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John Stuart Mill in Nineteenth-century Serbia: Influence on Political Thought and Gender Issues

Abstract: The paper deals with the reception of J. S. Mill's writings by contemporary Serbian intellectuals. As shown in the paper, the impact that Mill's ideas made on many important Serbian politicians and philosophers from all parts of the political spectrum was broad and profound. Special attention is paid to the work of liberal and socialist thinkers, notably Vladimir Jovanović and Svetozar Marković. The influence of Mill's ideas on Serbia's political development is also examined, as well as how Mill's attitude towards the question of women's rights impacted contemporary Serbian political thought.

Key words: John Stuart Mill, Serbia, Vladimir Jovanović, Svetozar Marković, Petar Kara-djordjević, liberalism, women's rights, politics

By the 1860s Great Britain and Serbia had had three decades of regular diplomatic relations behind them. As Serbia was only an autonomous principality under Ottoman suzerainty at the time, from 1837 the relations were maintained through the British consul general in Belgrade and the ambassador in Constantinople. The relations between the largest empire in the world and a small autonomous principality landlocked on the periphery of the Ottoman Empire were very complex, though. Great Britain sought to thwart Russia's penetration into the Balkans and to contain her influence. British policy was controversial inasmuch as it supported the preservation of the Ottoman Empire and the emancipation of the Principality of Serbia at the same time. Britain, a far-off country without any obvious economic and military role in Serbia, nonetheless exerted a significant political influence on the Principality in the late 1830s (1837–39), during the Crimean War (1853–56) and at the time of the Kanlidja Conference (1863). On an individual scale, one may mention Britons such as David Urquhart, a radical British politician and Russophobe who visited Serbia a few times in the 1830s and had an ideological influence on the question of her Constitution and the creation of a national programme, and Andrew Archibald Paton who published the first extensive account of travels through Serbia.¹ Ideas of British liberalism were first

¹ David Urquhart, *A Fragment of the History of Servia* (London 1843) (translated into Serbian and published in 1989); Andrew Archibald Paton, *Servia, Youngest Member of*

introduced in Serbia in the late 1850s by Konstantin Bogdanović and Vladimir Jovanović. It was as a result of those ideas that the so-called St Andrew's Day Assembly (1858/9) became the first parliament to assume sovereign power in a South-East European country. It seems interesting to note that in the mid-nineteenth century democratism was considered to be a feature of Serbia by the British public. Thus in 1858 John Bright, a British radical politician and champion of parliamentary reform, described the Serbs as a "democratic" people who allowed "upper classes" to be represented in the National Assembly.² In such a society the influence of a philosopher of liberalism such as John Stuart Mill could be nothing less than considerable.

Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government, On Liberty and Centralization* strongly influenced political and state-building thought in Serbia, notably the evolution of liberal thought during the 1860s and 1870s. One of the leading theorists of liberalism, Vladimir Jovanović, was the first to introduce Serbian society to the writings of English utilitarianists and positivists. He became acquainted with the work of English theorists of liberalism during his stays in London in the 1850s and 1860s. Holding John Stuart Mill in highest esteem, he translated into Serbian and published Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* in 1876.³ Jovanović's sympathies towards Mill seem to have stemmed from the fact that Mill's utilitarianism did not exclude the state from playing a role in the economy and social affairs. Namely, the Serbian liberals believed that the economy of an underdeveloped country such as Serbia had better prospects if assisted by the state.⁴ Moreover, Mill was acknowledged as one of the greatest thinkers of his time in all of Europe.

It was Mill's seminal work *Considerations on Representative Government* that Djura Vukičević, a distinguished Vojvodina⁵ jurist, drew

the European Family or, A Residence in Belgrade, and Travels in the Highlands and Woodlands of the Interior, during the years 1843 and 1844 (London 1845).

² Some members of the St Andrew's Day Assembly were appointed by the Prince. Cf. Č. Antić, "Britanske vesti o Svetoandrejskoj skupštini" [British press about St Andrew's Assembly], *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 63–64 (2001), 244.

³ D. T. Bataković, "Vladimir Jovanović – apostol liberalizma u Srbiji" [Vladimir Jovanović, the apostle of liberalism in Serbia], in *Liberalna misao u Srbiji. Prilozi istoriji liberalizma od kraja XVIII do sredine XX veka*, eds. J. Trkulja and D. Popović [Liberal thought in Serbia. Contributions to the history of Liberalism from the late 18th to the mid-20th century] (Belgrade 2001), 171.

⁴ B. Bešlin, *Evropski uticaji na srpski liberalizam u XIX veku* [European Influences on Serbian Liberalism in the 19th Century] (Sremski Karlovci–Novi Sad 2005), 757.

