American Political Science Review (2023) 117, 1, 249–262
doi:10.1017/S0003055422000363

Liberal Plebeianism: John Stuart Mill on Democracy, Oligarchy, and Working-Class Mobilization

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How should democratic societies address inequality in an age of plutocratic encroachment and populist indignation? What role should popular movements play in progressive reform efforts? This article turns to the nineteenth-century liberalism of John Stuart Mill for insights on an essential challenge facing democracy today: how to mobilize social movements against intensifying oligarchic threats while safeguarding liberal-democratic values. I advance a novel reading of Mill as a proponent of "liberal plebeianism"—that is, as an activist-theorist who confronted the threat of oligarchy by promoting working-class mobilization within a liberal, parliamentary framework. I trace two discourses within Mill's writings and speeches: an antioligarchic discourse focused on countering "sinister interests" and a mobilization discourse focused on working-class incorporation. Both follow from Mill's conviction that liberal reformers should operate as "tribunes of the poor." This reading helps to clarify Mill's contested legacy and provides potential resources for understanding how a plebeian orientation might enliven liberal democracy today.

INTRODUCTION

How can contemporary democracies mobilize citizens to confront the challenges posed by plutocracy while avoiding the excesses of populism? Does the liberal tradition offer resources for addressing our moment of "democratic deconsolidation" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), when oligarchic power is becoming more entrenched (Winters 2011) and illiberal authoritarian alternatives more salient (Applebaum 2020)? This article turns to the nineteenth-century liberalism of John Stuart Mill to help address these questions. I advance a novel reading of Mill as a proponent of "liberal plebeianism": I present Mill as a theorist-activist who confronted the threat of oligarchy by vigorously advocating for working-class mobilization within a liberal parliamentary framework. I argue for liberal plebeianism as a normative-political posture that can enhance democratic aspirations in our age of plutocracy and populism.

Throughout his life, Mill deployed two political discourses that, together, constituted his liberal plebeianism: an *antioligarchic* discourse denouncing the "sinister interests" of socioeconomic elites and a *popular mobilization* discourse directed at incorporating the British working classes into a liberal reform coalition. Mill inherited the antioligarchic discourse from the radical Benthamite circles of his youth, and he developed the discourse of popular mobilization through his lifelong political activism. But it is the *intersection* of these discourses that proves so salient for contemporary challenges. In a neglected passage from 1837, Mill uses explicitly plebeian imagery, arguing that liberal reformers must operate as "tribunes of the poor" (Mill 1982b, 396). Mill took on the task of becoming a "tribune of the poor," a mediator who could ally with workers against oligarchs while simultaneously mediating between workers and other liberal reformers.

Liberalism, Plebeianism, and Contemporary Democracy

I offer this reading as a contribution to the "plebeian" turn in contemporary democratic theory. Recent democratic theorists have developed plebeian approaches in response to the increasingly unequal and oligarchic shape of contemporary political life (Arlen 2019; Breaugh 2013; Green 2016; Hamilton 2014; Kalyvas 2019; McCormick 2011; Mulvad and Stahl 2019; Vergara 2020). Insofar as wealth concentration persists in environments where capital returns exceed rates of economic growth, Thomas Piketty (2014) argues, the political power of those with great wealth will increase. Numerous empirical political scientists have confirmed that this is happening (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Winters 2011; Winters and Page 2009). In this context, many plebeian democrats criticize mainstream liberalism for insufficiently attending to the deleterious effects of substantive inequalities—what Jeffrey Green (2016) calls "the shadow of unfairness." They worry that liberal norms of formal equality cannot protect citizens from oligarchic domination and systemic corruption.

Plebeian democrats respond to substantive inequality with new institutional proposals and novel theoretical approaches. Their proposals include plebeian constituent assemblies (Vergara 2020) and class-specific minipublics composed exclusively of nonwealthy citizens (McCormick 2011). And they make several important theoretical contributions to respond to contemporary inequality: they embrace plebeian identity as an intersubjective status, constructed around

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Received: May 18, 2020; revised: July 29, 2021; accepted: March 18, 2022. First published online: July 11, 2022.

common citizens' shared experience of vulnerability to "oligarchic harm" (Arlen 2019); they draw inspiration from premodern institutions, like the Athenian jury system (Ober 1989) and the Roman tribunes of the plebs; and they deepen the concerns of neorepublican theorists (Pettit 2012) and critical realists (Bagg 2018; Rahman 2016) about responding to concentrated elite power by restoring more meaningful democratic agency (Landemore 2020; Thomas 2016).

But the relationship between modern plebeian perspectives and prevailing liberal perspectives remains undeveloped. While some plebeian theorists take their position to be at odds with liberalism, this article shows that Mill brought liberalism together with a core plebeian insight: democratic politics fundamentally concerns the mobilization of social movements against oligarchic threats. Contemporary plebeian theorists have drawn inspiration from classical republicans like Machiavelli (McCormick 2011; Winter 2012) and socialists like Rosa Luxemburg (Vergara 2020). But they have claimed the liberal tradition too rarely, if at all. This neglect deprives plebeians of important historical allies while making mainstream liberals suspicious of the idea that plebeian proposals can strengthen liberal commitments. Mill is an effective liaison between these different camps. He is a canonical liberal, but he drew widely on a large range of intellectual influences, among them utilitarianism, German romanticism, and Greek virtue ethics. Mill reminds contemporary liberals that plebeian commitments to confronting oligarchy through popular mobilization can also be central to their project, and he offers a concrete roadmap for political engagement around these very issues.

Critics argue that Mill's disciplinary tendencies (Arneil 2012; Zerilli 1994), overarching concern with stability and control (Hamburger 2001), and complicity in imperial politics (Lederman 2021; Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005) render him, at best, an antiquated "aristocratic liberal" (Kahan 1992). But recent scholarship has challenged conventional understandings of Mill's liberalism and expanded our understanding of his primary concerns, moving beyond *On Liberty* to a fuller appreciation of Mill's vast intellectual corpus.[1] Scholars have rediscovered Mill's contributions to debates about democratic representation (Thompson 1976; Urbinati 2002), power relations (Baum 2000), gender norms and political economy (Hirschmann 2008), multiculturalism (Marwah 2019), international relations (Varouxakis 2013), economic citizenship (Englert 2016), institutional corruption (Selinger 2019b), and democratic socialism (Baum 2007; McCabe 2021). This paper builds on these sympathetic accounts while moving beyond them by emphasizing Mill's concrete interactions with working-class movements. It was Mill's tactical innovation as an activist, pamphleteer, theoretician, and parliamentarian, I argue, that proved central to sustaining the cross-cutting energies that infused the liberal reform movement of his period.

