



Mill's Liberty and the Quest for National Development

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ABSTRACT

Nigerians in my view are a people who live beside the ocean yet, dying of thirst. Our beloved country is blessed with both human and natural resources but her rate of poverty is one that is alarming. In the area of science and technology she is rich abroad but poor at home. Every year, her universities produce graduates who continue to roam the streets in search of white collar jobs. Gradually, the harsh and unpleasant economic situation sows evil seeds in the hearts of these youths thereby, taking to crimes. A people born free now find themselves everywhere in chains. Hopeless as she may seem today, Nigeria is however, not beyond redemption. Critically yes, but not entirely hopeless. To pull her back and turn her around obviously requires a change of ideology. Should we continue to do same thing the same way and expect a different result? How long shall we continue to be slaves in our father's palace? Mills conception of liberty provides a way out of our national predicament as this essay adopts both analytic and evaluative methods in establishing that liberty would make the people to be creative and innovative, thereby bring about the needed technological breakthrough.

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1. Introduction

Man is a social animal. He seeks society so that he can pursue his goals, values, etc. in a secured, civil and corporative environment. This is in line with Plato's thought who reasoned that human potentialities can be realised only through membership and participation in a more inclusive system of relationship - the state (Horner 159).

All socio-political philosophers including Plato and Aristotle are of consensus that man intrinsically lives in a community of others. This unique nature of man is an undeniable constructs of nature. Nature bestows on him a conscious and distinct essence of not only being self-reliance but mutually inter-dependence. This mutual interdependency inherent in man's essential nature brings to fore the peculiarity of his self-insufficiency and the craving for mutual complementation. It becomes glaring therefore that man's existence and survival cannot be devoid of his relationship with others. In this light, Aristotle affirms that, "he who is unable to live in society or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself must be either a beast or a god" (Omogbe 65). Man must therefore exist, in the community of his fellow men with an organised political leadership.

Furthermore, it is an indisputable fact that the state can neither organise nor build itself without man. It follows then that man is an agent of change. Hence, the development of any society rests on the shoulders of the people who must conduct themselves in a certain way. Coherent social conducts rest on laws to regulate people's behaviours so that the aim of society will not be defeated. There is however, a problem regarding the extent to which an individual's behaviour can be regulated by the society through laws in ensuring common good, peace and development.

Mill frowns at any excessive regulation of individual's liberty by the state since according to him, it amounts to a legalised form of oppression of the individual by the society.

He therefore posited the harm principle stating that the only condition in which the society can interfere in the activity of an individual is when it harms another. This position of Mill requires a serious attention regarding its tenability.

But before this let us first observe that philosophy is a way of life. A way of life must be guided by a set of ideas or ideology. An ideology is a set of belief that guides our lives. This set of beliefs is what shapes our attitudes in our society, the set of ideas translates into a kind of value which defines the basis of our thinking and actions, and this value becomes the standard or norms that guide or shape the lives of individuals. Ukagba expresses this view thus;

One of the major problems besetting the world today is how to organise a set of ideas through which the world can be socially, economically, culturally, and politically organised so as to ensure the common good, peace, solidarity and unity of man as a practical goal of life. Some have argued that any philosophy that cannot help man to practically realise these goals of his daily life or existence should be left behind for such philosophy is nothing but sophistry or illusion (Ukagba 4).

Sadly, because the Nigerian state is one where majority of her citizens are wallowing in abject poverty even in the midst of plenty, it becomes necessary therefore, to adopt a working and pragmatic ideology which will enable us tackle the problem of underdevelopment and bring about a new Nigerian that we all crave for.

2. The Concept of Development

Few concepts are as ambiguous as the concept of development in social and economic thought. Mostly the term has been defined from a perspective position. This is not unconnected to the elusive nature of the concept of

development itself. For instance, Olikhokhai opines that the theoretical debates and policy decisions concerning development have varied considerably and have sometimes stressed technological well-being and education. Generally, development is the progressive unfolding of the inner potentialities of a given reality. It entails bringing out to light (existential, functional and epistemic) what was enveloped folded or hidden (Olikhokhai 137).

We cannot talk of development without the individual and the society in which he finds himself. Development entails progress in various aspects: socio-cultural, moral-religious, intellectual-spiritual political economic and scientific-technological development. This presumably propels Rodney to say that;

Development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline responsibility and material well-being (Rodney 1).

