

Marx and Mill on “Systematic Colonization” and the Critique of Political Economy

Introduction

In the final chapter of *Capital* vol. I, Marx interpreted “systematic colonization” – the theory of colonization devised by E. G. Wakefield – as the admission, implicitly made by political economists, that capitalism is an institution that is artificially and violently implemented by the state and which, for that reason, cannot be regarded as *natural*, as classical economists would have one believe. Certainly, the scheme of colonization proposed by Wakefield aimed at establishing capitalist farmers in Australia and New Zealand through the intervention of the British Crown. This system consisted in preventing new settlers arriving in the colonies from freely acquiring virgin lands, which forced them to become wage earners dependent on some capitalist. Marx thought he found here living proof of the relevance of his critique of political economy, that is to say of the Classics’ pretension to present capitalism as natural.

On this issue, one of Marx’s main targets was John Stuart Mill, in as much as Mill, like his Benthamite Radical friends who constituted the “Colonial Reformers”,¹ was an enthusiastic defender of the Wakefield system of colonization. Given that Mill was himself a critic of political economy in the Marxian sense (Gillig 2016) and a promoter of socialism,² his support of “systematic colonization” may appear perplexing. Marx repeatedly put forward the idea that Mill moved “towards eclectic, syncretistic compendia” (Marx 1857, 3), and that he was even “the best representative” of “a shallow syncretism”, insofar as he belonged to the “men who still claimed some scientific standing and aspired to be something more than mere sophists and sycophants of the ruling classes, [and thus] tried to harmonise the Political Economy of capital with the claims, no longer to be ignored, of the proletariat” (Marx 1867, 21). Does Mill’s advocacy of “systematic colonization” prove his inconsistency, as Marx suggests, between a commitment to capitalism, on the one hand, and an advocacy of its abolition through the promotion of cooperative socialism, on the other?³ And, further, does it allow us to validate Marx’s idea that Mill’s economic discourse is ultimately, like that of the other Classics, an ideological edifice, which not only *assumes*

¹ For further information on this point, refer to the work of Semmel (1961).

² On Mill’s socialism in connection to Marx’s see Feuer (1949), Duncan (1977, 244–48; 287–97), Hollander (1985a, 1:770–824). For a recent and comprehensive overview of Mill’s socialism see McCabe (2021).

capitalism but also seeks to *impose* it universally on the globe? The answer to these questions is of importance for the history of ideas, not only because it makes it possible to gauge the authenticity and coherence of Mill's "socialism", but also because it contributes to assessing the scope of Marx's critique of political economy.³

A comparison of Marx and Mill's respective positions on the specific topic of "systematic colonization" in connection with the critique of political economy has never been undertaken in the literature. Hollander, for example, in his extensive study on Mill, shows how Mill's preoccupation with labor's "dependence" was close to that of Marx (Hollander 1985b, 2:776-77, 782-83, 820-21). But no mention is made of Mill's endorsement of the Wakefield system. Neither does Hollander mentions the Wakefield system in his book on Marx.

Historians of economic thought generally accept Marx's own viewpoint on this topic, according to which "Mill followed Wakefield and the colonial reformers by advocating specific legislation to achieve colonial *capitalism*" (Sullivan 1983, 614, emphasis mine; see also Perelman 2000, 333). McNally has recently argued that, to consider economically coerced labour more respectable than bonded labour, "this was all liberal political economists [Mill explicitly included] needed to hear" (McNally 2024, 465). I try to defend the opposite view: a thorough examination of Mill's motivations for supporting the Wakefield project reveals that they bear no relation to a defence of capitalism in Marx's sense. In fact, the opposite is true. As a result, Marx's ultimate "critique of political economy" appears overall to be unwarranted in the specific case of J. S. Mill.

After presenting Marx's critique of "systematic colonization" (section 1) and Mill's basic defence of it (section 2), I will point out that, despite their apparent opposition, they actually share the main basic principles concerning the central issues at stake in the Wakefield project, namely the pursuit of an enhanced division of labour (section 3). The subsequent section elucidates that their main disagreement pertains to the collectivisation of land. Section 5 demonstrate that Mill, while defending "systematic colonization", is a long way from considering capitalism as "the absolute and final form of social production", to use Marx's phrase in the Afterword to *Capital* vol. I. So that, far from betraying his socialism, it would be more true to say that Mill betrays Wakefield's conservative political ideas. The final section examines Mill's treatment of the issues

³ It is not my concern here to analyse Marx's or Mill's general attitude toward (settler) colonialism and the evolution of their respective positions on the topic. As far as Marx is concerned, such a project has already been undertaken (Avineri 1969; Anderson 2010). In recent years an important debate took place in colonial studies about Marx's alleged eurocentrism and whether he had a unilinear versus a multilinear theory of history (for a presentation of the debate see Lindner 2022). Concerning Mill and colonisation, an important literature exists, among which recent historiography traces the evolution of his thought (Ghosh 1991; Smits 2008; Bell 2010).

of private property and capital, which are central to Marx’s critique of primitive accumulation. In this respect, again, Mill’s analyses bear striking similarities to those of Marx.

1 Marx’s criticism of Wakefield’s “systematic colonization”

1.1 “Systematic colonization”

Edward Gibbon Wakefield, an English Radical and apostle of the development of Australia and New Zealand in the nineteenth century, was the initiator of a new colonization technique based on large landed property. In order to achieve the highest productivity and a high degree of civilization in the new settlements, he proposed limiting the scattering of the labour force. Indeed, he argued that when the virgin lands are put at the free disposal of emigrants, the latter tend spontaneously to constitute their own small individual land property. The result would be disastrous in terms of productivity, insofar as it would deprive the colonies of the positive effects of the division of labour – or rather of the “cooperation”, as Wakefield puts it⁴ – specific to large farms. The theory of “systematic colonization” was developed in 1829 in *A Letter from Sydney*, then elaborated in *England and America* (1833) and in *A View of the Art of Colonization* (1849). The idea was that the British government would take over the virgin lands (from settlers, but not necessarily from natives) and resell them at a “sufficient price”, that is to say, at a price high enough to prevent new settlers from acquiring them too easily but without discouraging them settling (Wakefield 1849, 339). By doing so, newcomers would not be able to acquire land until they had worked a certain number of years as wage earners. Furthermore, migrants living in these newly built towns would constitute a market for surplus agricultural production stemming from productive cooperation-based farms.⁵

⁴ Wakefield, who edited annotated volumes of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, criticized Smith’s use of the phrase “division of labour”, and proposed to replace it by the term “co-operation.” He defined “simple co-operation” as the situation “when several persons help each other in the same employment.” On the other hand, “complex co-operation” appears “when several persons help each other in different employments” (Wakefield in Smith 1776, 1:26). For the purposes of this study, it is important to bear in mind that “complex co-operation” encompasses both the technical and the social division of labour.

⁵ In addition, Wakefield proposed that the tax revenues generated by the sale of land should serve to finance the transportation of future settlers from the British mother country and thus support the further development of the colony. See Ballantyne (2013) for a detailed examination of the writings and career of Wakefield. For a presentation of historical experiments of systematic colonization see Mills (1915). On the settler transition in the Anglo-world that arouse on both sides of the Atlantic around 1815, in which Wakefield played part, see Belich (2009, chap. 6). Perelman offers an interesting overview of Wakefield’s economic ideas (Perelman 2000, 324–39). For a contextualization of Wakefield’s scheme in connection with the process of slave emancipation, see Sheridan (1961, 550), Engerman (1996, 297; 304), Holt (1992, 73), Drescher (2004, 56–58), Cazzola (2021).