Ultimately, I suggest that Mill's liberal plebeianism offers a robust alternative to, and corrective of, prevailing liberal approaches; it thus deserves a prominent place in contemporary democratic theory and normative political thought. Critics complain that mainstream Rawlsian liberalism lacks a sociological sensibility—that it fixates excessively on abstract rights claims and norms of procedural fairness to the neglect of concrete struggles by actual, institutionally embodied political movements (Klein 2022). These criticisms take hold amid wider debates about the role of ideal vs. nonideal (Mills 2005) and realist vs. moralist (Rossi and Sleat 2014) approaches in political theory. In this context, liberal plebeians can widen political horizons through an amplified focus on class-based coalition building, social-movement mobilization, and antioligarchic institutional reforms. Liberal plebeianism infuses liberalism with a more radical ethos and a more realistic appreciation of the workings of power (Hayward 2000), without abandoning the core procedural commitments that provide safeguards against illiberal populist forces (Cohen 2019; Urbinati 2019).

Certainly, Mill's efforts to mobilize the working class for reform were not wholly successful. But what Mill's career does offer is an opportunity to see how movement coordination played out during an extended period, through the mind of a canonical political theorist, and within a nineteenth-century political context that bears significant similarities to our own. By tracing the evolution of Mill's liberal-plebeian discourse over time, I seek to deepen appreciation of how democratic movements can respond to oligarchic threats today.

THE EARLY YEARS: SINISTER INTEREST AND THE CRITIQUE OF OLIGARCHY

"It was said without exaggeration before the Reform Bill, it may be repeated with very little exaggeration even yet, that the English Government is an oligarchy of landholders" (Mill 1982a, 470). So Mill proclaimed in 1839. Mill's antioligarchic discourse, I argue, provided a normative foundation for his subsequent mobilization discourse, his attempt to find common ground between liberal reformers and an increasingly emboldened working class. In this section, I explore the early foundations of both discourses as they emerged in the critique of sinister interest that animated Mill's youth.

In a seminal comparative historical study, Jeffrey Winters suggests that modern oligarchs have acclimated to democratic norms, including universal suffrage, often retreating from formal rule while finding new ways to pursue their objectives within the confines of democratic constitutions (Winters 2011) through various forms of state capture (Bagg 2018; Lindsey and Teles 2017).

However, Mill's antioligarchic discourse arose in a period when oligarchic elites might still have reclaimed *formal* power. Guiding this discourse was the concept of *sinister interest*, which Mill inherited from Jeremy

[1] On the tendency of some contemporary liberals to advance an overly simplistic reading of Mill, see Philips (2019).

Bentham, James Mill, and other radicals (Schofield 2006). Sinister interests are a subset of *particular interests*, those "detrimental to the greatest happiness, of the greatest number" by which "a man is prompted to sacrifice to it that all-comprehensive interest" (Bentham 1989, 151).

What most concerned Bentham were instances where socioeconomic privileges were deployed to amplify the private benefits of pursuing selfish behavior. He famously associated this pathology with a judicial system in which the sinister interests of aristocratic elites were served by lawyers and judges who retained their own sinister interests. We might deploy the phrase *sinister interest*, then, in reference to repeated, institutionally mediated behavior on the part of elites from various stations who are incentivized to act in self-regarding ways that are injurious to the collective good. This behavior can feed off past activities in a constant cycle where the fulfillment of one sinister interest provides new opportunities for the fulfillment of others.

Mill clearly internalized this insight. He lauded Bentham for exposing sinister interest "through all its disguises" (Mill 1985a, 109), agreeing that "of the evils incident to monarchical and aristocratic governments, a large proportion arise from this cause" (Mill 1977c, 441). Mill saw sinister interests on full display among wealthy factions who conspired with the ruling ministry to defeat taxes on the affluent, thwart trade unions, moralistically regulate workers' access to beer houses, and preserve the privileges of church elites (Mill 1982d, 162 and 205–14).

Meanwhile, landowners commanded archaic rural magistracies (Mill 1982a, 471). And commons were enclosed with no regard for the aesthetic life of the poor, even as public expenditures went toward extravagant Correggio paintings favored by wealthy connoisseurs (Mill 1982d, 249). Oxford and Cambridge were bastions of aristocratic youth who feasted on constant nepotism (250, 259). The military had become so nepotistic that it functioned as an "engine for extracting large annual sums from the people under false pretenses, to give to the sons of the rich" (Mill 1982c, 316). Common soldiers endured the brutish treatment "inherent in an army or a navy exclusively officered by gentlemen" (Mill 1982d, 268–70). When the wealthy misbehaved, police imposed trivial fines, while the poor were imprisoned "on some trifling accusation" (Mill 1982a, 483). In a commentary titled "The Rich and the Poor," Mill invoked the case of a magistrate from Devon, convicted of the most "brutal assaults" against his maidservant, but given only a minor penalty: as Mill put it, "who ever heard of a magistrate dismissed for oppressing the poor" (Mill 1982d, 267).

Confronting a "selfish oligarchy" (Mill 1982a, 479), Mill and his political circle, the self-styled Philosophical Radicals, saw their struggles against British landowners as mirroring ancient Greek struggles between democratic and oligarchic factions. Mill drew inspiration from reform-minded classicist George Grote, who defended Athens against the pro-Spartan biases of Tory classicists (Mill 1978a; 1978b). Although slavery inhibited Athens from realizing democracy in its "purest and most honourable" form (Mill 1978b, 324), Mill celebrated Athens as a regime that, unlike the "aristocratic Roman republic," granted poorer citizens equal access to office (324). Ordinary Athenians were exemplary in their respect for legal forms, Mill thought, whereas Greek oligarchs constantly violated those norms and acted viciously (326–8).

Commenting on French affairs during the tumultuous July Revolution, Mill worried the French would exchange a "feeble despotism for a strong and durable oligarchy" (Mill 1986a, 130; see also Mill 1986b). When excluded from power, the moneyed interests held common cause with the people. Now, "being a narrow Oligarchy," they indulged the same selfish pursuits of any oligarchy wherein "32 millions are governed by the 88 thousand richest" (132–3). In commentaries like *Civilization* (Mill 1977a) and *The Spirit of the Age* (Mill 1986c), Mill lamented the tendency of the wealthy to live complacently and to peddle an "idolatry of certain abstractions, called church, constitution, agriculture" (Mill 1986c, 315). Among Mill's chief targets was the protectionist "Corn Law interest," that "master-evil" (Mill 1982a, 470–6 at 476).

Mill, like Bentham, understood that sinister interests have a *cascading* quality: they proliferate throughout the social order, as one sinister interest produces incentives that support the pursuit of another sinister interest. The evidence surveyed above suggests that Mill understood the basic contours of this cascading process. But in what follows, I argue that the key to understanding Mill's contribution as a liberal plebeian lies in his mobilization discourse, which intersected with his critique of oligarchy and allowed him to move beyond Bentham. I now explore the early foundations of this mobilization discourse.

