

Comparing Mill's ideological "Custom" to Marx's critique of "Ideology"

Mills idea of "custom" expressed in his book *On Liberty* and Marx's "ideology" expressed in his work *The German Ideology* are fundamentally different. One overarching difference is that Marx is critiquing ideological thought and would argue that Mill's idea of "custom" and the individual are ideological constructions. When analyzing this difference, other differences emerge such as Marx's centrality of the mode of production being an underlying force in societies conceptions and his belief that materialist history is the engine of historical change. Also Mill's argument does not have a connection to the mode of production because it only focuses on individuals and their liberties, which Marx would argue has no true connection to the materialist world.

In John Stuart Mill's book *On Liberty*, he presents the idea that individuals possess certain inherent liberties such as freedom of thought and speech. He expresses deep concern for the protection of the individual and its liberties from societal and individual tyranny. He describes this social tyranny as the "despotism" of custom" an "oppressive yolk", and states that the way to prevent this is by protecting freedom of thought and speech and by learning from the eccentrics among us by admiring their differences.¹

Mill also goes on to present this idea of how custom can limit people and how individuals limit themselves internally by conformity. He describes this idea of custom as a set inherited practices, truths, and norms that society just accepts without even thinking about them which self-limits the individual. He warns that, "when it [ideas] has come to be a hereditary creed and to be received passively... there is a progressive tendency to forget all of the belief...accepting it

¹ Mill, John S. *On Liberty*. London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1859. 51. Print.

on truth dispensed with the necessity of realizing it in consciousness”.² Mill believes that customs inhibit people through this practice of becoming a societal norm because it causes people to just accept certain aspects and situations as they are instead of constantly questioning the world. He believes that this occurs in a voluntary way because, “it does not occur to them [individuals] to have any inclination, except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke”.³ If an individual is free to do what he chooses but he only chooses to do something customary because nothing else occurs to him, the individual is self limiting because he is not constantly thinking and acquiring knowledge, which is detrimental to the individual.

Marx presents a completely different argument from Mill in his excerpt *The German Ideology*. Marx is presenting a critique of ideologies and trying to give his audience a history of the relationship between ideas and the economic mode of production. He believes that the mode of production is the basis for society and dictates the way relationships and ideas are formed; believing that, “the nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production”.⁴ Marx believes that there is this division of the base being the mode of production and structure of the economic system and the superstructure being the mode of ideas, ideology, and mass culture that builds upon the base. He goes on to further explain how this set up creates the state and societal concepts such as classes which are all dependent on this base of the modes of production.

Marx describes in detail the way in which history has progressed forward due to the changing modes of production or materialist conditions. He first states that, “by producing their

² Mill, John S. *On Liberty*. London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1859.33.Print.

³ Mill, John S. *On Liberty*. London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1859.51.Print.

⁴ Marx, Karl. *The Marx Engels Reader*. London: W.W Norton&Company, 1978. 150. *The German Ideology*. Print.

means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life”.⁵ By this he is demonstrating that in the beginning of time men had to fulfill their first need, the need to survive and they subsisted off of whatever they could find. Therefore their society was built upon the mode of production and producing solely to survive. Once this need was fulfilled, this group or society would establish new needs that added to this production such as a division of labor or ownership, which in return began to create a societal organization infused with new ideas. Furthermore, “the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse's of men”.⁶ As a result of this, when modes of production began to change throughout history, ideas and societal concepts evolved as well pushing history forward.

By outlining both Mill’s and Marx’s arguments it is clear to see that they are fundamentally different in what they are arguing. One overarching difference between the two is that according to Marx’s analysis, Mill’s theory of liberty and its underlying conception of the individual is an ideological construction which Marx believes is a deficient way of thinking. Marx criticizes the Hegelians and ideological thought because it, “considers conceptions, thoughts, ideas, all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence as the real chains of men”.⁷ Marx believes that ideological thought is deficient thinking because it assumes that men come up with these ideas through their imagination and in return these ideas create change. He believes that this philosophy is not concrete enough because these ideas do not include a fundamental base of the mode of production.

⁵ Marx, Karl. *The Marx Engels Reader*. London: W.W Norton&Company, 1978. 150. The German Ideology. Print.

⁶ Marx, Karl. *The Marx Engels Reader*. London: W.W Norton&Company, 1978. 154. The German Ideology. Print.