1.2 Marx's censure of the "so-called original accumulation"⁶

This system caught Marx's attention, and the last chapter of *Capital* vol. I, entitled "The Modern Theory of Colonization", is devoted to it.⁷ Marx interprets the scheme as a deliberate policy of expropriation aimed at creating a labour market for the benefit of a few capitalist colonists. Of course, the Wakefieldian project stipulates that after a few years, settlers should be able to buy land in turn, yet this is only possible as long as there is land available: in the end, the system inevitably creates a class of capitalist owners. Furthermore, Wakefield unambiguously defends the ideal of large-scale capitalist farms and never envisages small land properties or cooperative models (in the socialist sense), let alone the idea of a nationalization of land. Marx can thus legitimately see in Wakefield a champion of capitalism. Nonetheless, the objective of Chapter XXXIII in *Capital* vol. I is not to offer a critique of the colonial system *per se*, but rather to undermine the very naturalistic foundation of classical political economy by revealing:

the secret that political economy of the old world has discovered in the new, and naively proclaimed on the housetops: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property, presupposes the annihilation of private property based on personal labour; its fundamental condition is the expropriation of the labourer. (Marx 1875, 1235)⁸

Marx considers in fact that "political economy seeks, in principle, to maintain a most convenient confusion between two distinct kinds of private property" (Marx 1875, 1224; 1867, 792) : on the one hand, that based on personal work; on the other, that based on the work of others. And Marx notes that economists call the two types "capital", whereas for Marx only the second one is true capital (see below section 6.2). In the case of the colonies of the New World, the free acquisition of land allows for the development of property based on personal labour, which directly hinders the development of capitalism in that it prevents the emergence of a labour market made up of proletarians. Wakefield brings to light the fact that "the first condition of capitalist production is that the property of the soil is already torn from the hands of the masses"

⁶ In the majority of English-language editions, "ursprüngliche Akkumulation" is translated as "primitive accumulation". I follow here Reitter's new translation published in 2024 which provides a convincing explanation as to why "original" is a more suitable translation for the concept of "ursprünglich" (Marx 2024, 836-38). For a competing proposal suggesting the use of the term "primary", see Foster et al. (2019, 1-4).

⁷ In fact, this is the penultimate chapter, as M. Rubel explains, placed in the last position surely to escape the scrutiny of his censors (Rubel in Marx 1875, 1705-6, note 2 from page 1224). For an opposite interpretation see McNally (2024, 461).

⁸ All translations into English of *The Capital* vol. I quoted here are mine, based on the French edition of 1875 reviewed and corrected by Marx. On the relevance to use the French edition as a standard edition of Volume I see Anderson (2010, 171-80).

(Marx 1875, 1228). Wakefield, therefore, finds himself unwillingly “revealing the truth of capitalist relations in Europe” (Marx 1875, 1225), that is, that capital is a social relation “of absolute dependence which in Europe the lying economist disguises by decorating it emphatically with the name of free contract between two equally independent merchants” (Marx 1875, 1229).

Marx takes up here what constitutes the very core of his criticism levelled at political economy throughout his work (see for example Marx and Engels 1845, 32; Marx 1847, 139–40; 1867, 19–20, Afterword to the 2nd German edition): economists take the capitalist mode of production – and therefore the private ownership of the means of production – as a natural fact, whereas it has an artificial and, moreover, violent origin.

Indeed, one has to keep in mind that Chapter XXXIII closes the eighth and last section (in both the French and English editions) of *Capital* vol. I,⁹ which deals with the “so-called original accumulation”.¹⁰ The section opens (Chapter XXVI) with an assault on the narrative propounded by economists, who portray capital in the hands of present capitalists as the outcome of a primary accumulation that would have been undertaken in the past by an industrious elite as opposed to an idle mass. Marx substitutes for the “nursery tale” of original accumulation based on *abstinence* the concept of *expropriation*, emphasising in the following chapters that the actual history of the genesis of capitalism is characterised by “enslavement”, “armed robbery” and “brute force” (Marx 1972, 1168) in order to expropriate titles or claims to land, property, and even bodies with the help of the state, through laws, decrees and police interventions, leading Marx to speak of a “coup d’État bourgeois” (*ibid.*, 1201).¹¹ However, Marx remarks, economists deny the existence of such a use of state violence by the bourgeoisie: “in the blissful textbooks of political economy, it is the idyll that has always reigned” (*ibid.*, 1168).

In that regard, the Wakefield system for Marx constitutes the living-proof of the pertinence of his theoretical critique of the “so-called original accumulation” promoted by political economy:

⁹ In the German editions it closes the seventh section entitled “Der Akkumulationsprozeß des Kapitals”.

¹⁰ In the French edition the eighth section is simply entitled “L’accumulation primitive”.

¹¹ See also Marx (1972, 1196; 1200–1202). The state, in Marx’s text, must be understood in the Weberian sense of an authority having the monopoly of legitimate physical violence (see Marx 1972, 1213), and not in the more restricted sense of ‘parliament’, as Harris and La Croix (2021, 354–55) suggest. Marx even contends that certain aspects of the expropriation of the rural population were carried out “without the slightest recourse to parliament” (Marx 1972, 1179).

capitalism's conditions of existence have to be produced and the brutal force of the state is used to hasten their advent (Marx 1972, 1213; 550).¹²

Marx's analysis of "systematic colonization" has raised a certain amount of interrogations among scholars in recent years, for example about his purported lack of concern with colonialism (Coulthard 2014; Foster, Clark, and Holleman 2020; McNally 2024). While this may, of course, be of considerable interest, we would like to focus on another aspect, as stated in the introduction: Marx critical attitude toward Mill. Although Mill is not quoted in chapter XXXIII of *Capital* vol. I, he is mentioned just before, in the same section 8 on "original accumulation", in chapter XXX, where Marx ranks him among the "philanthropic English political economists" (Marx 1875, 1210). This leitmotiv of the "philanthropist" economist also appears in chapter XV of *Capital* vol. I. In all instances it designates those economists who express regret at the negative consequences of capitalism, but never consider the possibility of questioning the system itself: they "believe[...] in the eternal natural necessity of the capitalist mode of production" (Marx 2024, 410-11).¹³ The question that now emerges is the following: is it legitimate that Mill, who is one of the prominent supporters of the Wakefield scheme, and who Marx also ranks among the "bourgeois economists" (Marx 1875, 967), should be censored alongside Wakefield for shamelessly advocating capitalist farming in settler colonies?

2 Why did Mill support "systematic colonization"?

First, it is interesting to note that the defence of the Wakefield system in the *Principles* (bk. V, ch. XI, sec. 12) serves Mill's own "critique of political economy". Perelman has convincingly shown that Wakefield himself was aware that through his scheme he "contradicted the sacred laws of political economy" (Perelman 2000, 328). Following Wakefield, Mill intends to denounce the intransigent supporters of the "laissez-faire" doctrine which, "in the name and on the authority of what was represented as the great principle of political economy", defends the idea that individuals would in all circumstances be the best guarantors of their own interests (J. S. Mill 1848b, 959). In this case, he criticized the idea – defended notably by McCulloch, John

¹² I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for providing these references from Marx's writings and for having made me aware of the precise role played by the state in Marx's theory of social change. For further details about the role of the state in Marx's genetic history of capitalism see Rudan (2022, 54-57).

¹³ In the French version, Marx is less explicit and has deleted the passage between inverted commas (cf. Marx 1972, 978), which is why I quote from the (recently published) English version.

Crawford,¹⁴ but also by his own father James¹⁵ – according to which each settler would know better, and like no other, which land is most profitable to him. The question of the appropriation of virgin lands is indeed one of those “cases in which public intervention may be necessary to give effect to the wishes of the persons interested” (the title of section 12 which discusses this question). Mill points to the risk in terms of overall benefit, for the colony and for “the future and permanent interests of civilization itself” (*ibid.*, 963), of the likely existence of strategic behaviour on the part of newly arrived settlers: if individuals are allowed to acquire freely the land, each will want to own the largest possible area although his capital will be insufficient to fully exploit it, which is sub-optimal in terms of productivity. There is thus a problem of collective action: the colonists find themselves in the situation of the prisoner’s dilemma, where the general interest can only be achieved if there is a coordination of individual decisions:

However beneficial it might be to the colony in the aggregate, and to each individual composing it, that no one should occupy more land than he can properly cultivate, nor become a proprietor until there are other labourers ready to take his place in working for hire; it can never be the interest of an individual to exercise this forbearance, unless he is assured that others will do so too. [...] It is the interest of each to do what is good for all, but only if others will do likewise. (J. S. Mill 1848b, 959)

The solution, Mill tells us, when individuals respecting their own interests are “unable to give effect to it except by concert” (J. S. Mill 1848b, 956), is the intervention of public authorities, and in particular of the law. Mill is therefore interventionist: the colony must, in the best interest of the settlers, be organized on a rational basis according to a “plan” (*ibid.*, 965) – which is precisely what is meant by the term “systematic”.¹⁶

So much for Mill’s basic defence of the Wakefield system.¹⁷ It is now important to consider whether Marx diverges from this analysis, and, if so, to what extent. Admittedly, Marx’s critique of political economy cannot be reduced merely to an attack on “laissez-faire” à la Mill. However, on the question of “laissez-faire” they have much more in common than is usually expected.