MOBILIZING THE WORKING CLASS

Nadia Urbinati's groundbreaking book *Mill on Democracy* boldly highlights Mill's neo-Athenian contributions to the "making of the modern democratic vision" (Urbinati 2002, 5). Whereas French liberals, haunted by republican excesses, contrasted "ancient" and "modern" liberty, Mill affirmed an agonistic agora politics instantiated through mechanisms, such as newspapers, that facilitated a robust public sphere. Here Mill saw the Socratic ethos thriving, despite modern threats of bureaucratic stagnation and collective mediocrity (Urbinati 2002).

Urbinati is certainly correct that the ancients are critical to understanding Mill's worldview. Yet along with positive lessons about the value of popular government, Athenian history also taught Mill more sobering lessons about oligarchic threats to democracy. Urbinati never explores this point fully, so she overlooks how Mill's antioligarchic worldview guided his real-world engagement with working-class movements. Mill's democratic theory was thus even more dynamic than Urbinati argues. It was not simply about fostering a deliberative ethos and reconciling the

agora to modernity; it was also about strategically mobilizing the population against oligarchy.

Mill's fixation on mobilization reflected disappointment with his principal movement allies, middle-class radicals who had failed to properly grasp the epochal significance of working-class ascendancy. In "Reorganization of the Reform Party" (1839) and other strategic essays published in outlets like the *London and Westminster Review*, Mill speculated on the liberal reform movement's future (Mill 1982a, 467–95). In "Parties and the Ministry" (1837), one of these crucial but neglected essays, Mill employed the plebeian language of "tribunes of the poor." I argue that Mill's strategy for working-class mobilization was predicated on this plebeian imagery of the liberal reformer as tribune: an ally of workers and an intermediary, one capable of liaising with sympathetic elites and fusing together a cross-class coalition.

Mill was certainly aware of the crucial role that tribunes of the plebs played in Ancient Rome. From an early age, when he was exposed to authors like Livy, Mill was "engrossed" by the "struggles between the patricians and plebeians" (Mill 1981, 17). Engagement with Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte encouraged Mill to think of society as an interrelated whole in which class divisions and relations form a crucial part (Mill 1974, 912). Mill's class analysis was thus guided by a stark contrast between two orders, which he called the "Privileged" and "Disqualified" classes. The former included large landowners and the richest commercial men. It also included privileged members of the army, clergy, and West India trading community (Mill 1982a, 470–5). The disqualified, by contrast, encompassed the middle classes enfranchised in the 1832 Reform Act, small manufacturing interests outside of the protected trades, dissenters of various sorts, educated men lacking commensurate social prestige, and the vast working-class assemblage (475–8). By 1839, Mill was envisioning a broad "phalanx" spanning from more cautious "Whig Radicals" to "Ultra-Radicals and the working classes" (467). He instructed each side to ensure that their "separate interests, however legitimate," did not undermine cooperation (478).

But throughout the 1830s, Mill's aspirations for coalition building failed to materialize, and he blamed reform leaders in Parliament. Workers were mobilizing around Chartism, with its ominous slogan "peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must."[2] In his 1837 essay, Mill implored the Radicals to hear out workers' grievances: "No other political duty is so important" (Mill 1982b, 396). Yet the Radicals were failing to seize their mantle as champions of the poor:

> Hence it is that the poor do not love them, do not rally round them. They *must* be tribunes of the poor, and to some purpose too, if they mean to be anything. Those who will not flatter the people must make it doubly obvious that they are willing to serve them. (Mill 1982b, 396)

To reiterate, Mill's use of the plebeian language of "tribunes" is striking, especially given the importance afforded to Roman tribunes of the plebs in recent plebeian thought (McCormick 2011, 178–88). It came in the context of an acute political dilemma. A premature push for universal suffrage would endanger essential middle-class support (Mill 1982a, 482). Yet workers had to be treated fairly "if Universal Suffrage is ever to come without a civil war" (483). Thus the motto "Government *by means* of the middle for the working classes" (483). For "the men of thews and sinews will never give their confidence to a party recommended only by willingness to take from the aristocracy and give to the shopocracy" (482).

While self-identifying with the "middle rank" James Mill had praised, John Stuart Mill proved far more alert than his father did to the threat of a hegemonic middle—the tyranny of opinion described in *On Liberty*. He thus believed that workers could usefully check the hegemonic pretensions of the middle rank, and the middle rank, for its part, could check the workers' numerical superiority: "We wish [the workers] to be strong enough to keep the middle classes in that salutary awe, without which, no doubt, those classes would be just like any other oligarchy" (Mill 1982a, 489). Mill's delicate class analysis rested on the prospect of successful working-class incorporation.

Thus, Mill endorsed a twofold liberal reform strategy: appeasing middle-class moderates by moving gradually on universal suffrage while aggressively incorporating workers into the informal public sphere. To convince fellow reformers that working men could submit to the conventions of British politics, he argued that an educated stratum of workers was already participating in the public sphere: "The working classes themselves contain a middle as well as a lowest class," Mill stressed. While repudiating the "Operative Radicals," men confined to a "narrow district in the North" (Mill 1982a, 485), Mill praised the Working Men's Association in London, which "framed the People's Charter" and continued to advocate for it in the press, as the "best and most enlightened aspect of working-class Radicalism" (485–6).

Mill believed enlightened labor leaders harbored conventional political ambitions. For "hardly any drunken or profligate working man is a politician. Such men do not read newspapers, or interest themselves in public measures; they take part in strikes, but not in Political Unions" (Mill 1982a, 486). By 1839, despite his continued gradualism on universal suffrage, Mill believed that a portion of the "respectable" working class should be enfranchised as a counterweight to the new cohort of middle-class electors (489). He supported parliamentary bids by moderate Chartist leaders like William Lovett so that the "legislature should not have to learn the sentiments of the working-classes at second-hand" (489).

[2] For other literature on the Chartist movement and nineteenth-century class dynamics more generally, see the classic study by Thompson (1966); see also Ashcraft (1993).

Workers, Mill saw, had reached an "organization and concert," a degree of tactical awareness, "not yet reached by any other class of Reformers" (Mill 1982a, 478). Mill recognized that without suffrage, some workers would continue to perceive Britain as a "mere oligarchy" (481). Mill hoped the "intelligent working classes" could be persuaded to accept gradualism on universal suffrage (488). Mill recognized that Britain had entered a "political age" in which the "desire of political rights, or the abuse of political privileges by the possessors of them, are the foremost ideas in the minds of most reading men" (Mill 1967a, 383).

