"Posthumous Productivity", Political Philosophy, and Neo-Victorian Style: Review of Paul Ginsborg, *Democracy: Crisis and Renewal*

Mark Llewellyn
(University of Liverpool, England, UK)

Paul Ginsborg, *Democracy: Crisis and Renewal*
London: Profile Books, 2008

ISBN: 9 781846 680939 (PB) £10.99

*****

> Two middle-aged men, one 54 years old, the other 66, meet for the first time. The older man has invited the younger to dinner, at his home in Albert Mansions, Victoria Street. They are both accompanied – the one by his daughter Eleanor, the other by his step-daughter Helen. Of the two men the younger one seems the worse for wear. He is dressed badly, suffers from carbuncles and bronchitis, and has an enormous beard which is not impeccably clean. He speaks English with a polished German accent; indeed, he is German. The other is extremely English, even if he spends much of the year in the milder climate of Avignon in the south of France, partly for reasons of health and partly to be close to the tomb of his beloved wife, Harriet Taylor, who had died in that city in November 1858. The Englishman is as courteous and correct as the German is impatient and irascible. The one is an intellectual greyhound, the other a bull. They are, with the exception of Charles Darwin, the two greatest minds of the Victorian era. (p. 1)

This could be an extract from a neo-Victorian novel with its air of mystery, intellectual significance, and withholding of names, but it is instead taken from the historian Paul Ginsborg's inventive new book, *Democracy: Crisis and Renewal*. In this opening scene, Ginsborg posits a

Neo-Victorian Studies
2:1 (Winter 2008/2009)
pp. 179-186

meeting between John Stuart Mill (the "extremely English" one) and Karl Marx in spring of 1873, the year of Mill's death. The meeting, as Ginsborg confesses after the much more extensive scene has done its work, is purely imagined. This 'Prelude' is mirrored by an 'Epilogue' one hundred pages later, which imagines the two great 'minds' – or perhaps more accurately by this time, 'spirits' – of the Victorian age meeting again, in Heaven, in 2008, to discuss the intervening 135 years of (European) democracy. They are not impressed, although Marx's carbuncles have at least cleared up. Mill in particular declares his fears over not only how his work is today being interpreted, but also over the interpretation he produced in his own lifetime; as he tells Marx, from the perspective of heavenly hindsight:

> Now that I have had abundant time to read all your works, my dear Karl, I can confirm, without a shadow of a doubt, that you have been capitalism's greatest analyst. As for myself, there is little to say. I greatly mistook [*coughs apologetically*] the virtuous consequences of competition, and I overestimated the self-righting capacities of the market. What has occurred recently on a global scale, and all in the name of liberalism, fills me with abhorrence. It is not thus that we can hope to create a peaceful and prosperous world order. Individuals seem to have lost all sense of material modesty and collective responsibility. (p. 129)

Reading this in the context of the current credit crunch and economic downturn one cannot help but feel that the "sense of material modesty" and the "collective responsibility" (or at least the collective state interventions into capitalism we are all providing) have an added substance to them. But why does a political and historical theorist based in an Italian university, who has previously written a biography of Silvio Berlusconi (Einaudi, 2003; English version Verso, 2004) and a study of *The Politics of Everyday Life* (Yale UP, 2005), decide to write a book on democracy that begins, ends, and is intermittently dominated by the figures of two Victorian thinkers, who died more than a century ago? Why is now the moment for us to return to Mill and Marx?

Given that 2009 marks not only the bicentenary of the births of Darwin, Gladstone (who, as Ginsborg points out, was Prime Minister at the

date of the imagined meeting between Marx and Mill in 1873), Tennyson, and Swinburne, but also the sesquicentennial year of both Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Mill's *On Liberty*, it is telling that the extravagance of the Darwinian celebrations has left the anniversary of Mill's theories rather unremarked. Perhaps this is a result of a seeming universal Western acceptance of the tenets of classical liberalism as embodied in Mill's treatise, whereas Darwin's theories remain a progressive but contentious ideological site – as the recent controversy surrounding the various atheist polemics of 2007 and 2008 from Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens et al. have served to demonstrate. And yet looking around at the political sphere (not only in terms of party politics, but the more general arena in which all of us are constituted as political beings), it is tempting to ask which is the theory most in need of a reinterpretation and re-evaluation. Science builds on science; hypotheses generate new series of concepts, and these are tested, models are re(de)fined, and technology moves forward apace. Thoughts, ideologies, and economic-political-social theories, or at least the most influential ones, have their significance tested in other ways: through re-invention, re-reading and re-casting into neo-movements. Just because the final years of the twentieth century and the earliest years of the twenty-first might have been perceived as the realm of the 'neo-conservatives' or neo-cons, dominating the world stage in foreign and economic policy, (especially in the USA), does not mean that the same period could not be – and is not – considered one of neo-liberalism too. Contemporary pressures in the broadest conceptualisation of economics (not just the financial system but the more fundamental concepts of well-being, health, and happiness) mean that Mill's understanding of the concept of liberty, the realities of freedom within a democracy, and the relationships and obligations between individuals and states, people and the systems in which they must live and survive, is due for re-appraisal and re-application. Richard Reeves's recent biography *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007) placed Mill and his work firmly within his nineteenth century contexts but did, in its 'Epilogue', also signal the ongoing significance of Mill, albeit recognising the point about bicentenaries and sesquicentennials I mentioned above:

> With the exception of the odd plaque, the Watts portrait and the Embankment statue, there is no shrine to which Mill

> admirers can make their pilgrimage. His house in Avignon was bulldozed in 1961 to make way for an ugly block of flats…. In a side-room of the Palais du Roure in Avignon sits his Broadwood piano, badly out of tune. In a nearby corner, unlabelled and out of sight, is a medium-sized bust of his head. Mill himself would have been utterly indifferent to this treatment. His books are pored over, and argued over, across the world. His causes – for liberty, for women, for justice – have advanced and are fought for still. And his questions are our questions once again. Goethe said that one of the measures of genius was posthumous productivity; in which case Mill's claim is unanswerable…. The world he left was unquestionably better for his efforts. It still is. (Reeves 2007: 486-487)

Perhaps Reeves is placing Mill's current status in too positive a light for Ginsborg's re-animated Mill in Heaven in 2008, but Ginsborg's book is part of the same wider project to continue thinking about the Victorians *now*. The book has relevance to this journal's readers not only because of the opening and closing fictitious encounters between Mill and Marx as neo-Victorian positionings, but also because the text provides an intriguing, useful, and imaginative (but non-fictional) interjection into the larger debate about what it means to live in contemporary times so haunted by the ideologies, idealisms, and intellectual frameworks of the nineteenth century.

Ginsborg's book is not the only such text to do this, and when one starts to look for the Millian debate or the neo-Victorian articulation of a spectral sense of Victorian thinking, one starts to see it everywhere. In my recent reading, I have encountered overtly stated, indirect allusions, and residual echoes of Victorian intellectualising in a variety of texts. These include Stanley Fish's *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford UP, 2008), where John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1852, 1858), together with Mill's *On Liberty*, haunts Fish's account of the need to take overt political posturing out of the classroom. The spectre of Marx is again a significant presence in John Gray's *Al Qaeda and what it means to be modern* (Faber & Faber, 2003), and my Liverpool colleague Philip Davis self-consciously describes himself as "a neo-Victorian" in *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters* (Davis 2008: 2) – reviewed elsewhere in this issue

of *NVS*. Even Margaret Atwood in her recent book *Payback: Debt and the Shadow of Wealth* (Bloomsbury, 2008), proposes a timely reminder of the Victorians' attitude to finance using the figure of Charles Dickens as a central pivot, but with interesting counterpointed references to George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Oscar Wilde and Charles Kingsley. Victorian thinking here becomes a reciprocal process (reciprocity is one of Atwood's keywords); as it was for the Victorians themselves, so it is for us thinking about them. That this process often involves us thinking about them thinking about us is unsurprising. For all the references to post-modernity and the idea that we live in a post-Victorian landscape, we of course remain embedded in Victorian institutions, culturally, politically, and economically. Indeed, Fish asserts that "Postmodernism is [Victorian] liberalism taken seriously" (Fish 2008: 129).

The Victorian democratic settlement and the post-Victorian implementation or appropriation of its terminology lies at the core of Ginsborg's analysis. The three parts of his text, framed by the 'Prelude' and 'Epilogue' already explored, look, succinctly but with some piercing insights, at the European model of democracy as embodied in the European Union. More precisely, Ginsborg is interested, as we should all be, in what he terms the first and second paradoxes and their impact on the "democratic deficit of the European Union" (see pp. 32-40, especially, but also pp. 114-117). These paradoxes are rather better termed tensions between the relative positions of Mill and Marx, namely (i) direct democracy and communist dictatorship, and (ii) "the simultaneous triumph and crisis of liberal democracy" (p. 22). The second of course owes much to the publicity coup that emanated from Francis Fukuyama's declaration, post-1989, that we had arrived at the 'end of history' and that liberal democracy had won. Fukuyama did not put it in quite such terms, but this is how his work has been read; hence Ginsborg is correct to point out that the victory was neither complete nor one of liberal democracy's triumph in terms of Mill's nineteenth-century articulation of that concept. Indeed, one of the most significant contentions of Ginsborg's book is that "liberal democracy" as shorthand does not work, if it is meant to signify the relationship between the current settlement in most Western countries and the theories propounded by Mill himself. In both Part One and Part Two of the book, Ginsborg provides a lucid explication of the elemental strands of Mill's liberal democratic narrative around issues such as representation,