¹⁴ See Winch (1965, 126).

¹⁵ See James Mill’s article in the 1824 supplement to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, in which he asserts that the entire system of economists, both English and French, “was founded upon the certain maxim, that, in general, each man is a better judge of his own interest, than another to whom it is a matter of indifference” (J. Mill 1824, 711). On this issue see Ghosh (1964, 393–94) and Kittrell (1966, 612, in particular note 14).

¹⁶ Winch (1965, 149–50) notes that the Central Land and Emigration Board managed by Wakefield was, like that other Benthamite creation, the Central Board of the revised Poor Law System, a centralized bureaucracy, something particularly alien to the British mentality of the time.

¹⁷ Mill puts forward other arguments in favour of “systematic colonization”, in particular the fact that it is the only means by which emigration can be made self-supporting (J. S. Mill 1848b, 962–67). We will leave aside this aspect, which is not relevant to our issue.

Marx, just as Mill, appears to be a promoter of agricultural planning and high productivity, except puzzlingly in this particular chapter XXXIII.

3 Marx's proximity to Mill's analysis of agricultural production

When one looks only at chapter XXXIII, Marx seems at first glance to be at odds with Mill's defence of agricultural planning and high productivity. Marx argues there that "the secret of the prosperity of the colonies" is the fact that each settler can appropriate a piece of land (Marx 1875, 1228). Commentators like Pappe, who focus on the Wakefield-Marx relationship, claims that Marx "in his writings on colonization (...) extols the free, self-dependent, pre-capitalist farmers" and "was desperately opposed to the idea of specialization and the principle of the division of labour" (Pappe 1951, 93-94). Yet, Marx's statement above is baffling, because it is obviously in direct contradiction with all the claims he makes himself on this topic in the rest of his mature writings, where he does not believe any more in the possibility of a complete abolition of the division of labor in a socialist future, as demonstrated by Rattansi (1982).¹⁸ Of course, Marx was concerned about the pernicious effect of specialization on workers.¹⁹ However, to conclude, as Pappe does, that Marx's ideal was "pre-capitalist" production contradicts Marx's own broader vision of the role of the division of labour in the dialectic of historical stages. Indeed, chapters XIII to XV of *Capital* vol. I (on "Cooperation", "Division of labour and manufacture" and "Machinery and large industry") constitute a "triptych" (to use Rubel's formula)²⁰ depicting the need to develop productive forces. And Marx himself acknowledged, in a passage added to the French edition of *Capital* vol. I (Chapter XXX), that without division of labour and without machinery, that is to say without a "combined, scientific" production in all sectors, including

¹⁸ Rattansi in his *Marx and the Division of Labour* has convincingly shown that Marx, in his earlier writings such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*, conflated "division of labour" and "class", so that the abolition of class automatically entailed suppression of labour division, whereas in *Capital* and other later writings he became much less class-reductionist and acknowledges that large-scale industrial production imposes a minimal division of labour that are not solely the outcome of class domination. Rattansi also highlights in his book that the key feature of Marx's mature view on the socialist division of labor concerns the abolition of the division between mental and manual labour. Perelman, when criticising Mill's endorsement of the Wakefield scheme, appears to conflate, like the young Marx, the concept of division of labour with that of social classes (Perelman 2000, 333).

¹⁹ See *Capital* vol. I, ch. XIV, sections IV & V. For a thorough analysis of the influence of Smith and Ferguson on Marx's analysis of the division of labour, especially on his theory of alienation see Hill (2007).

²⁰ See Rubel in Marx (1875, 1678, footnote from p. 999).

agriculture, society is condemned to a “fragmented, routine production” (Marx 1875, 1210).²¹ It bears noting that the idea of a “combined” production of a certain number of workers, also called “co-operation” (in the non-socialist sense of the term), or in other words the division of labour, is a typical Wakefieldian idea (see footnote 4 above). Marx in chapter XIII (precisely entitled “Cooperation”) is directly inspired by Wakefield’s reformulation of Smith’s division of labour.²² In fact, he was a careful reader of Wakefield whom, according to Pappe, “he considered as the most notable political economist of the thirties” (Pappe 1951, 89).²³ An interesting example is how Marx emphasizes, in the case of agriculture, the necessity of appealing, at certain critical periods of the year, to “the simultaneous use of a great number of combined labour-days” (Marx 1875, 866). It is particularly noteworthy that Marx illustrates his proposition by stating that “it is because of the lack of such cooperation that in the West of the United States the masses of wheat [...] are almost every year squandered” (*ibid.*). in the article he wrote for the Manchester section of the International Workers’ Association, published on 15 June 1872 in *The International Herald* under the title “The Nationalization of the Land” (Marx 1872). One may find there striking echoes with the argumentation put forward by Wakefield – and Mill – but applied to the case of France:

In France, it is true, the soil is accessible to all who can buy it, but this very facility has brought about a division into small plots cultivated by men with small means and mainly relying upon the land by exertions of themselves and their families. This form of landed property and the piecemeal cultivation it necessitates, while excluding all appliances of modern agricultural improvements, converts the tiller himself into the most decided enemy to social progress. (Marx 1872)²⁴

Here, Marx expresses himself unambiguously in favour of intensive farming that makes use of all the most modern techniques. However, he contends that achieving the requirements of such production “cannot be met by allowing a few individuals to regulate it according to their whims and private interests, or to ignorantly exhaust the powers of the soil. [...] The technical means of agriculture we command [...] can never be successfully applied but by cultivating the land on a

²¹ This passage has been added in the French edition of *Das Kapital*, I (see note 1 p. 1210 by Rubel in Marx 1875, 1704).

²² Marx quotes Wakefield explicitly (see in particular Marx 1875, 863, note b).

²³ Evidence to that is the fact that Marx, in *Capital* vol. I, takes as his reference edition of the *Wealth of the Nations* the version edited between 1835 and 1839 by Wakefield.

²⁴ The absence of pagination is due to the lack of a paper edition at our disposal. We referred to <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/04/nationalisation-land.htm>. The corresponding volume in MEGA (I/23) has not yet been published at the time this paper was written.

large scale” (*ibid.*). It is therefore clear that Marx calls for a rational plan based on the division of labour when it comes to agricultural production, just as Mill and Wakefield do.

Consequently, it can be concluded that there is an astonishing theoretical proximity between Mill and Marx on the question of the rational organization of agricultural production, both of them agreeing with Wakefield on this topic. Therefore, we must not allow ourselves to be too quickly persuaded by the opposition Marx would have us believe between his theory and that of the supporters of the Wakefield system. At the same time, one sees an astonishing proximity to the Millian critique of “laissez-faire” and the need to resort to a plan rationally constructed against the spontaneous interest of the farmers.

This being said, Marx’s critique of systematic colonization raises the question of which organization of production makes it possible to reconcile high productivity with the absence of exploitation of workers. In *Capital* vol. I (especially in Chapter XIII), Marx distinguishes four major modes of production precisely according to the double criteria of productivity and exploitation:

- i) slavery, which is at the same time unproductive and concentrates the maximum of exploitation;
- ii) “independent producers”: whereas they are not subject to the exploitation of others, their productivity is anaemic since, by definition, this regime does not allow any division of labour, leading to an inadequate productivity level;
- iii) large capitalist industry based on the division of labour and machinery, where productivity is as strong as is the degree of exploitation of workers;
- iv) communism based on the nationalization of all means of production, the only regime that makes it possible that production be at the same time efficient and free of exploitation.