The concept of development refers to a change or transformation into a better state. Most economists place their emphasis on the context of the Gross Domestic Product (G.D.P) or Gross National Product (G.N.P) as well as other social indicators such as improved health facilities good housing, portable supply of water, electricity, good and accessible roads, telecommunications facilities availability of banks, markets, storage depots, hygiene, social awareness, nutrition, education etc. Hence, Omoyibo and Oriaklin assert that the general approach to resolving the question of what “development should mean in contemporary African context should take into consideration three basic principles. These include;

- a. Development as a process of self-determination: this principle is fundamental because it is the most effective method of mobilizing the people on a sustained basis.
- b. That the political context of development must be profoundly democratic, it is only under conditions of democracy that the people can get free expression and co-operate with all existing units or structures in the social system.
- c. Development must take as its starting point an acceptance of the people as they are (Omoyibo and Oriaklin 153).

More strikingly, Omoyibo and Oriaklin take into consideration three additional social principles, namely

- a. Means for life sustenance; that is, it should be able to source for means for survival on continuous basis.
- b. The people should rely on their esteem for survival. In other words, the people should be able to think highly of themselves as well as have a favourable opinion or respect for the established structures and institutions that can facilitate the process of sustainable growth (i.e. development)
- c. The issue of “freedom” must be taken as a very critical factor in development. The social system should ensure the independence and frankness should be applied in ensuring the use of state structures, institution and values to enhance the positive growth of the society without abuse of the social rights of citizens.

From our discussion thus far, it is not difficult to know a state that is under developed. Obviously, under development is not absence of development because every people have developed in one way or another and to a greater or lesser extent. Under development makes sense only as a means of comparing levels of development. It is very much tied to the

fact that human social development have been uneven and from a strictly economic view point, some groups have advanced further by producing more and becoming more wealthy. This is in line with Rodney’s thought that holds that; This moment that one group appears to be wealthier than others, some enquiry is bound to take place as to the reason for the difference at all times, therefore, one of the ideas behind underdevelopment is a comparative one (Rodney 15).

From the foregoing, it would be an indisputable inference that Nigeria, if compared to many other European and American nations is certainly underdeveloped. This is unconnected to the fact that most Nigerians lack the basic necessities of life. Egwali describe the situation thus;

All over Nigeria, on the faces of the people, we smell poverty, monumental nullity, and backwardness. Nothing seems to work perfectly nowadays. The people are hungry and angry. Why? Because the people (politicians) that were voted for have turned their backs on the citizens by brazenly and wantonly looting the treasury; here is a country divinely blessed with human natural resources. She calls herself the giant of African and yet the people are hungry profoundly impoverished and made worthless, and poverty stricken (Egwali 348).

The issue of under development is that which calls for public concern as far as the future of our dear country is concerned. We cannot continue in this trend and expect a different result. Something needs to be done and we must do that fast!

3. Liberty from the Lens of Mill

Individual autonomy is an idea that is generally understood to refer to the capacity to be one’s own person, to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one’s own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces. This is the central idea of Mill’s liberalism, whose aim was to rescue the individual from all sort imposed conformity or tyranny, either by a ruler or majority. Autonomy has traditionally been thought to connote independence of individualism in both moral thinking and political designations. Mill opines that he is not interested about perennial metaphysical problem of free will and determinism but with socio-political freedom. For him, liberty is “pursuing our own good in our own way as long as we do not attempt to impede their efforts to obtain it” (Mill 33).

He believed that the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community against his will is to prevent harm to others. This propels him to offer the “harm principle”. This principle holds that;

The sole end for which mankind is warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their member, is self-protection... in the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is of right absolute (Mill 30).

What the above implies is that liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else. In other words, no one should be forcibly prevented from acting in any way he chooses provided his acts do not affect the free acts of others. The individual’s liberties the society must respect include: liberty of thought and opinion; liberty of tastes and

pursuits; and liberty of association with other consenting individuals for any purpose that does not harm others. Mill says, children and backward societies (which is contestable) are excluded from such liberty since they lack the requisite experience. They can only gain such experience after being educated, so as to enable them make informed decisions.