Of course, as first evidenced by his support for the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, Mill could display a critical attitude toward working-class behavior that he felt inhibited progress.[3] However, to read Mill solely as an elite disciplinarian intent on controlling working-class bodies (Zerilli 1994) is to overlook Mill's essential belief that workers deserved respect and agency. In "The Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes," a crucial section of his *Political Economy*, Mill criticized the ideology of dependence that demanded dutiful quietism from workers, suggesting that few workers would tolerate it (Mill 1965b, 758–96).[4] The failure of paternalist approaches was settled the moment workers began to access newspapers and railroads, agitate for suffrage, and so on: "The working classes have taken their interests into their own hands" (762). Mill drew an analogy between socioeconomic and gender claims: "The same reasons which make it no longer necessary that the poor should depend on the rich, make it equally unnecessary that women should depend on men" (765). The section ends with some of Mill's earliest reflections on worker cooperatives.

Mill recognized, however, that if workers remained dissatisfied, further agitation would ensue. The French insurrection of June 1848, its violent suppression, and the ascension of Louis Napoleon vividly underscored this threat (Mill 1985b). But Britain possessed parliamentary traditions and a stable, if evolving, constitution. An incomplete but workable foundation for incorporating the working class into that constitution had been laid in 1832. This unfinished business guided Mill into the mature period of his intellectual life.

THE MATURATION OF MILL'S LIBERAL PLEBEIANISM

According to one conventional narrative, an intellectual awakening drove Mill away from the orthodox Benthamism of his youth and toward the more elitist views that guided canonical works like *On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government.* As Dennis Thompson (1976) argues, for example, Mill's commitment to balancing "competence" and "participation" was not an aristocratic position but reflected Mill's deep partisanship for representative democracy: an expanded working-class suffrage would be counterbalanced by measures, such as the Hare system of proportional representation, that preserved competence and protected distinguished minorities. What emerges on this and other "class balancing" accounts is a robust, but still elitist, democratic theory, chastened of the radical impulses of Mill's earlier years.

In this section, I argue against interpretations that would view Mill's radicalism as simply youthful exuberance. Mill's mature period, I argue, was the culmination of his liberal-plebeian commitments: his critique of oligarchic sinister interest and his discourse of working-class mobilization culminated in Mill's engagement as a Member of Parliament.

Clearly, Mill was sympathetic to an epistemic account of class balancing in which every major socioeconomic group has a voice, but no group dominates political life. Both *Considerations* and *On Liberty* offer compelling arguments for viewpoint balance. But while appreciating class balancing as an epistemic ideal, Mill never abandoned his earlier position that nonideal British politics required a tactical alliance with the working class. My argument here thus reveals important continuities between Mill's earlier and later periods.

The young Mill was deeply class partisan. His complaints about oppressive magistrates, game laws, and so on emphasized the role of factionalist bias in social and political life: "Who is for the aristocracy and who for the people," he wrote, "will be the plain question" during a "short and sharp" confrontation between the "two principles that divide the world" (Mill 1982e, 300). Mill identified antiunion efforts, including policies inhibiting workers from forming cooperatives, as quintessential examples of systemic class bias (Mill 1982a, 487). A "government which abdicates its legitimate office of a mediator and peace-maker, and assumes that of an auxiliary on either side … precludes itself from being listened to as an impartial and unprejudiced friend" (Mill 1982d, 207).

Years later, in *On Liberty*, Mill reiterated that "class interests" and "feelings of class superiority" (Mill 1977b, 221) guide the moral climate in pernicious ways. Mill's critique of the despotism of custom and the dangers of majority opinion would certainly apply to a working class that could eventually become hegemonic. But *On Liberty* identifies the middle class as the greater immediate threat to impose its mores (286), and it criticizes disciplinary measures, such as restrictions on access to spirit houses, as inconsistent

[3] On Mill's Malthusianism as a disciplinary project see Zerilli (1994, 95–109). Arneil (2012) sees a fundamental symmetry between Mill's arguments for imperial rule abroad and his endorsement of a disciplinary approach to the idle poor in Britain. This posture is seen as consistent with a broader phenomenon of "domestic colonization" manifested through labor colonies and other disciplinary institutions. Lederman (2021) likewise insists that Mill viewed the working class as fundamentally "barbaric" and had deep anxieties about popular politics. These readings are provocative in capturing some of Mill's expressed concerns about working-class character and unregulated mass democracy. Nonetheless, they fail to acknowledge the full spectrum of Mill's engagement with workers, which went far beyond the discipline, control, and dehumanization of workers or the denial of their political agency.

[4] On Mill's critique of paternalist philanthropy, see Saunders-Hastings (2014).

with the governance of a free laboring class (Mill 1977b, 298–9).

Mill's preoccupation with oppressive local magistrates, unfair tax policy, antiunion efforts, and obstacles to worker cooperatives, all highlight his long-standing view that real-world governments are not neutral arbiters of "class balance," a view he pursued aggressively during his time in Parliament. During a campaign speech from 1865, Mill invoked his 1839 argument for worker cooperatives to highlight consistency on the issue (Mill 1988b, 29). Because workers are distinctly disadvantaged, they require special redress, he insisted in a parliamentary address; "they require it more than any other class" (Mill 1988d, 65) as the "chief sufferers" in need of advocacy (67).

Mill's commentary on the American Civil War provides arguably his fiercest critique of elites. Mill drew heavily on political economist J. E. Cairnes, whose work *The Slave Power* depicted a plantation society embodying, in a phrase Mill quoted from Cairnes, "the distinctive vices of an oligarchy" (Mill 1984a, 151).[5] It was this "white oligarchy of the South," Mill insisted, that was propagating slavery as the "proper condition of the working classes everywhere" (Mill 1984b, 135–6). With remarkable candor, he assailed England's elites for sympathizing with Southern slaveholders. Mill certainly recognized that slavery was horrific in ways not generalizable to other forms of oligarchic corruption. Nonetheless, he saw the English aristocracy's pro-Confederate sentiment as symptomatic of sinister interest more generally, of privilege inhibiting serious reflection on "what a dreadful thing slavery really is" (Mill 1988b, 32–3 at 32). This "fanaticism of a class for its class privileges" provoked Mill's "strongest feelings" (Mill 1981, 266). He decried the "furious pro-Southern partisanship" expressed even by some English liberals. Workers were among "the sole exceptions" to this prevailing sentiment (267), and Mill applauded their moral clarity on the issue.

These events deeply shaped Mill's outlook. With higher classes allied with Southern slaveholders, abstract ideals of class balance and viewpoint diversity were insufficient. The superior judgment of the working class on this issue deserved partisan political support, whereas the aristocracy's pro-slaveholder sentiment reinforced "how far men could be carried away by their bias": it was class bias, even when "unconscious and unintentional," that "made the rich sympathize with the rich" (Mill 1988b, 33). In a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mill drew analogies between Britain and America. In both societies, "all the fundamental problems of politics and society, so long smothered by general indolence and apathy, surge up and demand better solutions" (Mill 1972c, 1307). Practically, the episode reminded Mill why rich MPs could never fully represent the interests of workers; he increasingly saw recruitment of working-class MPs as urgent.