This statement on communism is reiterated in the aforementioned article from *The International Herald*. There Marx asserts that an organisation of production based “on a common and rational plan” must be combined with the common property of the land and of the means of production in general. Therefore, illuminating the similarities and divergences between Marx and Mill concerning “systematic colonization” requires a careful examination of their respective positions on the degree of collectivization of land.

4. The issue of full collectivization of land: a point of disagreement among Marx and Mill

Planning, in Mill's perspective, does not necessarily mean collectivization. It means rather state intervention in organizing *private* farms (which does not imply that these are capitalist ones, as we will see). According to Marx, contrastingly, planning has to be associated with full collectivization of the means of production and of land in particular. Although it remains unclear whether in Marx's mind cooperatives should belong to the state,²⁵ it is however certain that Marx and Mill diverged on the nationalization of land.

Marx was in favour of such national control as early as 1868.²⁶ He advocated the “national centralisation of the means of production” (Marx 1872, italics in the text) and especially of land, a position he defended in opposition to César de Paepe²⁷ who left open the possibility of the ownership of the soil by rural associations. Since fragmentation into small property, in addition to being unproductive, has the disadvantage of transforming the peasant into an enemy of social progress, as the French peasantry illustrates, it followed that “the nationalisation of land has become a social necessity” (*ibid.*). Marx thus ranked with the collectivists.

Mill was always opposed to the full nationalization of land, in accordance with his defence of the “system of private property” – the theoretical system in which private property is supposed to be based exclusively on personal labour (see below section 6.1). Indeed, the private property of the land “gives the strongest motive for making the soil yield the greatest possible produce” (J. S. Mill 1871, 691). Nonetheless, as soon as 1851, he promotes “only a qualified property in things not produced by labour, such as the raw material of the earth” (J. S. Mill 1851, 450), insofar as the land must be susceptible of re-appropriation by the community if public utility justifies it:

Property in land is essentially subordinate to public convenience; [...] that it may at any time, if the public interest requires, be taken by the legislature, on payment of compensation. [...] For the sake of great public reforms, sacrifices may have to be imposed on the possessors

²⁵ Hollander considers that Marx and Mill diverge on this issue. He suggests that “it is not J. S. Mill's competing cooperatives that Marx had in mind, but some form of cooperation under central control” (Hollander 2008, 392). Hollander quotes also a letter from Engels to Bebel where cooperatives are presented as a transitional solution before national control of the means of production. This also explains why, although Marx and Mill were both admirers of Fourier (Feuer 1966, 466, 470) and saw in productive cooperatives the future organization of the economy, Mill unlike Marx challenged any compulsory generalization of cooperatives (see the “Résolutions du premier congrès de l'A.I.T.”, handwritten by Marx in 1866 published in Marx 1972, 1469); see also note 1, p. 1472, by Rubel in Marx (1972, 1728–29).

²⁶ See Rubel in Marx (1972, 1476). See also Eccarius (1869, 1023).

²⁷ De Paepe was a member of the International Workingmen's Association and author of a report on the question of land nationalization at the Brussels meeting in 1868.

of property [...]; and the most proper time for demanding such sacrifices is on the occasion of succession by death. (J. S. Mill 1851, 451-52)²⁸

Finally, according to his meritocratic ideal, he advocates the confiscation by the state of undeserved land rent, that is to say the differential rent induced solely by demographic pressure and not due to investments made in order to improve the returns. This idea appears from the first edition of the *Principles* (V, II, 5), and was taken up again in 1871 in his *Explanatory Statement of the Programme of the Land Tenure Reform Association* (a short-lived association which Mill chaired during the elaboration of its programme). Marx knows these positions and notes that John Stuart Mill, like his father James, stigmatizes large landowners but does not at all solve the question of wage labour, and hence of capitalism (see Gillig 2016, 395).

Marx does not seem aware that Mill, towards the end of his life, takes a number of positions in favour of agricultural cooperatives. Point V of the program of the *Land Tenure Reform Association* which he drafted in 1870 aims at “promot[ing] a policy of Encouragement to Co-operative Agriculture, through the purchase by the State, from time to time, of Estates” (J. S. Mill 1871, 693). In a leaflet from the same association calling for a bill introduced in 1872 to appoint guards to manage public lands and promote the development of agricultural cooperatives, the arguments state that “it is to the public advantage that no lands over which the public have any rights should pass into the hands of individual proprietors”, and that the “opportunities for extending its [co-operative agriculture] operations are not afforded by private landowners” (J. S. Mill 1872, 767).

There is, surely, a clear divergence of view with regard to the nationalization of land between Marx and Mill, but one that is far from implying a desire to establish capitalism on Mill’s part, as I will show in the next section.

5 How Mill diverged from Wakefield

On at least two elements, Mill is clearly opposed to Wakefield’s defence of capitalist agriculture, whatever the enthusiasm he expressed for systematic colonization. This again brings

²⁸ There are quite similar statements in his article on the Irish land question (cf. J. S. Mill 1870, 672).

Mill closer to Marx, contributing further to rendering the latter's critique of Mill's political economy unjustified.

5.1 Mill's opposition to capitalist agriculture

In Book I (ix, 4) of the *Principles*, Mill opposes Wakefield on the question of the scale of farms. Wakefield, who is closer to Marx, praises the great English farms (against the French peasantry) because of their greater productivity.²⁹ According to Mill, on the other hand, "small culture" shows a greater productivity for the reason that it induces greater involvement of the peasant owner (this also applies, but to a lesser extent, to the *métayer*). Mill believed that "the superiority of the large system in agriculture is by no means so clearly established as in manufactures" (J. S. Mill 1848a, 142). Mill considers that Wakefield exaggerates the possibility that agricultural work could benefit from the *technical* division of labour (the "complex combination", in Wakefieldian terminology). It is essentially "simple co-operation", that is, the fact that there are "several persons helping one another in the same work", which can be implemented there (J. S. Mill 1848a, 143). Of course, large-scale irrigation or drainage works require a technical division of labour. But even in this case, nothing prevents an association of farmers owning their land so as to carry it out (J. S. Mill 1848a, 147). Thus the "*petite culture*" that Mill defends is explicitly conceived as standing in opposition to capitalist agriculture: "the disadvantage, when disadvantage there is, of small or rather of peasant farming, as compared with *capitalist farming*, must chiefly consist in inferiority of skill and knowledge; but it is not true, as a general fact, that such inferiority exists" (J. S. Mill 1848a, 146, my emphasis). Mill cites the example of Flanders and Italy at the time where there are small farms and high productivity. As for the agricultural production of France, founded precisely on this "*petite culture*", Mill deems that its inferior productivity compared to that of Great Britain is by no means a counter-example. The problem of French agriculture is not so much the small individual property as a lack of technical skills, along with often too small and, above all, too scattered parcels.

This advocacy of *petite culture* seems to contradict partly Mill's defence of the concentration of farms, inherent in the Wakefield system and claimed in other passages of the *Principles* (J. S.

²⁹ The debate about the impact of farm size on agriculture productivity is still ongoing. Recent researches tend to demonstrate that larger farms have much higher labour productivity than smaller farms (Adamopoulos and Restuccia 2014).