Mill absorbing his liberal theory of any priori colouration or abstract foundation, since it will be inconsistent with his empirical stand point, argues that it is grounded on his principle of utility since, "mankind are greater gainer by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves than by compelling each to live as seem good to the rest" (Mill 33). He frowns at 'doing same thing in the same way' and emphasised the need to challenge existing traditions in order to avoid dogmatism. He submits that the problem with undoubted traditions or dead dogmas is that, they are not fully understood because one does not really know something unless one knows the other person's view or opinion about it and succeeds in rationally refuting such opposing opinion to the glory of ones. Over time, dead dogmas also lose their meaningfulness and people no longer orient their lives with them.

For Mill, not even a single opinion can be justifiably silenced for to shut the door on criticism is to tacitly assume infallibility and to be prejudicial. The merit or otherwise of an opinion can only be determined after a robust open-minded debate. He claimed that the over idealisation of traditions is uncalled for since "ages are no more infallible than individuals" considering the fact that every age have held "many opinion which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd" (Mill 38). On these ground, Mill argues that the individual should be given freedom and even be encouraged to evaluate traditions and make contributions, after all, individuals like Socrates who had proved traditions wrong around history. To what extent should the state regulate the individual's liberty? Where does the authority of society begin? How much of human life should be assigned to individuality and how much to society?

For Mill, everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society render it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest. This conduct consists first, in not injuring the interests, which, either by express legal provision or by tacit understanding, ought to be considered as right; and secondly, in each person's bearing his share (to be fixed on some equitable principle) of the labours and sacrifice incurred for depending on the society or its members from injury and molestation.

These conditions, society are justified in enforcing at all cost to those who endeavour to withhold fulfilment. As soon as any part of a person's conduct affects prejudicially the interest of others, society has jurisdiction over it. And the question whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted by interfering with it, becomes open discussion. But there is no room, says Mill, for entertaining any such question when a person's conduct affects the interests of no persons besides himself. In all such cases there should be perfect freedom, legal and social to do the action and stand the consequences.

It would be a great misunderstanding of this doctrine to suppose that it is one of selfish and difference, which pretends that human beings have no business with each other conduct in life and that they should not concern themselves about the well-doing or well-being of another unless their interest is

involved. Instead of any diminution, there is need of a great increase of disinterested exertion to promote the goods of others. But disinterested benevolence can find other instruments to persuade people to their good, than whips and scourges, either of the literal or the metaphorical sort.

For any state to be a moving train, Mill sees education to be of a high importance and must therefore, be made compulsory for children since lack of education is a crime against the society and the child. He holds that "a general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which please the predominant power in the government"(Mill 119).

In all, Mill frowns at any form of agreement entered by and individual that makes him susceptible to slavery arguing that it defeats the concept of liberty.

4. Mill's liberty: A Panacea to Nigeria's Predicament.

Many could be tempted to assume that Nigeria is a failed nation and so need no solution as it is heading towards unavoidable disaster. For some however, the problem faced with Nigeria is beyond human control and therefore, must wait for a divine intervention. Suffice to say that this is in sharp contrast with the 19th century positivism in the Western world where religion was seen as a past phase in the development of humanity. August Comte (1798-1857), the father of the science of Sociology believed he had discovered a law that all human societies passed through three stages, humans believed that events were caused by the actions of gods, in the second; events were held to be caused by abstract forces; in the third scientific rationality triumphed, hence, scientific laws formed the basis of every explanation (Dzurgba 55-58). Similarly, Sir James Frazer opined that mankind everywhere sooner or later passes through three stages of intellectual development, from magic to religion and from religion to science, a scheme he may have taken from Comte's Phases (Pritchard 27).

What can be sieved from the above is the very fact that every ideology must be scientifically rooted if it must lead to any meaningful development. To this regard, Mill's liberty is no exception. In elucidating on the essential ingredients which must not be overlooked by the state, Mill identifies liberty as an indispensable element of a progressive state. For him, liberty in its essentialness orchestrates the nature and limits of power legitimately exercised by the society over an individual. Hence, liberty must be preserved, and the state adequately protected against any form of tyranny by political leaders (Mill 505).

Tyranny promotes fear, which destroys man's essence in particular and that of the state in general. The rights and liberties of the citizenry must not be ignored in the civil state, as this remains one of the fundamental essences of law. This is the only way individuals can take up challenges and stop hoping for development to be divinely thrust on them. Indeed, secularism extricates government from the strong grip of religion and tradition and makes it autonomous. It makes government scientific. This makes it open to criticism, experimentations, improvement and of course flexibility.