Importantly, the terms oligarchy and plutocracy remained prominent in Mill's later vocabulary; in 1859 he referred to oligarchy as that "monster evil" (Mill 1977d, 333).[6] Such concerns were not simply derivative of Bentham but central to Mill's own mature intellectual system. For example, Mill's analysis of oligarchic tendencies in large manufacturing interests went well beyond Bentham. In an interview, Mill wrote that the "advantages which the possession of large capital gives … are growing greater and greater" as business "conducted on a large scale" facilitated a "great monopoly in the hands of the rich" (Mill 1967c, 410; see also Mill 1965a).

Mill's critique of oligarchy increasingly led him to discuss excessive campaign spending. In "Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform" (1859), a precursor to *Considerations*, Mill analogized election spending with formal property requirements: "Morally, it is still worse … by the corrupting effect of the notion inculcated on the voter, that the person he votes for should pay a large sum of money" (Mill 1977d, 320). Later, in 1864, Mill lamented the "number of persons that are constantly becoming wealthy, whose sole ambition is to obtain what wealth alone has not yet given them, namely, position" (Mill 1988c, 10). The dangers of "what may be called plutocracy" could amplify preexisting challenges to strong democracy, Mill warned (10).

Mill continued to deploy the Benthamite language of sinister interest. In *Considerations*, for example, he discussed the "sinister interests" of power holders (Mill 1977c, 442). Still influenced by Grote, with whom he maintained a lifelong correspondence, Mill invoked a sobering lesson from antiquity: political degeneration, "the incessant and ever-flowing current of human affairs towards the worse" (388) was always possible. Moving beyond Bentham, however, Mill argued that majoritarian democratic factions could also display sinister interests if left unchecked (442). This argument lends some support to the claim that Mill became more elitist over time. But it also raises questions about how sinister interests function in nonideal circumstances: Even if the working classes are capable of indulging sinister interests, political conditions may be such that the sinister interests of the upper classes are *still* more

[5] Mill is referencing J. S. Cairnes, *The Slave Power, Its Character, Career, and Probable Designs, Being an Attempt to Explain the Real Issues Involved in the American Context* (New York: Carlton, 1862).

[6] Mill uses the term oligarchy here in reference to an earlier period in which the rich were "in complete possession of the Government (Mill 1977d, 332–3). In such environments, the secret ballot is essential. Mill suggests that by 1859, electors are no longer "mere organs for putting power into the hands of a controlling oligarchy. The electors themselves are becoming the oligarch," which renders public balloting essential as a constraint (333). These passages do lend some credence to the view that Mill was becoming more elitist and more concerned about unchecked power in the hands of the electorate. The passage is consistent with Mill's evolving view that democratic majorities can also have sinister interests if left unchecked (Mill 1977c, 442). However, importantly, Mill still expresses these concerns through the language of oligarchy, reinforcing the point that the *concept* of oligarchy was still central to his mature political vocabulary. Moreover, as the 1860s progressed, Mill increasingly worried about new forms of wealth-based oligarchy threatening democratic progress, as this article argues.

dangerous to democracy and more prone to abuse, as the Southern slaveholder example underscores. Even if class balancing was Mill's normative ideal, he was operating in a decidedly unbalanced environment that still structurally favored elites; achieving long-term reform required immediate partisan efforts on behalf of workers and against the sinister interests of elites.

THE HARE PLAN: TOWARD THE "JUST ASCENDENCY OF MAJORITIES"

This point provides the proper perspective for understanding Mill's arguments for the Hare system of proportional representation and plural voting.[7] In *Considerations*, Mill advances his most sustained defense of elite epistemic competence. But Mill's more radical impulses still surface here. Mill insisted that the Hare system would actually empower enfranchised workers in the near term because workers, although a majority of the population, currently constituted a minority of most constituencies (Mill 1988g, 185). Of course, under universal suffrage, Hare would serve as a counterweight against working-class majorities. Yet even under Hare, "a minority would not be equivalent to a majority; a third of the electors could not outvote two-thirds" (183). Hare was thus a vehicle for the "just ascendency of majorities" (Mill 1988h, 208). Mill praised working-class allies for being open minded about it (Mill 1972d, 998).

Likewise, Mill's enthusiasm for plural voting wavered when he came to realize it could be co-opted by conservatives. Plural-voting schemes were inadmissible under conditions of limited suffrage because they would simply create "an oligarchy within an oligarchy" (Mill 1977d, 325). Increasingly, however, these nuances were lost; plural voting became associated with favoring property owners, which undermined its strategic value for reformers (Mill 1972d, 998).

Mill's willingness to deny the suffrage to illiterate citizens, nontaxpayers, and those on parish relief underscores that his epistemic defense of working-class participation had limits.[8] Yet Mill was acutely aware that in representative bodies "the minority must of course be overruled" (Mill 1977c, 449). Even in a well-constituted democracy, the numerical majority would retain "absolute power, if they chose to exercise it" (467). The most necessary restraint would thus be the "good sense, moderation, and forbearance" of the majority itself (467). More broadly, Mill bristled at using the ideal of epistemic competence to justify a cloistered elite detached from everyday reality: "An intellectual aristocracy of *lumières* while the rest of the world remains in darkness fulfils none of my aspirations" (Mill 1972b, 631).

Socioeconomic groups, Mill argued, are only secure when members can advocate for their interests (Mill 1977c, 404), as otherwise these interests are neglected:

> [Does Parliament] ever for an instant look at any question with the eyes of a working man? When a subject arises in which the labourers as such have an interest, is it regarded from any point of view but that of the employers of labour? I do not say that the working men's view of these questions is in general nearer to truth than the other: but it is sometimes quite as near; and in any case it ought to be respectfully listened to. (Mill 1977c, 405)

Suffrage has its own educative effects in broadening working-class horizons, and these epistemic improvements, Mill thought, would allow laborers to better advocate for their interests in formal venues.[9]

Mill's political interventions certainly reflected his belief that popular movements benefit from guidance. Mill self-identified as an educated elite, and he saw a functional role for such elites in democracy. But he never endorsed the epistocracy defended in our day by elitists, such as Jason Brennan (2016), who direct their epistemic claims against democracy itself. Brennan insists that the "rule of the rich" can be a desirable outcome insofar as rich people have superior knowledge about politics. Mill would resist such simplistic justifications for epistocracy. His activism was firmly democratic and informed by his view that the upper classes forfeited epistemic respect when taking positions in accordance with their sinister interests, as with their support for Southern slaveholders. Conversely, working-class individuals deserved epistemic respect for their distinctive life experiences, especially on issues, like trade unionization, where their interests were most at stake.[10]

In summary, far from departing from his earlier concerns with working-class incorporation, Mill's mature theoretical works placed those issues front and center, even as he went beyond Bentham in developing a more nuanced and elitist position on the role of expertise in democracy. Yet the political landscape in Britain had changed considerably since the 1830s, with the continued decline of the old aristocracy and the rise

[7] The system of proportional representation notably proposed by the reformer Thomas Hare (1806–1891) employed a single transferable vote. Under it, each voter would rank candidates, and once a candidate had enough votes to be elected, that candidate's surplus votes would be transferred to other candidates.