Mill 1848b, 768). This paradox can be resolved by noting that Mill's interest in the Wakefield system, that is to say in the benefits of a planned division of labour, pertains exclusively to the *social* division of labour, not the *technical* one that could be implemented in large capitalist farms. As he says in chapter VIII, sec. 3 of Book I of the *Principles*, the establishment of a productive agriculture requires that there are incentives for farmers to produce surpluses. This implies a significant "town population" (i.e. a non-agricultural population) in close proximity to agricultural holdings or sufficient international outlets. Thus, Wakefield's merit is to have stressed that the colonies must include such a "town population" and that farms should not be disseminated at a distance from it;³⁰ in contrast, Mill states explicitly that the Wakefield system has nothing to do with the promotion of large capitalist farms:

The principle on which the scheme is founded, does not depend on any theory respecting the superior productiveness of land held in large portions, and cultivated by *hired labour*. (J. S. Mill 1848a, 121, our emphasis)

The very core of Mill's plan is not to create large capitalist farms, but to concentrate the population on a given territory, a fact that his controversy with Cairnes only confirms.³¹ In his critical review of the *Principles* for the 1865 edition, Cairnes claims that it is not the "separation of employment" (i.e. social division of labour) between the agricultural and the non-agricultural that increases productivity in agriculture; it is rather the increase in population and in the level of qualifications (Cairnes in J. S. Mill 1848b, 1046). In practice, what is needed is to attract as many skilled workers as possible to the colonies. There is, therefore, no need to seek to create a social division of labour between town and countryside: international trade must be sufficient to absorb the agricultural surpluses of the colonies. In reply, in a letter of 12 December 1864, Mill maintains his defence of the Wakefield system, retorting that in the colonies international trade would not take place if the colonists were scattered (J. S. Mill 1972, 976). Again, Mill emphasizes the proximity between economic agents and the density within a given territory as key incentives for the exchange of surpluses. Therefore, Mill thinks that from an economic point of view agricultural capitalism is not required in the settler colonies.

³⁰ Thus, in the case of India, its low agricultural productivity comes from the "deficiency of town population" and not from the fact that its agricultural system is composed of "small holdings" (J. S. Mill 1848a, 121). Later, in the *Principles*, Mill expressed himself favorably on the proposal of the famous British agronomist Arthur Young to impose by law a limit to the fragmentation of properties (J. S. Mill 1848a, 276-77).

³¹ See the Mill-Cairnes correspondence recorded at the end of the *Principles*, Volume III of the *Collected Works*, p. 1046.

Furthermore, Mill believes that agricultural capitalism is not needed either from a moral perspective, “which is still more important than the economical” (*ibid.*, 768). In Book II of the *Principles*, Mill proposes a justification of small peasant property in terms of the cultural and moral well-being of the peasants. He directly contrasts peasant property with slavery, in that the former constitutes the state “in which [the labouring class] are the most uncontrolled arbiters of their own lot” (J. S. Mill 1848a, 252). Mill praises the Swiss, German, Norwegian, and Belgian-Flemish peasantry, which, in addition to being more productive, also presents the highest degree of social development because it rests on private property coupled with small production scales. Indeed, Mill believes that this form of organization stimulates the intelligence of peasants as well as their “forethought and self-control” (chapter VII, 2 & 3). Mill, who is constantly concerned about the Malthusian problem of overcrowding, feels that they are less likely to multiply when their material situation improves, compared to salaried workers (J. S. Mill 1848a, 283–84). Thus, “compared with the English system of cultivation by *hired labour*, [peasant properties] must be regarded as eminently beneficial to the labouring class” (J. S. Mill 1848a, 296, emphasis mine).

At the end of the *Principles*, Mill clarifies matters and finally distinguishes three types of agricultural organisation according to their increasing degree of desirability: hired labour, *petite culture*, and cooperative socialism. *Petite culture* is thus only a second best from a moral standpoint:

The opinion expressed in a former part of this treatise respecting small landed properties and peasant proprietors, may have made the reader anticipate that a wide diffusion of property in land is the resource on which I rely for exempting at least the agricultural labourers from exclusive dependence on labour for hire. Such, however, is not my opinion (J. S. Mill 1848b, 767).³²

In order to fully understand Mill’s assessment of the three property relations, I think it is enlightening to apply McCabe’s analytical framework of “desirability”, “feasibility” and “accessibility” (McCabe 2019, 3–4) to the agricultural issue. Besides, it is also important to bear in mind that Mill differentiates between two different regions of the world: old and new countries.

³² I depart from Vincent W. Bladen who notes in his introduction to the *Principles* that “along with his admiration for the co-operative association in industry, Mill had a curiously individualistic attitude to the organization of agriculture” (Bladen 1965, li). Admittedly, in the chapter devoted to the study of peasant private property Mill adds in concluding remarks that he does not feel himself “on the present occasion called upon to compare it with the joint ownership of the land by associations of labourers” (J. S. Mill 1848a, 296). But Bladen seems to have overseen the passage we quote here.

Mill's "North Star", by which he thinks we ought to guide desirable social reforms is definitely cooperative socialism, as McCabe has previously demonstrated. Now, in advanced countries, where production is at any rate already on a large scale, Mill claims that this ideal is feasible:

thanks to the "association of labourers among themselves", it is possible to obtain "the civilizing and improving influences of association, and the efficiency and economy of production on a large scale (...) without dividing the producers into two parties with hostile interests and feelings" (*ibid.*, 769).³³

And the concrete experiments of workers associations show that it is available. Yet, in the context of systematic colonization, one might well have expected Mill to have encouraged the development of agricultural cooperatives, which appear to be feasible particularly since Wakefield's idea was to bring in "civilized" settlers, i.e. families (especially young married couples), unlike the usual deportees, convicts or other adventurers who were the bulk of the forces. For Mill considers that socialism in general rest on very high civic virtues, of which only an educated elite is capable (see the "Additional Preface" to the 3rd edition of the *Principles* in J. S. Mill 1848a, cxiii; as well as his *Chapters on Socialism* in Mill 1879). Mill's lack of support for any cooperative experiments in the case of settler colonization admittedly contrasts with his advocacy of the same in Europe.

By contrast, *petite culture*, which is *feasible* and also *available* (especially in new countries due to superabundant and priceless land), is less *desirable* because, notwithstanding its aforementioned positive effects, it impedes the process of civilisation. Mill argues here that it leads to "disperse mankind over the earth in single families, each ruled internally, as families now are, by a patriarchal despot, and having scarcely any community of interest" (*ibid.*, 768).

As far as farming capitalism is concerned, Mill distinguishes again between old and new countries. Whereas in the former countries he clearly rejects any desirability of wage labour, in the latter he tolerates it only in as much as it is temporary:

To begin as hired labourers, then after a few years to work on their own account, and finally employ others, is the normal condition of labourers in a new country, rapidly increasing in wealth and population, like America or Australia (*ibid.*, 766).

³³ We fully agree with McCabe's (2019, 16-17) analysis of the slight textual changes Mill made to this passage in successive editions of the *Principles* (although her reference to Mill's text contains a pagination error in note 135 on p. 16: in the *CWIII* the passage is p. 769, not p. 672): Mill tends to question the "*speed* at which society might transition" towards socialism, but "the direction of change is still towards socialism" (McCabe 2019, 17).

Furthermore, he defends the existence of a labour market in settler colonies only insofar as it is to the advantage of the workers:

Competition even in the labour market is a source not of low but of high wages, wherever the competition *for* labour exceeds the competition *of* labour, as in America, [and] in the colonies (*ibid.*, 794, emphasis in the original).

Consequently, it is evident that in the case of settler colonies, Mill's agricultural *ideal* does not consist in recreating "eternal" capitalist relations by destroying private property based on personal labour – contrary to what Marx suggests. It is noteworthy that the key passage in Mill's text, mentioned above, that labourers would form associations among themselves was added in the 3rd edition of the *Principles*. Marx apparently knew Mill only through the second edition of the *Principles* (1849) and the *Essays on some Unsettled Questions* published in 1844.³⁴

5.2 Mill's advocacy of emancipation

A second example of the gap that separates Mill from Wakefield – and that brings him closer to Marx – regards the question of wage exploitation and the analysis of social classes. At first glance, Wakefield himself does not seek to create a class of wage earners whose ascendancy towards any future form of economic independence would be barred. On the contrary, labourers are supposed, after a few years, to have accumulated sufficient capital to be able to acquire their own plot (see above 1.1). One could add that Wakefield joins Mill and Marx on the importance of civilizing the colonies in the face of the risk of a return to the state of nature: by concentrating production, one avoids the population becoming scattered, which favours civilization. Marx wrote famous passages on the backwardness of the French peasants, a situation said to be due to their dissemination on small plots, whereas industrial workers, gathered together in the manufacture and especially the great industry, are the heralds of social progress. Mill insists likewise on the importance of urbanizing the colonies to "civilize" them (Bell 2010, 41).