Nature bestows on man certain inalienable rights: Right to life, freedom of thought, liberty, equal existence, ownership of properties, fair treatment, expression, etc. An attempt to any form of existential sustainability without these rights would be self-defeating and naturally unattainable. Man's existence is therefore, dependent upon the respectful observance of the laws and rights transmitted to man by nature (Locke 352).

Among others, the right to liberty and national development are contextually and practically correlated. No matter the nature of a country's polity, economy, religions inclinations and predominant family structure, liberty pervades every society.

It serves as a reference point for human actions and development. This reflects in the words of Omoyibo and Oriakhi when they opine that, "historically, man is created with free will which allows him to choose from the various options around him" (Omoyibo and Oriakhi 148). With this freedom of choice, Mill opines that the individual could adopt the "Greatest Happiness" principle and carries out actions that are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness and avoid evil as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness (Mill 186). For him, this would make the individual and the society to thrive in liberty, peace and progress.

Any violation of the individual rights and liberty would amount to a social injustice which is a crime, not just against the individual, but against humanity in general. The greatest violators of social injustice, says Omoyibo and Oriakhi, are situated in the African geo-political terrain (Omoyibo and Oriakhi 144). This situation of social injustice affects the individual psycho-social development and perpetually results in insecurity of nations and thus, manifest in a larger concept of nationhood in the form of underdevelopment. It is therefore important to stress that any attempt at relegating liberty in any society is tantamount to jeopardizing everything within a given socio-political and economic environment. The society must desist from compelling the individual to conform to societal norms in self-regarding sphere. Widest possible range of possibilities or opportunities must be offered by the society; that will see the individual being responsible for his actions. It could be argued that unnecessary restriction of individual liberty leads to mediocrity, conformity to the already existing norms and lack of creativity and innovation. This would not go well for our beloved country Nigeria.

In like manner, Mill's position on liberty gives a normative insight into the question of law since law ought to be neutral in self-regarding issues, that is, law must secure what Berlin calls "negative liberty" which he defines as "the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others" (Berlin 685). Any attempt to prevent such self-regarding issues that do not harm others is considered as an infringement on the right of the victim and must be repelled by the law. For the sake of social order however, such individual freedom stops where that of others start.

Development is a necessary offshoot of liberty, peace, equality, stability and social tranquillity. This is in line with Rawls' notion of justice which strives to ensure the preservation of equal liberty and opportunity of citizens. Citizens must be given equal political opportunity and level play-ground for participation. The freedom and fundamental right of the people must not be trampled upon. The law must not discriminate. It must cater for the interest and benefits of the less privileged in the state. This is hinged on the fact that for Rawls' man is free and equal (Rawls 19).

Economists and many socio-political philosophers are in consensus that every reasonable development in various spheres is tied to a policy which considers the fundamental rights and liberties of the people as sacrosanct. It is on this note that Mill seeks to fortify the individual and sues for his liberty. In the area of education, Mill holds that the state must make education a matter of right for all children and any parent who dissents must be compelled to enforce same since

lack of education is a crime not just against the society but also against the child. This is hinged on the very fact that education is a veritable tool for national development. It has been asserted that human capital development through a well-structured educative system is a panacea for economic development of any nation.

In the aspect of economic activities, the denial of a people's rights and freedom would be an antithesis to national development since such could lead to violence and revolt. Such environment devoid of peace would bring every economic activity to a halt. In this light, Mill holds that "the legal subordination of one (individual)... is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances of human improvement, and that ought to be replaced by principle of perfect equality" (Mill 1). On the other hand, once the state affirms the dignity, rights and liberty of the individual, there would be peace and tranquillity. With the people having little or nothing to fear, there will be creativity and innovations among our local manufacturers-a situation that can lead to the development of specialization and improvement in productive skills; thus bringing our darling country, Nigeria into limelight.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the kind of liberty which Mill professes can lead to individual's self-reliance and development. This brings to the fore the need for vocational skill. Vocation is tantamount to the procession of creation of a new venture; it is the process of discovering new ways of combining resources.

