members of a so-called civilized society are in as bad a condition as every one would be in that worst form of barbarism produced by the dissolution of civilized life, it does not follow that the way to raise them would be to reduce all the others to the same miserable state" (Mill 1996, 749).

Clearly, even at this late stage of his life, Mill viewed many of the lower classes in England as being in a state of complete barbarism. Indeed, in 1868 he wrote in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton: "The intelligent, who are the politically active part of the working classes, are not impatient; they have a sincere dread of the mass of brutal ignorance behind them, and have consequently set themselves to demand very vigorously a real national education" (Mill 1972b, 1442). We can thus better understand the danger of the "false" meaning of democracy for Mill: if representatives act as delegates in a situation where the workers are fully enfranchised but have not been properly educated and institutionally checked, the danger is no less than the destruction of civilization in England. We also see here relations between the periphery and the center that parallel Mill's treatment of civic participation: while experiments on a limited, local level are to be welcomed, the national sphere must be protected from such encroachment of working-class presence and ideas due to their current mental and moral state.

Here too, we find more parallels with the colonies than scholars commonly recognize. Mill actually praised Indian village communities as important participatory institutions; indeed, Zastoupil has suggested that these village communities and the success of Indians' participation in the British administration of India, and not just the American experience, served him as an inspiration in his advocacy of participation in local institutions at home (1994, 188–9, 196–206). But the case of Ireland is more revealing in this context and deserves a brief consideration.

Famously, Ireland holds an ambiguous place in European colonial history, "a country situated uneasily between colony and metropole in the British mind" (Pitts 2005, 155). It captured much of Mill's attention

and together with India was a major colonial arena in which his political thought was displayed (Finlay 2009, 27). Mill himself occasionally noted that “those Englishmen who know something of India are even now those who understand Ireland best. Persons who know both countries, have remarked many points of resemblance between the Irish and the Hindoo character” (Mill 1982, 519).

Often quoted is Mill’s letter to John Pringle Nichol in 1837: “There is much to be said about Ireland. I myself have always been for a good stout Despotism—for governing Ireland like India. But it cannot be done. The spirit of Democracy has got too much head there, too prematurely” (Mill 1963a, 365). Even if we set aside Mill’s more complex views of Ireland as rendered in his later writings, this statement in itself already contains more nuances than commentators usually discern: Ireland appears here as both an uncivilized country that requires enlightened despotism *and* as a country that has already gone too far in its democratic aspirations—namely, in the yearnings of its population for self-government.

England, in Mill’s view, actually retarded the progress of Irish society toward self-government: “By persisting in this wretched system from century to century, we have lost the opportunity of preparing the Irish nation for self-government. They have not acquired that experience of lawful rule, and that reverence for law, without which no people can be any thing but, according to their physical temperament, savages or slaves” (Mill 1982, 217). At the same time, Ireland’s proximity to England and the constant communication between the two countries had led the democratic spirit prevalent in England to spread into Ireland, “a premature growth, before the country had reached the point of advancement at which that spirit grows up spontaneously” (Mill 1982, 217). As a result of this dual process of English misgovernment and the dissemination of democratic aspirations, Ireland had come to be “in that unhappy state ... unfit for freedom, yet resolved to be no longer enslaved” (217).

The transition from a country governed despotically to a country governed democratically, then, can occur quite quickly; Mill preferred a long process of civilizational improvement, but he accepted that certain developments might bring this transition much earlier and with fewer guarantees of good government. We may also recall that Mill warned that the working classes in England were not prepared for democracy while at the same time acknowledging that the march of democracy had become inevitable.

Nonetheless, despite Mill’s view of the uncivilized nature of Irish society, which made it unprepared for national self-government, he fully supported local self-government for the Irish. As he already wrote in 1836, “We go the full length with those who assert the claim of the Irish to popular local institutions, as the most efficient of all instruments for training the people in the proper use of representative government” (Mill 1982, 324). Mill insisted that such local self-government must be granted “to the whole kingdom, and not merely to the inhabitants of a few

towns,” and urged the ministers responsible for governing Ireland to advance “a general measure for the creation of provincial representative assemblies throughout Ireland” (324). We see again that Mill often conceived of local participatory institutions as being complementary to the *denial* of national self-government. They are meant as an educative, “civilizing” measure to prepare a population for the task it is not yet fit for, namely, governing itself.

Finally, the proximity between England and Ireland and the dissemination of the spirit of democracy in both also meant that English misrule of Ireland was not only morally and politically wrong but also unsustainable in the long run. In an essay from 1868 titled “England and Ireland,” Mill described a mass meeting of workers, in which the crowd was asked if England had a right to rule Ireland against the will of its people, and shouted back “No!” He then observed,

An age when delegates of working men meet in European Congresses to concert united action for the interest of labour, is not one in which labourers will cut down labourers at other people’s bidding. The time is come when the democracy of one country will join hands with the democracy of another, rather than back their own ruling authorities in putting it down. (Mill 1982, 521)

Mill regarded such a prospect rather positively, as it served his attack against the way Ireland was governed, yet these comments are another indication of his acute awareness of the possible meanings of the rise of democracy, not only for English domestic affairs but also for the British empire.