⁵ *Srbska Vojvodovina* or *Vojvodina Srbija* (Serbian Duchy) and Tamiški Banat, roughly Serbia's present-day northern province of Vojvodina, was an entity (*krunovina* or crown

on in writing his influential article “Representative system” published in 1876.⁶ He used a German translation because Jovanović’s was not published until later that year.⁷ Vukičević did not embrace Mill’s ideas unreservedly. Calling for a more radical democracy, he was critical of the English parliamentary system, and considered all limitations imposed on the right to vote as an injustice “violating the natural rights of man”.⁸ Vukičević concurred with Mill’s arguments against universal suffrage, mass participation in politics and the unlimited power of government, and with Mill’s belief that good education was the foremost and indispensable prerequisite for being able to make decisions of importance for a state. Convinced that a state governed by incompetent and ignorant people would inevitably end up in a general crisis, Mill argued that government should be performed by a minority, the educated elite, with the majority having enough liberties and rights to be able to control it.⁹ Vukičević therefore called for “general popular education” to be carried out before such a government could be instituted in Serbia. The right to vote would then be denied only to “criminals and mentally retarded”. On the other hand, he rejected Mill’s argument for giving individuals from the “better-educated” classes a double voting right, believing that it might make sense in countries with clear-cut class divisions, which was not the case in Serbia, where, according to his opinion, “social relations rest on much more natural foundations than in the European West”. According to some interpretations, Vukičević was also opposed to indirect voting under a bicameral system, which was later supported by most Serbian liberals.¹⁰

land) in the Habsburg Empire, established during the 1848/9 revolution by the political representatives of the Serbs from the south-eastern parts of the Habsburg Empire. After the revolution the Austrian government denied democratic and national rights to its ethnic Serb subjects, but the nominal existence of *Vojvodina Srbija* continued until 1860, when it was abolished.

⁶ Bešlin, *Evropski uticaji*, 656.

⁷ In 1876 this book of Mill’s became accessible to the Serbs who spoke Hungarian. It was translated by Benjamin Kállay, Austro-Hungarian consul general in Belgrade 1868–75 and administrator of Bosnia-Herzegovina 1882–1903.

⁸ Quoted after Bešlin, *Evropski uticaji*, 759.

⁹ M. Djurković, *Politička misao Džona Stjuarta Mila* [Political Thought of John Stuart Mill] (Belgrade 2006), 226 and 229.

¹⁰ Bešlin, *Evropski uticaji*, 759. However, the National Liberal Party’s official programmes (of 1888 and 1889) proclaimed a unicameral parliament as a party goal. Cf. V. Krestić and R. Ljušić, *Programi i statuti srpskih političkih stranaka do 1918* [Programmes and Statutes of Serbian Political Parties until 1918] (Belgrade 1991), 167, 171.

John S. Mill's famous essay *On Liberty* was translated into Serbian and published in Vienna in 1868 by Prince Petar Karadjordjević,¹¹ future King of Serbia (1903) and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918–21). A little earlier the Prince had met Vladimir Jovanović in Pest and their discussion about Mill might have inspired him to embark upon translating the essay, although from a French translation. In the preface he described Mill as a famous philosopher and statesman but, considering himself as not competent enough to appraise “such a celebrated writer”, he relied on quotations from Henry Thomas Buckle for introducing Mill to the Serbian reader. On Mill's example, Karadjordjević put forth his own views on the freedom of an individual and a people: “Of all principles that have taken shape, none is as legitimate, let alone as important, in the lives of individuals, peoples and all humankind, as — Freedom... Only a free man is able to build up his will and use all of his energies to improve his personality and thus help the advancement of the people he is related to by blood, language, native land, fortunes and misfortunes. From the freedom of the members of a people arises the overall Freedom of the people ... all that bolsters human dignity, invigorates the strength of people — all of it is the fruit of man's Freedom, people's Freedom!”¹²

In order to demonstrate to the Serbian reader that Mill is both an excellent philosopher and a statesman, Karadjordjević refers to Mill's books *The Principles of Political Economy* and *A System of Logic*, describing the former as “a true treasury of practical advice on how to put proven truths into practice”. Unlike him, the Serbian liberal politician and economist Čedomilj Mijatović,¹³ although an Anglophile, criticizes Mill's *Political Economy*, arguing that Mill “discusses financial issues quite unsystematically and cannot be credited with making any contribution in that field”.¹⁴ As for Mill's *System of Logic*, Petar Karadjordjević describes it as being “written more profoundly and sharp-wittedly than any other [book] since Aristotle”.¹⁵ Although never translated into Serbian, this work greatly influenced the development of the science of logic in Serbia. Alimpije Vasiljević, a philosopher and one of the leading ideologists of the United Serbian Youth¹⁶

¹¹ Bešlin, *Evropski uticaji*, 656.