Indeed, self-reliance goes a long way in enhancing one's authentic freedom. It makes one less dependent (either on family members or the government) and helps to solve the problem of unemployment and reduce the number of people who depend on government for job. It makes one to learn the act of "fending for himself" rather than being at the receiving end. Over dependence either on family members or government is one of the major problems of Nigeria today. Most of our university graduates wait endlessly for the government to provide them with white-collar jobs. Osasere expresses this when he holds that;

Nigerian youth should not wait for the government to provide job for them; rather they should sharpen their intellectual instincts and find means for themselves to survive even in the midst of the few opportunities available in the economy. They should be creative, be self-reliant and be prepared to do any kind of job to make a living (Osasere 5).

Naturally, man is a free agent capable of bringing about rapid change in the world in which he resides. Awolowo in his work *"Path to Nigeria Greatness"* holds that, "the individual is the sole creative and propulsive dynamics in nature; the prime mover in all activities. Without him, nothing at all can be produced" (Fafowors 12). In a state devoid of individual's liberty, this prime mover would be in chains thereby, making every effort of attaining developmental strides futile. The individual must therefore, be given the enabling environment and equipped with practical skills in order to compete favourably in the labour market for self-sustainability and national economic growth. Self-reliance is a veritable tool for better capacity building in the society especially with the global economic melt-down.

In all, the government has its role to play. For Mill, governments are to be judged according to "utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interest of man as a progressive being" (Mill 224). By this, he means that all forms of government are to be evaluated in terms of their capacity to enable each person to develop in his or her own way, their

capacities for higher forms of human happiness. Such development will be an end for each individual, but also as a means for the society to develop and make life better for all.

The foregoing implies that development depends on good governance, appropriate infrastructure, institutions and better trained people. The possibility of this requires investments in basic health and nutrition, education, science and technology and other sectors of the economy. With pragmatic government policies and a hardworking population that responds to right incentives our wounds as a nation would be healed and the pains remembered no more.

Mill opines that, "We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavouring to stifle is a false opinion, and if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still (Mill 229). These words of Mill therefore, coupled with the Nigeria present reality of underdevelopment, the government should be ready to listen to all shades of opinions because, from the plurality of individuals views come the wisdom that makes for good governance and national development.

5. Conclusion

Mills "harm principle" can help serve as a veritable ideology in ensuring and preserving social order necessary for the attainment of national development especially in pluralist state like Nigeria. This aligns with Bello's Universalist philosophy that if Africans must meet up with modern world challenges they must appreciate that "cultural products are best seen as the common wealth of mankind to be appropriated as the needs arise" (Bello 264). Mill's position also favours Wiredu's admonition for Africans to appreciate any modern "resource of philosophical insight not already exploited in our culture" (Wiredu 149). We must shake off the shackles of dogmatism since it retards people from being vast as much as possible in terms of ideas and innovation. This presumably led Russell to postulate that dogmatism "in the midst of a great and powerful world... must sooner or later, lay our private world to ruins" (Russell 92).

Philosophy is not an idle tale it must be able to affect lives and change the society for the better. This therefore demands that the modus operandi of the state must be a working and a pragmatic one. Lawhead, for instance holds that;

Pragmatism reflects the spirit of American culture. It is down-to-earth and shuns abstruse abstractions that have no "cash" value. It is oriented towards experience, action and practical issues, the sort of characteristic that enabled a fledgling nation to come late onto the scene and shortly became a major culture force in the world. Pragmatism views ideas as tools for getting a job done and values them only if they are successful when put to work... pragmatism fits in well with the spirit of science and technology and the enthusiasm for problem solving (Lawhead 460).

The above implies that no particular belief will ever be immune from the need to be revised. This view is known as fallibilism which;

involves the recognition that our methods of forming our opinions are not proof from error. Even the best scientific theories may need to be revised as our knowledge develops (Hook way 153).

Mill's notion of liberty can therefore be said to be pragmatic since the harm principle gives room for fallibilism which is error revealing and self-correcting. That is, there is always room for improvement. That is why we can be more confident about a view which survives scrutiny and criticism than one which has never been challenged. Besides, even if a

view is obviously true, the act of defending it against false views keeps the true view alive and prevents it from becoming a dead dogma, incapable of stirring anyone to action.

The adoption of Mill's position of liberalism in our country, Nigeria, would make the political social, economic and other sphere to be pragmatic. That is, not immune to fallibilism. This implies that our beloved country will continue to evolve or develop. She will become a project in progress. A brand new Nigeria will continue to emerge instead of the hitherto situation of stagnancy or retrogression.

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