This reconstruction of Mill’s thought on representative government and the colonies demonstrates that although he does make broad distinctions between civilized England (and other European countries) and uncivilized India (and other European colonies), the implications for individuals and groups within each society are not at all obvious. There are more and less civilized groups within each society, in a way that defies any easy dichotomy between Mill’s reflections on the metropole and the colonies and, consequently, between the forms of government appropriate to each society.

This does not mean that Mill thought the English working classes to be *the same* as the Indians, or colonial subjects more broadly, as much more was involved in what he called the “national character” of peoples than the degree of civilization of groups within them. Yet, he did see them as significantly lower on the civilizational scale than the higher classes in England and therefore less fit for equal representation and influence. The analogies between Mill’s depiction of the working classes and of the colonial subjects suggest, in other words, not so much that he treated these different populations as identical but rather that the discourse of civilization served in his political thought as a “governmental rationality,” to use Foucault’s term, which can be employed in different contexts in a process of mutual borrowing to legitimize different but related forms of exclusion.

In this sense, Mill relied on the colony with its legitimating discourse of enlightened despotism over uncivilized populations to serve his arguments for the exclusion of large portions of the domestic masses from governmental power. The very distinction he draws between the civilized and uncivilized and the different forms of government suited to them—a distinction well familiar and acceptable to his audience as a result of the colonial experience—allowed him to use the same categories, explicitly and implicitly, to distinguish between the hardly civilized and the highly civilized in England itself and therefore their different entitlement to equal participation in government.

This argument also points to the need for a nuanced reading of Mill's positions on race. It is true that "racial difference, figured as civilizational capacity, structured Mill's analytical field" (Bell 2010, 17; see also Goldberg 2005, 134; Schultz 2007, 120; Young 1990, 124). But what is significant in Mill's case is precisely that he made distinctions between the civilized and the uncivilized without grounding them in "natural" racial traits, and consistently resisted this kind of biological determinism (Jones 2005, 180; Mehta 2012, 234–5; Varouxakis 2005, 139). This allowed him not only to preserve the promise that at some point in the future colonial subjects would be granted self-government—as nothing permanent but only their current civilizational level required despotism—but also to justify the exclusion of the English working classes from equal power in national politics by the same basic logic. In other words, Mill's resistance to biological racism is precisely what allowed him to "borrow" the racialized, civilizational language of the colonial enterprise in his discussions of the English working classes.

In this sense, the more positive views that Mill often expressed toward the working classes—as capable of education and improvement to the point where eventually universal suffrage would be possible—should be seen as located on the same continuum and as serving the same purpose: it is the *relation* between the future potential and what is currently possible that makes Mill's arguments convincing, especially to the "liberal" mind, with regard to colonial subjects (Mehta 1999, 30) as well as to the domestic masses.

## CONCLUSION

Mill drew on forms of domination proper to uncivilized societies, as well as on the stagnation and degeneration that characterized these societies in the British imaginary, to warn against the rise of the masses to power. In this way, Mill teaches us something important about the paradox to which Manin (1997) has pointed: the transition in the understanding of representative government from an elitist, antidemocratic form of government to the only democratic form of government possible involved an ideological reinvention of the meaning of democracy. Democracy was reconceptualized to mean a form of government in which "the few" rule under the supposed control and sovereignty of "the many." Mill exemplifies

this reimagination of the meaning of democracy and was a distinguished promoter of its legitimization.

In this process, an already existing discourse proved enormously helpful. There was an easy transition between the justificatory discourse of colonialism and that of representative democracy: the need for an educated and intelligent elite to manage the intricate business of government; the anxiety about the prospects of unchecked power in the hands of the masses; and the deep fear of the implications of such possibility for fundamental liberal values, the rule of law, the economy, the international order, in short, for civilization itself.

Enlightened despotism and representative democracy remain very different forms of government. Yet Mill's political thought shows that European colonialism abroad and the specific form that representative democracy has taken at home should be seen not as diametrically antithetical forms of government but rather as related modern projects of taming the masses, based on a similar logic and a common enabling discourse.

Finally, to think about modern democratic thought and practice as having been inspired to a significant degree by the colonial experience means, first, to rethink the extent to which the colonial legacy is part of our collective "self." As noted in the beginning of this article, much effort has been made in this direction in recent decades. Nevertheless, as modern, representative democracy is widely perceived to be not only a core Western institution but almost an unmitigated good, the argument offered here suggests even deeper, and still unacknowledged dimensions of the extent to which we are all, in a sense, children of European colonialism.

Second, recognizing these connections might also help us to think more critically of representative democracy as we have come to know it. Although colonial despotism is largely over in our contemporary world, we may follow Manin (1997) in asking—as representative democracy has not "evolved in any obvious way" in terms of its inherent elitist, antidemocratic tendencies—whether its rationalization in popular as well as academic discourse still serves to obscure what is ultimately a semicolonial logic of excluding the supposedly less civilized masses from meaningful participation in government.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.



## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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