¹² P. Karadjordjević, preface to his translation into Serbian of Mill's *On Liberty*: Dž. S. Mil, *O slobodi* (Belgrade 1912), pp. IX, X, XII.

¹³ On Mijatović see S. Marković, “Čedomilj Mijatović: A Leading Serbian Anglophile”, *Balcanica XXXVIII*[2007] (2008), 105–133.

¹⁴ Bešlin, *Evropski uticaji*, 823.

¹⁵ Karadjordjević, preface to Dž. S. Mil, *O slobodi*, XII.

¹⁶ The United Serbian Youth was a pan-Serbian political movement of the liberally-minded youth founded in Novi Sad in 1866 and active until 1871.

(*Ujedinjena Omladina Srpska*) drew on it for his three-volume *Logic Adapted for School Use*, which became a textbook at Belgrade's Great School (*Velika Škola*), the highest educational institution in Serbia at that time.¹⁷ Even the subtitle of Vasiljević's book states that it was written following the example of John Stuart Mill and "other newest and best writers", while in the preface Vasiljević fully acknowledges his great debt to Mill's famous *System of Logic*. According to Vasiljević, "Mill has built a complete system of logic as theory of knowledge, and in that respect his book stands at the top of everything ever done in that field".¹⁸ Mill's *System of Logic* also influenced Milan Kujundžić Aberdar, one of the first Serbs to receive education in Great Britain and, along with Vasiljević, the most important philosopher of the United Serbian Youth at the time he taught nineteenth-century philosophy at the Great School.¹⁹

In his preface to the translation of Mill's essay *On Liberty* Petar Karadjordjević offers a quite extensive analysis of Mill's claim that the principle of liberty has no application on immature persons and societies, observing the prevailing Western perception of Serbs as backward. Similarly to Vladimir Jovanović and other liberals, Karadjordjević rejects as groundless the claim that Serbs are immature for a parliamentary system: "Today, after so many centuries of our people not only not being independent but for the most part completely subjugated to foreigners ... today, a look into Serbian folk poetry, the life and customs of our people suffices ... — to see that our people is aware of the need to live and advance in community with other peoples; for it has the prerequisite qualities for such a development... And what does it need most for this progress? ... Freedom... Without enjoying freedom our people cannot progress: all this has inspired us to introduce our people to the book in which the famous writer expounds his thoughts on Liberty."²⁰

A thorough biographical study of Karadjordjević's years in exile interprets his preface as the political programme of a candidate for the throne of Serbia. Namely, the Prince claimed that the Serbian people did not enjoy

¹⁷ The Great School was a stage in the development of higher education in Serbia. In 1838 the Lyceum was established in Kragujevac. Three years later it was transferred to Belgrade and in 1863 replaced with the Great School that consisted of three faculties (Philosophy, Engineering, Law). During the following decades the Great School was being shaped on the model of modern European universities and thus became the core of the University of Belgrade established in 1905.

¹⁸ Quoted after Bešlin, *Evropski uticaji*, 786.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 792.

²⁰ Karadjordjević, preface to Dž. S. Mil, *O slobodi*, XIV, XV.

the liberties it deserved, because its large portion was living outside Serbia while the country was ruled by the rival Obrenović dynasty.²¹

The first reference to Prince Petar's translation can be found in a letter of his mother, Princess Persida, written a few months before its publication in 1868.²² In May 1868, the daily *Zastava* (Flag)²³ announced the book, and on 26th May brought out a review, whose author remains unknown.²⁴ Whether the announcement and review had any impact on the Serbian public remains an open question, given that the assassination of Prince Mihailo Obrenović in Belgrade just a few days later, on 29th May, understandably overshadowed all other events.

John Stuart Mill had many admirers and followers as theorist of liberalism, but he differed with most men of his times over one issue: the emancipation of women. While member of Parliament, Mill more than once endorsed and helped carry out actions of the British suffragette movement. In 1867 he proposed the amendment to a bill to replace the word "man" with the word "person".²⁵ In 1866 he presented to Parliament a petition signed by fifteen hundred persons demanding the right to vote for all real estate property owners regardless of gender.²⁶ Apart from Mill's actions in Parliament, the history of the struggle for women's rights remembers him as the writer of the essay *The Subjection of Women*, where he puts forward arguments for women being entitled to basic civil rights, and emphasizes the necessity of their having the right to vote.