However, the resemblance ends here: Wakefield is an advocate of capitalist relations and he even justifies economic inequalities. Holding that equal ownership of capital prevents fixed capital activities (Wakefield 1833, 1:17), he *de facto* rejects any cooperative organization of production. Yet Wakefield is a thinker who subscribes to the "cooperation" of labour, which could have

³⁴ On this issue, see the detailed study conducted by Evans (1989, 276).

inspired socialist themes.³⁵ In his critical edition of the *Wealth of Nations*, he considers that the expression “division of labour” does not correctly reflect Smith’s thought. Smith in Chapter I of Book I seeks the specifically *social* phenomenon of the “combination of labour” (Wakefield in Smith 1776, 1:24) – as opposed to the “natural division” (that is the “muscular” separation) of the forces of labour between men.³⁶ In civilized societies, most commodities are the result of the concurrence of a multitude of labourers, and therefore imply the “union” (*ibid.*, 25) of many individuals’ labour. Therefore, Wakefield proposed to substitute the term “co-operation” for “division of labour”. Be it “simple” or “complex,” cooperation always consists, according to Wakefield, in the fact that people “help each other” (*ibid.*, 26), providing each other a “mutual assistance” (*ibid.*, 27). But Wakefield’s sardonic criticism of Owen speaks volumes about the distance between Wakefield and socialism: Owen aims at setting up a co-operative system, Wakefield tells us, whereas Owen’s scheme precisely consists in a “division of labour” since it entails the separation of humanity “into small distinct societies, amongst which there shall be no exchange” (*ibid.*, 43). In other words, Wakefield retains only the productivity criterion, with no attention paid to exploitation. Marx understood Wakefield perfectly on this matter: the first sentence of the chapter entitled “Cooperation” in *Capital* vol. I indicates that cooperation is not about cooperative enterprises but “capitalist production [that is to say, that which] actually begins only where a single master exploits many wage-earners at the same time” (Marx 1875, 859).

In the political sphere, too, Wakefield dismissed any democratic demand, since for him the political equality of rights would lead the majority, i.e. the working class, to demand “a revolution of property” (Wakefield 1833, 1:191), that is to say, a “confiscation” of capital even though “capital does so much more than labour” in terms of productivity. As a consequence, “any legislative attack upon property would cause a decrease of production” (Wakefield 1833, 1:195),³⁷ hence the solution provided by Wakefield, namely the necessity to improve the comfort of the working class through emigration. Systematic colonization, in the mind of its architect, is thus also a solution to preserve the established order in Great Britain, “for the good of the nation” (*ibid.*, 193). This political perspective was certainly not one that would endear him to Marx.³⁸

³⁵ Semmel emphasizes the theoretical proximity between a number of analyses of Marx and Wakefield (Semmel 1961, 516-17) and more generally between Marxist thought and that of the Philosophic Radicals (*ibid.*, p. 521 and 525).

³⁶ “Nature has divided labour into single pairs of hands.” The division of labor is thus associated with uncivilized peoples, evolving in a state of nature (Smith 1776, 1:24). See also Wakefield (Smith 1776, 1:42-44): “all schemes for dividing labour tend to drive us back into a state of barbarism” (*ibid.*, p. 44).

³⁷ Wakefield has been harshly criticized by historians such as J. C. Beaglehole, B. Fitzpatrick, or W. B. Sutch for having created a fundamentally inequitable society in New Zealand. On this matter see Pappe (1951, 88-89).

³⁸ All this passage from *England and America* is reminiscent of F. List and its invocation of the “good of the nation” to justify protectionism. One may remember, interestingly, that Marx opposed List and his idea of the

This being said, it would be a great mistake to lump Mill and Wakefield together. It is indeed on this issue that the difference between them is most obvious. As rightly underlined by Piterberg and Veracini (2015), Wakefield feared the education of the working classes, as he believed it could lead to Chartism and socialism, and ultimately to revolution. This was of course in direct opposition to Mill's views. Thus, one has to make clear that among the promoters of systematic colonization there is in reality a plurality of ways of conceiving the civilizational model which colonization is capable of engendering, beside the one that Wakefield in fact designed. Whereas Marx tends to subsume all non-revolutionary economists under the single category of "bourgeois," commentators have repeatedly emphasized the differences between Wakefield and Mill in particular. Bell points out that Wakefield's idea of the colonies "was ultimately more conservative than Mill's. He wanted to transpose hierarchical British social relations onto the colonies". Mill, on the contrary, saw the colonies as a space for social experimentation, as "laboratories of character development" (Bell 2010, 46). Winch reminds us that the Philosophic Radicals were not revolutionaries, but above all critics of the aristocracy, esteeming the middle classes (Winch 1965, 151) and adopting a "paternalistic" attitude towards the working classes: "in the society of their dreams, inequality and ranks were to be maintained. Wakefield[']s view of society was not so much 'aristocratic' as bourgeois, and if we find his vision limited then many of the classical school must face the same charge" (Winch 1965, 153). Yet Mill, it seems to us, deserves to be set apart, as Winch himself later acknowledged. In his commentary on the famous chapter VII of Book IV of the *Principles* (entitled "On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes") he notes that despite Mill's affinity with Coleridge's and Carlyle's conservative ideas, according to which moral regeneration must take precedence over social reform, Mill rejected any paternalism, and this chapter specifically targets the Victorian intelligentsia of the time (Winch 1985, 33).

Indeed, the political and social ideal he pursues (in the colonies as well as in the mother country) does not simply consist in improving the material standard of living of the population, but at the same time in deepening social and political equality as well as emancipation. For example, Mill is delighted that the cooperative experiments in France and elsewhere in Europe (which Mill describes in a detailed manner in section 6 of the famous chapter VII) prove that the workers decided "not only that they would work for one another, instead of working for a master tradesman or manufacturer, but that they would also free themselves" (J. S. Mill 1848b, 775).

"productive forces of the nation", which he described as "phantoms", that is fantasies aimed at deluding people (Marx 1845, 93).

These working class men “would realize, at least in the industrial department, the best aspirations of the democratic spirit” (J. S. Mill 1848b, 793). Throughout this section Mill clearly highlights two great advantages of cooperatives: the struggle against miserable exploitation, on the one hand, and the moral and political struggle for the establishment of democracy in the sphere of production, on the other. This twofold challenge is clearly summarized at the end of the section, when he avers that through the association of workers the aim is both to achieve the “most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for universal good” and “social justice” (J. S. Mill 1848b, 794). As in Marx’s texts, we see the importance of the political and moral dimension of cooperatives. Ultimately, Mill joins Marx once again and depart definitely from Wakefield.

6 Mill’s proximity to Marx’s critique of capitalism

Given that Marx’s critique of Wakefield’s scheme appears when he discusses the “so-called original accumulation”, a full examination of the similarities between Marx and Mill requires an analysis of Mill’s approach to the question of private property and capital.