[8] As Englert (2016) notes, these exclusions suggest that Mill endorsed an idea of economic membership in which some forms of economic participation are prior to political participation in providing the basis for common life. However, in practice the exclusions created a dichotomy within the lower classes between those who were participating in economic life (as workers) and those who remained idle (Englert 2016, 576). As Carlisle (1998) emphasizes, analysis of working-class "character" was indeed a central preoccupation in the Victorian period.

[9] As Selinger (2019a) argues, Mill was devoted to the theory and practice of British parliamentarism, and *Considerations* was his attempt to reconcile its normative commitments with a rising mass democracy, echoing a prevailing Victorian view that Parliament could function as the "mirror of the nation," with diverse views represented in a deliberative body (Conti 2019, 1).

[10] Alongside his belief that participation is an intrinsic good in democratic societies, Mill thus saw instrumental value in participation as a tool to ward off oligarchic threats and pursue specific reform objectives.

of a commercial class that was beginning to harbor its own political ambitions. Against this backdrop, Mill pursued his brief but memorable career as a "moralist in and out of Parliament" (Kinzer, Robson, and Robson 1992), an MP in William Gladstone's liberal coalition. This episode, I argue, proved the culmination of Mill's liberal-plebeian discourse and his effort to serve workers as a "tribune of the poor."

TRIBUNE OF THE POOR: MILL'S WORKING-CLASS CONSTITUENCY

In his autobiography, Mill identified activism on working-class issues as a highlight of his parliamentary career (Mill 1981, 277–8), alongside advocacy for women's rights. In this section, I suggest that Mill's liberal-plebeian discourses—oligarchic harm and working-class mobilization—reached their apex on the real terrain of parliamentary battle. Mill believed that reform politics demanded the protection of working-class interests through their representation by a tribune within the liberal reform movement. Mill thus undertook a parliamentary career to actualize the reform priorities he had maintained since the 1830s. It culminated with Mill's dramatic intervention in a series of working-class suffrage protests.

Mill's "attention to the interplay between freedom and power in the economic sphere," as Bruce Baum argues, was "one of the most distinctive features of his liberalism" (Baum 2000, 199). Mill believed that the passive or "quiescent" power of social groups must translate into "active" power through opinion formation and other collective activities (73–4). Baum's innovative reading clarifies why power was so central to Mill's theoretical agenda. Yet Baum overlooks just how personally invested Mill was in bringing about power mobilization. Baum criticizes Mill for underestimating "the degree to which achieving such change requires social and political struggle to overcome vested interests" (18). Mill, he says, was "better at outlining what a free society would look like than at offering us practical guidance on how to achieve it" (276). My argument challenges such claims.

Consider Mill's tendency to reference his writings from the 1830s in engagements with working-class parliamentary constituents. When discussing the suffrage question at a constituent meeting, Mill appealed back to the period when reformers delayed immediate enfranchisement in exchange for attention to the "practical grievances" of workers, invoking his "Reorganization of the Reform Party" essay from 1839. It was in the 1830s that Mill first implored liberals to function as "tribunes of the poor." It seems significant, then, that Mill directed working-class constituents to his early radical years to underscore continuity in his views and to stress that his support for worker cooperatives stretched back to the 1830s (Mill 1988b, 29). Mill wanted workers to know that should he gain parliamentary power, he would put theory into practice and function as their parliamentary tribune.

During Mill's electoral campaigns, his critique of sinister interest remained potent: In electoral speeches, he railed against a broken campaign finance system.[11] Without drastic reform, he said, Britain's political system would morph into an oligarchic "Venetian Constitution, and that in a very bad form" (Mill 1988c, 10). Mill watched as W. H. Smith, Jr., a wealthy Tory, spent massive resources on political ambitions, and he decried those seeking the political power that "wealth alone has not yet given them" (10).[12]

Both while campaigning and after assuming office, Mill met frequently with disenfranchised workers to press his critique of "plutocracy." He affirmed workers' epistemic authority, which encompassed both axioms of "common sense and common observation" and more specialized knowledge on subjects like trade unionization (Mill 1988d, 65). Privileged classes could rarely comprehend "what a working man has in his mind," Mill argued, "because they do not know what is in his mind" (65). Let reasonableness prevail, and if workers "do not obtain what they desire, they will as readily acquiesce in defeat, or trust to the mere progress of reason for reversing the verdict, as any other portion of the community" (66).

Perhaps the most dramatic example of Mill's operating as a "tribune" was his intervention in a notable working-class suffrage protest during the summer of 1866. This episode shows Mill attending to working-class grievances while still affirming the value of prevailing British political conventions. The Hyde Park protest came as William Gladstone's reform effort, which would have enfranchised a subsection of the elite working class, stalled in June 1866, facing continued conservative opposition. In this tense climate, the Reform League, a prominent post-Chartist organization, announced intentions to stage a mass public meeting. On the evening of July 23, Reform Leaguers arrived at the park and were confronted with locked gates and a police barricade. Some protesters broke the barricades and descended on the park. Mill later recalled a scuffle in which "many innocent persons were maltreated by the police" (Mill 1981, 278). In parliamentary discussion on July 24, he criticized the Home Secretary's crackdown (1988e, 99–100).

Claiming the right of free assembly, the league was set to defy a restraining order. As Mill recalled, the protesters "shewed a determination to make another attempt at the meeting in the Park, to which many of them would probably have come armed" (Mill 1981, 278). Disturbed, Mill attended, with several other radical MPs, a council of leading Reform Leaguers and working-class leadership, and the "task fell chiefly

[11] As Selinger (2019b) shows, Mill articulated a remarkably modern critique of campaign finance practices, going well beyond bribery to broader concerns about how private money could corrupt the practice of campaigning itself.

[12] Some of the campaign and parliamentary speeches cited here represent journalistic transcriptions or reporting of Mill's utterances. Insofar as they are presented as faithful representations of Mill's speeches, and consistent with their inclusion in his collected works, I treat these speeches as Mill's words.

upon myself of persuading them to give up the Hyde Park project, and hold their meeting elsewhere" (278). Mill persuaded them to move the protest to a nearby agricultural hall. For a violent stand in Hyde Park was only justified "if the position of affairs had become such that a revolution was desirable, and if they thought themselves able to accomplish one. To this argument after considerable discussion they at last yielded" (278).