The Subjection of Women first appeared in 1869, and its Serbian translation was published no later than 1871.²⁷ The preface to the Serbian edition of *The Subjection of Women* was penned by Svetozar Marković, the founder and leader of the socialist movement in Serbia. A year before (1870) he had published the text "Is a woman capable of being equal to a man?", which makes references to Mill's *Subjection of Women* and points out Mill's

²¹ D. Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I Karadjordjević u izgnanstvu 1844–1903* [King Peter I Karadjordjević in Exile 1844–1903], vol. III of *Kralj Petar I Karadjordjević* (Belgrade 2009), 47.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Zastava*, the Novi Sad-based daily, started in 1866 by the politician Svetozar Miletić, was the most influential and widely read newspaper of the Austro-Hungarian Serb community.

²⁴ Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I*, 49.

²⁵ L. E. Snellgrove, *Suffragettes and Votes for Women* (London 1984), 17.

²⁶ P. Bartley, *Votes for Women 1860–1928* (London 2001), 30.

²⁷ In 1870 the essay was translated into French, German and Polish; cf. N. Božinović, *Žensko pitanje u Srbiji u XIX i XX veku* [The Woman Question in Serbia in the 19th and 20th Centuries] (Belgrade 1996), 43.

view that patriarchy has arisen as a result of the physical dominance of men “while man was still in a state of savagery”, and that later on women have been brought up to be “slaves to their husbands”.²⁸ Marković begins the preface by assuming that the very title of Mill’s essay is likely to cause the reader to doubt: “We don’t need this; it’s too early for us.”²⁹ Assessing that issue as being one of the most important issues in the world, and thus in Serbia too, he wonders: “How should a half of all humankind, the *female sex*, be pulled out of the darkness of ignorance and won over for science and human advancement?”³⁰ It is on the solution to that issue that, in his opinion, the development of society and state institutions in Serbia would depend. Marković believed that less developed nations should rely on the knowledge and experience of others in solving that issue.

Marković proceeds to look at the moral role of women in the Serbian family and society, and emphasizes the importance and necessity of education: “In this kind of *domestic upbringing* mother plays quite a *pitiful* role. In most cases she is utterly uneducated. Even if she is educated as a *female*, she is not capable of imparting the *right knowledge* to her children, let alone of helping her children develop into human beings, *members of society* — *citizens*. A woman is not a citizen. She knows nothing about civil rights or even about civic and human duties and virtues.”³¹ As a result, Marković contends, mothers often tend to teach their children to be deceitful and dishonest; which is “not surprising considering that it is a slave who is bringing a future *citizen* up”.³² Looking at the economic position of women, Marković criticizes the female desire to dress up and buy flashy clothes, believing it to be the consequence of women’s lack of dignity as persons, of their being subjected to men and mere tools for male satisfaction rather than equal persons. In conclusion, Marković emphasizes that John S. Mill in his book stands up as a spokesman for women’s rights, as their advocate: “He speaks of the sufferings of women who have all duties and no rights in society. He points to the gross injustice that even the best, most learned, kindest woman has fewer rights than the worst, stupidest, meanest man.”³³ And underlines:

²⁸ Svetozar Marković, “Je li žena sposobna da bude ravnopravna s čovekom?” [Is a woman capable of being equal to a man], vol. II of *Sabrani spisi* [Collected Writings] (Belgrade 1965), 109. Marković appended to his own text the translation of John Bright’s speech on women’s right to vote delivered in Edinburgh in 1870.

²⁹ Svetozar Marković, preface to the Serbian edition of J. S. Mill, *Subjection of Women: Potčinjenost ženskinja* (Belgrade 1871), I.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, III.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, VII.

“By explaining how injustice is being done to women in society, Mill makes us inadvertently think about the other side of the woman question, i.e. that the injustice done to women rebounds on all of humanity. Readers who take time to study this book seriously will see that the issue of ‘women’s liberation’ is inseparably connected with overall social transformation, with the liberation of humanity from all evil, vice, tyranny and slavery. They will see that the ‘woman question’ is not too early for us, but the one that should be put on the top of the agenda.”³⁴

J. S. Mill and philosophers of British liberalism significantly influenced the development of Serbian political thought, the process of emancipation of women and cultural advancement. It seems interesting to note that liberalism inspired not only the liberally-oriented Serbian politicians and parties, but also early socialists, radicals and progressivists. The profound influence of British liberalism on nineteenth-century Serbian political thought was utterly disproportionate to Great Britain’s political or economic presence in Serbia, and perhaps was nearly comparable only to the influence of contemporary Russian philosophers.

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