6.1 Mill, a critic of the idea of the naturalness of private property

From the first edition of the *Principles* onwards (1848), Mill considers property as the product of a historical process of appropriation by force, while common law afterwards settles this *de facto* possession.³⁹ As already shown in Gillig (2016, 381–84), Mill is clearly some distance from a naively naturalistic point of view which would suppose private property in general – and *a fortiori* private property of the means of production – as having existed for all eternity, and especially in an identical form. For instance, concerning the right of bequest, he underlines that such a right “in a primitive state of society, was seldom recognised; a clear proof, were there no other, that property was conceived in a manner totally different from the conception of it in the present time” (J. S. Mill 1848a, 219). It is interesting to note that in the 1862 edition Mill refers to the work that partly inspired the English historical school (and Cliffe Leslie in particular): *Ancient Law* written by Henry Maine. Collini et al. rightly claim that “*Ancient Law* was added [in the 1862 edition] merely to give weight to a long-held conviction” (Collini, Winch, and Burrow 1983, 146) – a

³⁹ A point of view defended recurrently in his works. In *The Subjection of Women*, for example, he argues that the law merely endorses the inequality of the sexes that historically existed first, as in the case of slavery: “Laws and systems of polity always [...] convert what was a mere physical fact into a legal right, give it the sanction of society... Slavery, from being a mere affair of force between the master and the slave, became regularized... The inequality of rights between men and women has no other source than the law of the strongest” (J. S. Mill 1869, 264).

conviction that was acquired in particular from the Saint-Simonians as early as the 1830s. Elsewhere, Mill reiterated this interest in Maine's thought, stating that Maine had shown how much modern laws, institutions, and ideas are "continually accepted as dictates of nature and necessities of life, which, if we knew all, we should see to have originated in *artificial* arrangements of society" (J. S. Mill 1867, 246, my emphasis).⁴⁰

Yet up to the end of his life Mill remained convinced that the problem was not the "system of private property" (J. S. Mill 1848a, 214). One has to make clear that this divergence between Marx and Mill is only apparent, since they understood the concept of private ownership of the instruments of production in radically antithetical ways. Private property corresponds for Marx to the social system in effect in the industrialized countries of his time. But according to Mill, and contrary to Marx, "private property" does not amount to the system which prevailed in Great Britain at that time: "the laws of property have never yet conformed to the principles on which the justification of private property rests" (J. S. Mill 1848a, 207). Mill considers that private property corresponds to a system theoretically supposed to imply "the guarantee to individuals of the fruits of their *own* labour and abstinence" (J. S. Mill 1848a, 208 emphasis mine).

Keeping this in mind, it is interesting to note the close proximity between Marx's analysis and that of Mill on the distinction between property based on the work of others and that based on one's own work. What is more, not only did Mill envisage the possibility that capitalism could be transcended, but he even fostered a growing sympathy for socialist experiments (workers' cooperatives) over the successive editions of the *Principles*. In all, Marx and Mill shared a common political goal (the end of exploitation)⁴¹ but seemed at odds concerning the means to achieve it: subversion of the system of private property *versus* improvement of it.

It should nevertheless be noted that these considerations on private property only appeared from the 3rd edition of the *Principles* (1852) onwards, of which Marx himself had seemingly no knowledge, as mentioned earlier. It is therefore not certain that Marx had any knowledge of Mill's more balanced view on property, which may explain why he did not make a special case for Mill on this topic.

⁴⁰ For an analysis of Marx's ambivalent relationship with Maine, see Stedman Jones (2016, 576; 583–85).

⁴¹ Doubtless, Marx and Mill provided different ultimate philosophical reasons for legitimating that goal: according to Marx, the aim was to restore man's lost social essence (see the 3rd Manuscripts of 1844 and Stedman Jones's comments on it in Marx and Engels 2002, sect. 9); according to Mill, it was to allow man to develop his potentialities and his spontaneity (cf. *Principles* and especially *On Liberty*). Yet even on this issue these two authors have a great deal in common (see Nutzinger 1984, 122).

I have highlighted how little Marx's general criticism of the naturalness of political economy appears legitimate with regard to Mill's general viewpoint on capitalism. Now, it is necessary to clarify the starting point of Marx's critique of the Classics in chapter XXXIII, namely, their alleged pretension to subsume any private property under the term "capital".

6.2 Mill's critique of the naturalness of the categories of "capital" and "profit"

Marx associates the term "capital" exclusively with "property based on the labour of others" – what we nowadays call "capitalism". Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that by doing so, Marx does not intend to defend the idea that outside capitalism, in the case of "property based on personal labour", production could dispense with a capital understood as "advances" (to use the physiocratic term). For, although capitalism is not natural, the human condition entails the eternal necessity of labour; and, as Marx points out in the manuscripts of the first book of *Capital* vol. I dated 1863, all labour always requires means of production arising from earlier works. The problem for Marx is semantic: by naming these means of production "capital", economists pass off a particular social relation of production – that is capitalism – for universal: "if I then stick to them the name of capital [...] I shall have demonstrated that the existence of capital is, for human production, an eternal law of nature"⁴² (Marx 1988, 73–74). Marx points out that this ideological discourse is to be found in Bastiat, in Martineau, or in the treatises of the *Society for the Advancement of Useful Knowledge*, but also "among true scholars" (*ibid.*). And, a page before, Marx had just cited Mill's *Principles* as an example of one of the "best economics textbooks" which nevertheless commits the "insanity to take a determined social relation of production, materialized in objects, for the natural and objective property of these things" and which proclaims "from the very first pages that the elements of the production process [...] are land, capital and labour", thus confusing "the appropriation of the labour process by the capital with the labour process itself"⁴³ (Marx 1988, 73. The asterisk refers to Mill's *Principles*).

Yet when one looks into Mill's own definition of capital, the concept of capital is not inherent to the particular social system of wage labour. It designates, in the wake of Smith and of the physiocratic concept of "advances", a fund necessary to begin production. According to Marx,

⁴² „Hänge ich ihnen daher den Namen *Capital* an in der Zuversicht, dass „semper aliquid haeret“, so habe ich bewiesen, dass die Existenz des Capitals ein ewiges Naturgesetz der menschlichen Production ist...“

⁴³ Here is the original without the cut: „Diese Verrücktheit, die ein bestimmtes *gesellschaftliches Produktionsverhältniß*, das sich in Dingen darstellt, als dingliche Natureigenschaft dieser Sachen selbst nimmt, schlägt uns ins Gesicht, wenn wir das erste beste Handbuch der Oekonomie aufschlagen, und gleich auf der ersten Seite lesen, daß die Elemente des Produktionsprocesses, auf ihre allgemeinste Form zurückgeführt, Erde, *Capital* und Arbeit sind“. And the note reads: "* Sieh z. B. *John St. Mill. Principles of Pol. Economy*. v. I, b. I.“

only the Physiocrats managed to avoid this ideological trap (Marx 1863, 338). But when Mill defines capital as a “stock, previously accumulated, of the products of former labour” and which provides “services which present labour requires from past, and from the produce of past, labour” (J. S. Mill 1848a, 55), his definition does not necessarily imply wage-labour. Mill’s definition is compatible with the case of an isolated worker or of cooperative workers possessing their means of production and accumulating for their own future production. Admittedly, Mill is not so clear on this last point. All the more so as, when he attempts to illustrate his definition (“to familiarize ourselves with the conception”, *ibid.*), he takes only examples involving the hiring of employees by capitalists affording their subsistence (J. S. Mill 1848a, 55–57). Moreover, when he justifies the remuneration of the capitalist, Mill argues that, faced with the risk he incurs “he must be compensated, otherwise he will not incur it. He must likewise be remunerated for the devotion of his time and labour” (J. S. Mill 1848a, 401). Certainly, the use of the modal verb of obligation “must” may be interpreted as a naturalizing posture. However, one has to keep in mind all the oratorical precautions taken by Mill to re-situate capitalism in its socio-historical and geographical particularity.