With the group reconvening at the agricultural hall on July 30, Mill accepted an invitation to address the Reform League.

> Ladies and Gentlemen, this vast meeting is a sufficient guarantee that the cause of reform will suffer nothing by your having determined to hold your meeting here instead of repeating the attempt to hold it in the park… . You have been very much attacked for holding such large meetings, on the ground that they are inconsistent with discussion. But discussion is not the only use of public meetings. One of the objects of such gatherings is demonstration… . You want to make a display of your strength, and I tell you that the countries where the people are allowed to show their strength are those in which they are not obliged to use it. (Mill 1988e, 103–4)[13]

This episode figured prominently in Mill's autobiography. "No other person," Mill insisted, "had at that moment the necessary influence for restraining the working classes," except for Prime Minister Gladstone and the radical MP John Bright, both of whom were unavailable (Mill 1981, 279). This remarkable autobiographical citation highlights Mill's confidence in his own ability to mediate with workers at a critical juncture, which underscored his belief that structural circumstances did not justify revolution. He subsequently spoke out against, and orchestrated the defeat of, a Tory bill to prevent public meetings in the parks (279).

It was in a similar spirit that, seven months after the Hyde Park episode, Mill responded to accounts of an angry Reform League meeting at which a general strike was entertained. In a letter to William Randal Cremer, a key trade-union leader, Mill criticized the meeting's "direct appeal to revolutionary expedients" and the readiness among some attendees to "proceed at once to a trial of physical force if any opposition is made" to their demands (Mill 1972a, 1247–8). Mill emphasized again that Britain's parliamentary system provided for the "redress of grievances to be sought by peaceable and legal means" (1248).

Mill continued to reinforce this message up through his reelection campaign in 1868. The Reform Act of 1867 had finally brought some measure of suffrage expansion. From Mill's perspective, however, this reform only reinforced the urgency of cultivating relationships with workers. Having finally achieved its enactment, would the working classes "have as the fruits of that Reform Bill a Tory Administration" (Mill 1988f, 336)?

[13] The quote as presented here omits some textual notes from the *Collected Works* that describe audience reaction to Mill's speech.

FINAL YEARS: INCREASING RADICALIZATION

Yet Mill, like numerous other liberal candidates, lost in the election of 1868.[14] Mill largely blamed this electoral setback on the pathological role of money in elections, the "real cause" of the movement's electoral misfortune (1972e, 1514–5). The defeat only expanded Mill's commitment to movement building. He implored workers to make a "united and energetic appeal to Parl[iament] to clear away this obstacle to their representation" (1515). He reinforced his long-standing support for worker cooperatives in completing his *Chapters on Socialism.* Mill's idiosyncratic position in the socialist tradition has attracted ongoing attention among scholars, who focus largely on the theoretical dimensions of his flirtation with socialist ideals and his criticism of specific socialist initiatives.[15] For my purposes, *Chapters* is notable less as a philosophical text than as a concrete culmination of Mill's liberal-plebeian discourse.

Mill understood that suffrage acquisition was not sufficient to address the challenges facing workers (Ten 1998, 387–8). As Baum (2000) argues, Mill's vision of worker cooperatives stemmed directly from his focus on insulating workers from undue forms of dependence and paternalism. Yet cooperatives were not simply about protection but also about mobilization. In *Chapters*, Mill recognized that workers were maturing politically and would not act in the "disorderly and ineffective way" of those unfamiliar with the "legal and constitutional machinery" (Mill 1967b, 707). Rather, their instruments would be "the press, public meetings and associations, and the return to Parliament of the greatest number of persons pledged to the political aims of the working classes" (707).

Mill's preoccupation with worker cooperatives traced back to his early radicalism, when he criticized partnership laws that inhibited workers from forming cooperatives (Mill 1982a, 487). Throughout his career, Mill viewed cooperatives as a crucial barometer, alongside suffrage expansion, for measuring working-class political inclusion. Cooperatives were distinctly democratic institutions: "labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves" (Mill 1965b, 775). Efforts to inhibit their formation were thus

[14] For an especially informative account of Mill's parliamentary career and the reasons for his electoral defeat, see Kinzer, Robson, and Robson (1992).

[15] As McCabe (2021, 7) notes, "there is no consensus about Mill's socialism," and his writings on the subject are often seen as tangential and peripheral to his mature liberal project. However, McCabe (2021) vigorously argues that Mill's views on socialism are central, not peripheral, and that they began at a young age. Sarvasy (1984, 586) argues that Mill's socialist objectives are intricately related to his democratic theory, with the latter being a mechanism for facilitating socialist development; see also Baum (2007), Medearis (2005), and Ten (1998).

symptomatic examples of the elite sinister interest Mill was determined to overcome.[16]

Mill was skeptical of communism because he worried that selfish behavior would reemerge in communist societies (Mill 1967b, 744). However, he believed that well-structured worker cooperatives could avoid these pathologies. Precisely because workers were becoming more politically powerful, it was essential for reformers to understand their emerging beliefs about economic reorganization (707). In the 1830s, Mill argued that worker cooperatives could have a profound "healing effect" in giving workers confidence in "fair play" (Mill 1982a, 487), and he advanced a similar argument four decades later.

Socialism was a creed worthy of the most careful consideration at a time when workers had every right to demand reexamination of old customs. There was urgency in this appeal, as the "circumstances which have caused them, thus far, to make a very limited use of that power, are essentially temporary" (Mill 1967b, 707). Note the striking parallel with Mill's analysis in the 1830s, when he implored liberal reformers to address working-class grievances so as to stave off more destabilizing forms of revolutionary protest. Against those who argued that poverty is natural or "necessary," Mill noted that similar arguments were made about "all the privileges of oligarchy" (710). This late usage of the term "oligarchy" again demonstrates the terminological consistency in Mill's discourse. Ultimately, by the end of his life, Mill's distinctive fusion of liberal reform and working-class mobilization had culminated in an advancing, though still unfinished, pursuit of democratic progress.

CONCLUSION: MILL AND LIBERAL PLEBEIANISM TODAY

John Stuart Mill's legacy as a resource for contemporary political theory remains contested. I have argued that Mill's work should be appreciated for its liberal plebeianism—for combining an *antioligarchic* discourse dedicated to combatting the "sinister interests" of entrenched elites with a discourse of *mobilization* intended to incorporate the British working classes into a liberal reform coalition.