⁷ Marx, Karl. *The Marx Engels Reader*. London: W.W Norton&Company, 1978. 149. The German Ideology. Print

Marx would classify Mill's theory of liberty and custom as ideological concepts because both focus on men being the creators of their own ideas and realities. Mill's ideas of custom and liberty follow the Young Hegelian thought process of,

“relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and limitations are products of their consciousness...logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness and thus removing their limitations”.⁸

This interpretation of the ideological thought process can be directly connected to Mill's idea of liberty and the individual. Mill clearly believes that individuals possess certain ideas and certain inherit liberties that allow them to express their ideas in whichever way they would like. This is an ideological conception because it begins with the basis of men's ideas, instead of a concrete connection to a fundamental materialist base. Instead of having this connection to the mode of production, Mill's concepts of the individual and his liberties emerge out of a thought process, making them ideological.

Also Mill's idea of custom is an attempt to bring attention to the fact that certain societal norms could be self-limiting to the individual. This whole idea is meant to illustrate to the individual how to prevent this social and individual tyranny from occurring which directly connects with the idea of men changing their moral postulate to a new consciousness removing an individual's limitations. Therefore, Mill's ideas of custom and the individual could be seen as an ideological construction because both begin with the individual having new ideas or new ways of thinking that causes him to change his consciousness and remove his limitations.

⁸ Ibid

Marx believes that this way of looking at the world is too arbitrary because it does not have a connection to materialist production. All of Mill's ideas spur from the imagination and are not connected to a concrete aspect. For example, to expose the arbitrariness of Mill's ideas Marx could pose a question such asking why liberty is not a custom but custom is a custom, demonstrating that these ideas are imagined and defined inside of other abstract ideas, instead of having a concrete connection to other ways that these ideas might have formed.

Instead of believing that individual ideas create change, Marx argues that individual or societal ideas are directly produced by the mode of production. According to Marx, Mill's idea of custom is lacking the fundamental base of the mode of production causing it be an ideological construction. Marx believes that the mode of production is the base for individual thought and experience, "as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of intercourse corresponding to these".⁹ This mode of production is the underlying base of societies conceptions and individual consciousness therefore ideas are dependent upon the mode of production. Marx states that, "men developing their material production and material intercourse, alter their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life".¹⁰ This demonstrates that according to Marx, the mode of production is the basis for societies ideas or conceptions directly contrasting with Mill's ideology of the individual and custom, which are connections to a moral thought processes.

Lastly, Marx is attempting to illustrate how materialist history as expressed in the mode of production is the engine of social change, while Mill is arguing that individual ideas and

⁹ Marx, Karl. *The Marx Engels Reader*. London: W.W Norton&Company, 1978. 154. The German Ideology. Print

¹⁰ Marx, Karl. *The Marx Engels Reader*. London: W.W Norton&Company, 1978. 155. The German Ideology. Print

ideological concepts spur change. Marx illustrates how history has been moved forward through the transgression and fulfilling of different needs by different modes of production, creating social structures and new ideas along the way. He describes how history has moved from producing day to day for survival to fulfilling new needs and creating a family structure. This structure then in return creates different ideas of production such as division of labor and distribution, which creates new forms of social activity. Marx believes that, “this fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us,...is one of the chief factors in historical development”.¹¹ Marx is illustrating the connection between how materialist production forms societies way of thinking and being, which is dependent on the mode of production. Therefore when the mode of production changes, it causes a change in societies concepts and ideas, which in return creates historical change.

Mill presents a different viewpoint of the way in which he believes society has evolved. He relates the movement of history to the construction of individual liberties. He describes the struggle that occurred between liberty and authority in which patriots attempted to set limits to others power over them by, “obtaining a recognition of certain immunities, called political liberties or rights”.¹² These liberties came to be their own as a protection of their inherent rights, allowing individuals to be the sovereign over themselves.

Furthermore, history for these individuals is created by the change they individually produce. For example, Mill believes that custom is one aspect that self-limits individuals, he believes by moving away from this and instead cultivating individuality, “that human beings

¹¹ Marx, Karl. The Marx Engels Reader. London: W.W Norton&Company, 1978. 160. The German Ideology. Print

¹² Mill, John S. On Liberty. London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1859.2.Print.

become noble and beautiful object of contemplation...human life also becomes rich and abundant".¹³ Therefore by changing an individual's own ideas and imagination first, a change in society will be created illustrating that history is dictated by the changing ideologies and ideas according to Mill, which is opposite of Marx's argument.

Overall Mill's idea of "custom" and Marx's "ideology" are completely different. While Marx is critiquing ideology and ideological ideas, Mill's concept of custom and the individual can be classified as an ideological construction. This difference exposes other fundamental differences between the two such as Marx's belief that the mode of production is the underlying force for society and spurs historical change. While Mill is solely focused on the basis of ideas and those ideas creating change in a society, which again demonstrates ideological thinking.

¹³ Mill, John S. *On Liberty*. London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1859.52. Print.