citizenship, concepts of 'civil society', deliberate democracy, and the role of the local in government. Returning us to Mill's texts, and those of Marx, Ginsborg reminds us that what Victorian thinkers proposed is often radically different to what is perpetuated under their names or banners. Thus, "the essence of liberal democracy" (p. 27) proposed by Mill, that representative government is of the whole nation or the "general public", is at odds with the current "assignation of politics to a separate sphere, inhabited by professionals, organised by party elites" (p. 27). Similarly, the power of the mass media and the "joined hands" of the political sphere with big businesses (p. 29) are seen as unequal to the definition of liberal democracy proposed by Mill. Such statements have been made before, but often in the easy manner that allows them to rest alongside a belief that these developments are somehow the natural outcomes of liberalism and liberal economic theory itself. What Ginsborg does is to neatly and succinctly unwrap this political enfolding and illustrate how it frequently angles Mill's arguments into the obverse of his original intention. Ginsborg is also good at pointing out the shared objectives that can, with the distance of history, be identified more readily between Mill's and Marx's ideological positions. One such objective is the "need for men and women to be active subjects in both politics and society", which Ginsborg asserts has not been achieved (p. 11); indeed, his argument is summed up in the idea that the European model actively prevents such activity.

Marx and Mill are frequent presences throughout the discussion, not only in the set-piece opening and concluding sections already mentioned. They are variously and regularly referred to (and somewhat reverenced) as a combined "Victorian authority" (p. 46) and "our two great Victorian thinkers" (p. 80), and a neat balancing act is performed between the two players in each section: "If we consider Mill first" (p. 51) or "Let me begin [this chapter] with Marx…" (p. 62). As an intervention in the neo-Victorian sphere, Ginsborg's study lends itself as a model of the dialogue between periods, ideas, and concepts. As Ginsborg points out after a summary of the "unaccountable power" of the corporations, rather than states, that make up the "fifty-one [out of one hundred] biggest economies of the world" (p. 41): "Neo-liberal economics has fattened these creatures up on a global diet of deregulation. J. S. Mill would have been horrified that the very word 'liberalism', even with a 'neo-' preceding it, could be employed in such a context." (p. 42) By the end of Ginsborg's book, Marx, "recently …

promoted from Purgatory" (p. 118), even questions whether time is a concept that can any longer be applied to the contemporary economic market:

> I must first admit that I mistook the birch of capitalism for its death pangs. The rate of profit … does not fall. The workers do not rise up, ever stronger; they do not organise themselves as a revolutionary class. They seem to be – how shall I put it – ah yes, more interested in appropriation than expropriation!! Down there [*nods derisively towards the earth*], they talk about late capitalism, late modernity, late everything. But how do they know what time it is, economically speaking? How do they know if it is late or early? (pp. 118-119)

These Victorian thinkers are openly looking down at us, observing the present, but several of the texts already mentioned also carry the implicit suggestion of Victorian judgement on our own time. And this is why Marx's fictional comment about the unawareness of the present as to its temporal location within "late capitalism, late modernity, late everything" has a specific resonance. We are a period marked by a self-conscious belatedness. Marx's sense of the "spectre haunting Europe" in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) is inverted in Ginsborg's text to become the Mill and Marx spectres haunting European democracy in the twentieth- and now twenty-first centuries. This book does not, indeed cannot, provide answers through drawing on either the Victorian or the contemporary alone, nor is it able to answer that fundamental question, "What, then, is to be done?" (p. 41). Yet persuasively and succinctly, Ginsborg still manages to highlight that, if we are to acknowledge the presence of the Victorian in the modern world, then we might as well do so explicitly and return to the origins themselves. Rather than a pale imitation or mimicry of the Victorian, always in part a bemoaning of the continued and inescapable influence of the past (so conceived), we might be more alert and open to the reciprocal possibilities of the arrangement, and do these justice by turning back to re-think what a term like 'neo-liberalism' means politically, economically, socially, aesthetically and ethically in relation to 'liberalism' itself. Assuming that the

present situation can be made new simply through adding ‘neo-’ to a concept is not enough.

What Ginsborg demonstrates is that while Mill’s piano might not be in tune in Avignon, there may yet be notes left to play on it.

Bibliography

Davis, Philip. *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Fish, Stanley. *Save the World on Your Own Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Reeves, Richard. *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand*. London: Atlantic Books, 2007.