By reading a canonical liberal through a plebeian frame, this paper has suggested that liberal and plebeian discourses can converge around a shared critique of oligarchy and a shared focus on mobilizing reform movements to strengthen democracy. Mill lived and wrote in a historical context where oligarchic threats proliferated and where mobilization was required to counteract them. He was committed to keeping reform movements within established norms of British politics. But as a "tribune" of the working-class, he adopted an aggressive antioligarchic posture. Standard class-balancing interpretations (i.e., Thompson 1976) overlook the full force of Mill's advocacy on behalf of workers. Mill's democratic theory sought to *defend* those most vulnerable to oppression, not simply to balance their interests with those of elites. He sought earnestly to be their tribune within a dynamic public sphere.

Mill's liberal plebeianism shows the promise of a contemporary normative paradigm, not yet fully developed, that synthesizes different perspectives to find a productive balance between "plebeian" and "liberal" commitments. This synthesis requires both perspectives to acknowledge their mutual compatibility. Plebeians must acknowledge the critical resources that exist within the historical liberal tradition, including liberalism's fierce criticism of legal inequalities, concentrated power, absolutism, antipluralism, and threats to individual liberty and property. Conversely, liberals must acknowledge the value of a plebeian attentiveness to class-based political distinctions and power imbalances. The proper balance between these different commitments cannot be determined a priori but must be struck in real-world political contexts. It takes democratic leaders, like Mill, to manage trade-offs within the constraints and opportunities afforded by a specific time and place (Beerbohm 2015).

Contemporary liberal plebeianism is thus fundamentally realist in orientation: It is concerned with forces like concentrated power and institutional corruption, which animated Mill's engagement with his "nonideal" political environment. It harkens back to a period where political liberals were animated more by these practical political questions than by abstract debates in "ideal" theory (Sabl 2017; Sleat 2013; Waldron 2016). Contemporary liberal plebeians can probe this "lost history of liberalism" (Rosenblatt 2018) to highlight why and how the problems motivating earlier liberals are still relevant today. By responding to the messy balance of social forces that shapes their specific political context (Arlen and Rossi 2021; Bagg 2018), liberal plebeians can distinguish their approach from the more abstract forms of analytic liberalism that emerged out of the Rawlsian revolution (Forrester 2019).

Building on Mill's legacies, a contemporary liberal-plebeian orientation would involve, first, a *diagnostic* posture focused on mapping the terrain of oligarchic "sinister interests" as they manifest themselves in specific political orders, second, a *mobilization* posture in which this diagnosis aids in assembling different social classes around a reform agenda, and third, an *institutionalization* posture in which reform is pursued through formal institutions, like parliaments, that respect (at minimum) liberal procedural norms. Each of these phases is reflected in Mill's own political career, from his early pamphleteering to his later involvement in parliamentary politics.

Consider how we might apply this orientation to a pressing contemporary issue. Global tax sheltering is arguably a paradigmatic example of oligarchic "sinister interest." An estimated $7.2 trillion is sheltered abroad, through entities like shell companies, a problem vividly underscored by the Panama Papers and Pandora Papers scandals (Zucman 2015). Political strategies that prove effective in confronting tax sheltering may

[16] Cooperatives were also central to Mill's long-standing interest in harnessing productive as opposed to "idle" labor.

prove less effective against other political challenges, such as the proliferation of "soft money" in the American campaign finance system (Lessig 2014; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016). Nonetheless, a liberal-plebeian leader can diagnose the interlocking connections between different political challenges, showing how global tax sheltering might help special interests exert power domestically or vice versa. She might mobilize a political coalition around confronting these challenges while also working within formal institutions to enact progressive policy changes. Of course, tax sheltering raises important normative concerns that can be tackled from within existing Rawlsian liberal theories of justice, for example. However, liberal plebeians draw us further toward the real-world dynamics that perpetuate sheltering: not simply abstract problems of justice, fairness, and equality but concrete manifestations of entrenched oligarchic power.

The plebeian orientation thus works against the tendencies of some contemporary liberals to abstract away from the broader balance of social forces and to rely excessively on proceduralist crutches (Klein 2022). Importantly, however, the liberal orientation recognizes the dangers of the populist tendency to stray too far from these same procedural norms. In contexts that are highly oligarchic, liberal plebeians can pursue democratic innovations, such as new forms of citizen assembly and oversight, that empower ordinary people to exert more formal political influence (Arlen 2022; McCormick 2011; Vergara 2020). Such reform proposals are weapons in the democratic arsenal. But unlike extreme populists, who see liberalism as an obstacle to progress, liberal plebeians still affirm the value of liberal parliamentarism as a framework through which to pursue progressive reforms.

There is a spectrum of different institutional possibilities from more to less aggressive, depending on how the liberal and plebeian commitments are balanced in any specific context. An effective liberal-plebeian leader can advocate institutional reforms that maximize the epistemic competence of the many (Landemore 2020) while pushing back against antipluralist forms of populism (Cohen 2019; Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019). Mill was a "parliamentary liberal" (Selinger 2019a) who nonetheless understood the distinctive political predicament of the working class as a force to be respected on its own terms, a force capable of participating in the reform and reshaping of institutions. Mill understood, better than many of his liberal allies, that working-class mobilization need not destabilize democracy. Mill's mobilization model thus required educated elites and working-class activists to coordinate their epistemic capacities in a mutually reinforcing manner, drawing on the experience of both sides. In this spirit, contemporary liberal-plebeian leaders can facilitate the inclusion of voices that might not otherwise survive in formal channels of the political status quo while simultaneously attempting to convince progressively inclined fellow elites to ally with popular factions.

Ultimately, liberal plebeianism offers a unique and promising framework for confronting contemporary political challenges. Mill feared that oligarchic corruption would prevent ordinary working-class people from exercising political power. Those among us who share his concerns today should be no less vigilant.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the *APSR*'s editors and anonymous reviewers for their highly constructive feedback. I am especially indebted to John McCormick and Enzo Rossi for their mentorship and unwavering support of this project. For comments on previous versions, I thank workshop participants at the University of Chicago, the University of Amsterdam, The International Society for Third-Sector Research Conference, and the APSA annual conference. I also thank Chiara Cordelli, Lea M. Klarenbeek, Steven Klein, William Levine, Patchen Markell, Natasha Piano, Jennifer Pitts, and Jason S. Canon. Alexander R. Cohen provided excellent assistance with editing and proofreading. I thank Rainer Forst, Beate Sutterlüty, Iris Koban, and the staff and fellows of the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften of the Goethe University Frankfurt for creating an ideal research environment. Finally, I thank my current colleagues at Swarthmore College for their support and camaraderie.

FUNDING STATEMENT

The research for this piece was supported by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) Science Organization's Vidi Project "Legitimacy beyond Consent" (grant n.016.164.351). The Justitia Center for Advanced Studies (Frankfurt) on behalf of the Alfons and Gertrud Kassel Foundation also provided funding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms that this research did not involve human subjects.

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