More problematic seems Mill’s adherence to the explanation of profit in terms of abstinence introduced by Senior. Profit is indeed a “reward” obtained by the capitalist for “forbearing to consume his capital for his own uses, and allowing it to be consumed by productive labourers” (J. S. Mill 1848a, 400). While Mill disliked landowners and their undeserved incomes and, more generally, all rent receivers, recipients of profit did not seem to him to be a problem. Whether they are mere lenders, limited partners or managing capitalists, Mill regards the profit received by these economic agents as legitimate because it compensates a sacrifice made on their part, respectively abstinence, risk, and labour (“the labour and skill required for superintendence”, (J. S. Mill 1848a, 401). Marx, who aims at substituting for the fable of “original accumulation” based on *abstinence* the notion of *expropriation*, vigorously reacted against Mill for subscribing to Senior’s theory, thereby highlighting what he perceived to be an inherent inconsistency in Mill’s position:

Mr. J. St. Mill contents himself with reproducing in one page the theory of Ricardo’s profit and annexes on the other hand Senior’s ‘remuneration of abstinence’. [Whereas the Hegelian ‘contradiction’, the source of all dialectics, is alien to him, on the other hand the shallowest contradictions are familiar to him].⁴⁴ (Marx 1875, 1101, note b)

⁴⁴ The part in brackets does not appear in the French edition but appears in the first German edition: „Herr John St. Mill exzerpiert dagegen auf der einen Seite Ricardos Profittheorie und annexiert auf der andren Seniors

In addition, Marx went so far as to downgrade him to the rank of “vulgar economist” (along with Senior) from the second German edition of *Capital* (1873): “[i]t has never occurred to the vulgar economist to make the simple reflexion, that every human action may be viewed, as ‘abstinence’ from its opposite. [...] ‘Determinatio est Negatio’”⁴⁵ (*ibid.*).

It is undeniable that the idea of profit as a deserved reward in return for abstinence entails the performative effect, whether voluntary or not, of justifying it. Still, as has already been suggested in the literature by Balassa (1959, 150–51) or Oakley (1985, II:177–78), Mill uses the term “abstinence” not to explain the existence of profit *objectively*, but to account for it *subjectively*.⁴⁶ Abstinence is the voluntary renunciation of an economic agent to consume (“unproductively”) in the hope of a future profit or for some other reasons. But hopes alone, which by definition are subjective, are insufficient for the generation of profit. It is true that there may well be abstinence without any profit being generated, for example from a wealthy salaryman or a self-employed artisan. For Mill, on the other hand, what objectively explains profit – or, “surplus value”, as Marx puts it – is surprisingly that for a part of his time under the capitalist the wage earner works for free, which is the explanation usually attributed to Marx:

the reason why capital yields a profit, is because food, clothing, materials, and tools, last longer than the time which was required to produce them; so that if a capitalist supplies a party of *labourers* with these things, on condition of receiving all they produce, they *will*, in addition to reproducing their own necessaries and instruments, *have a portion of their time remaining, to work for the capitalist*. We thus see that profit arises, not from the incident of exchange, but from the productive power of labour; and the general profit of the country is always what the productive power of labour makes it, whether any exchange takes place or not. (J. S. Mill 1848a, 411 italics mine)

This passage, well known to commentators, Mill adds in the fourth edition of the *Principles* (1857); it appears, indeed, within a completely new fifth section added to chapter XV of Book II on the origin of profit, which not only resembles the Marxian theory of exploitation but also

„remuneration of abstinence“. So fremd ihm der Hegelsche „Widerspruch“, die Springquelle aller Dialektik, so heimisch ist er in platten Widersprüchen“.

⁴⁵ „Der Vulgärökonom hat nie die einfache Reflexion angestellt, daß jede menschliche Handlung als „Enthaltung“ von ihrem Gegenteil aufgefaßt werden kann. [...] Determinatio est negatio“.

⁴⁶ For further arguments denying any contradiction in Mill’s defence of both abstinence and surplus-value, see Hollander (2008, 477).

anticipates it.⁴⁷ In the end, for Mill (as for Marx) there can be no profit without hired labour.

This cardinal point deserved to be clarified because it invalidates Marx's idea that there is an impassable gap between his own relativistic conception of profit and the supposed natural conception of the Classics and of Mill in particular. Marx undoubtedly here employs more incisive and penetrating conceptual distinctions than Mill; but Marx is wrong when he does not recognize any proximity between Mill's stance and his own.

Conclusion

This study has tried to highlight the surprising commonality between Mill and Marx's theoretical views on a number of issues related to "systematic colonization". Marx, in agreement with Mill, concurred with Wakefield's assertion that production ought to be planned through social division of labour. A hitherto unacknowledged element in the literature is that, in addition to Marx, Mill also differed with Wakefield on the matter of whether such planning should transpire within a capitalist framework. As a consequence it is unwarranted to apply Marx's critique of the naturalness of political economy specifically to Mill's writings. The fact that Mill supports "systematic colonization" does not prove his inconsistency or "shallow syncretism" between socialism and capitalism.

It is important to note that this in no way detracts from the relevance of Marx's critique of political economy, particularly that of primitive accumulation. Yet while the marxian criticism finds little purchase in the case of Mill, it is indeed appropriate in the case of other authors such as Herman Merivale or Gustave de Molinari, from whom Marx quotes, in the chapter XXXIII of *Capital* vol. I, passages that undoubtedly support his thesis. For instance, Merivale affirms that "in the countries of old civilization, the worker is, although free, dependent on the capitalist by virtue of a natural law (!); in the colonies this dependence *must* be created by artificial means" (Marx 1875, 1231, underlined by Marx). In the same way, Molinari is shocked by the fact that in

⁴⁷ About Marx's disturbing comment on this passage, see Gillig (2016, sec. 3.3.1). As noted by Hollander (2008, 477), at one time Marx had felt able to concede Mill's claims regarding surplus value, as shown by a passage in the *Economic Manuscripts*.

the colonies “we have seen the simple (*sic*) workers [...] demanding from them [the capitalists] wages out of all proportion with the *legitimate share* in the product that was theirs” (Marx 1875, 1231, note a, stressed by Marx). Marx, who intends to demonstrate the political and therefore unnatural dimension of the distribution of the produce, declares ironically that Molinari is experiencing “a terrible itching to lend [in the colonies] a bit of police assistance to this poor law of supply and demand which elsewhere [...] works so well by itself” (*ibid.*). As we have seen, Mill is at odds with such a naturalizing, depoliticizing, conception of social relations. Marx, who casts shame on all economists – these “sycophants of capital” (Marx 1875, 1225) – gives no place to the specific thought of Mill.

The present study raises also the question of Marx’s contemptuous attitude towards Mill. Admittedly, if Mill is himself a critic of political economy, it is not at all with the same conceptual force as Marx. In Mill’s texts, this criticism is neither as central, nor as incisive, nor as systematic. Besides, certain aspects of Mill’s writings may have caused legitimate irritation on the part of Marx. Mill defended Wakefield in particular due to his obsessive Malthusianism, which Marx and Engels interpreted as “the most open declaration of war of the bourgeoisie upon the proletariat” (Engels 1845b, 493). Nonetheless, Mill is quoted twelve times in *Capital* Vol. I but only twice in Vol. II and six times in Vol. III, and he is barely mentioned in *Theories of Surplus-Value*. In other words, in around 4 500 pages, Mill is only mentioned around twenty times, which shows that Marx failed to pay enough attention to Mill’s remarkable intellectual openness.

A final discrepancy between Marx’s and Mill’s views on colonization could be raised in the case of the North American colonies. Indeed, Mill does not mention the utopian communist experiences that emerged there during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ One would be inclined to emphasize in this respect the radical break with Marx (and Engels) on this question, since these closed communities of Shakers, Rappists, Lutheran separatists of German origin, and other Owenites in New Harmony were praised by Marx and Engels precisely as the first communist models (Feuer 1966). In an essay written in 1845, Engels presents these communities as living evidence of the feasibility of communism (Engels 1845a). Admittedly, Mill also sees in the cooperative experiments concrete proof of the feasibility of socialism. Nonetheless, it is the European experiments, especially those in France, which he mentions (see *Principles*, Bk. IV, VII, 6). Moreover, as Kurer points out (in relation to cooperatives in general, beyond the strict North American case), “Mill had no sympathy with the notion of self-sufficient communities. Mill’s cooperatives are therefore engaged in trade” (Kurer 1992, 225). Yet even on this point, the

⁴⁸ For a detailed presentation of these experiments see Gide (1928, chap. VI).

opposition between Marx and Mill is not really fair: the admiration of Marx and Engels for the experiments they discovered in 1844 was in reality only of short duration. As early as 1846 Marx and Engels rejected these isolated experiences in the name of utopian socialism as doomed to failure, redefining communism as the strictly political struggle for the abolition of classes (Feuer 1966, 473).

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