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*John Stuart Mill and the Stationary State: When does  
progress cease?*

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## **John Stuart Mill and the Stationary State: When does progress cease?**

### **Introduction:**

Since the XVIII century, the economic system has been described and guided by a number of innovative and different theories provided by the greatest economists of all times. Among those we remember Smith, Ricardo, Malthus, Mill, Marx and Keynes. Their assumptions have played an essential role into the construction of the actual economy and are still today topics of several debates. The spread appearance along history, has certainly accentuated the many contrasts between their reasonings. But some similarities have last across the years. Indeed, another certain point, is that all of them were agreeing on the fact that the capitalistic condition of their days could not last forever. They believed into a post-capitalistic situation, where economy would have reach stagnation, the rate of profit would have fall down and the economy would have attain a Stationary State.

The first economist to argue about stagnation has been Adam Smith, however in this bouquet of brilliant minds, the greatest analysis on the topic has certainly been the one provided by John Stuart Mill.

Mill was an economist, philosopher and a visionary of the XIX century. Since his younger age he demonstrated a singular intellect and propensity for social studies. Exposed prematurely by his father, at only three years old, to mathematics and history, at the age of ten he could already read and write fluently both Greek and Latin.

The eclectic personality of John Stuart Mill and the concept of Stationary State are strictly related. Mill tried, through his studies, to answer to the question that used to fascinate his predecessors, and continues to intrigue his successors, up to today: *When does progress cease? "Toward what ultimate point is society tending by its industrial progress?"*

Through the three chapter of this thesis we will try to explain the concept of Stationary State and to respond at the question that Mill asked to himself and to the his readers in his *Principles of Political*

*Economy.*

In a first place we will seek the origins of the concept of Stationary State, investigating among the father founders of the actual economy. Starting from Smith and Ricardo, we will continue through Malthus, and conclude with Marx. Remembering that their idea are the base on which is constructed the today economy, and Mill thought.

The second chapter is entirely dedicated to John Stuart Mill. We will analyse his similarities and differences with predecessors and try to look in depth his idea of Stationary State, through the discussion of happiness and degrwoth.

Finally the third chapter will briefly study the similarities between the contemporary vision of John Maynard Keynes and Mill on the topic; and try to actualise the concept of stagnation comparing Mill's idea with modern society.

## **PART I: The evolution of the idea of Stationary State**

In the very first part we are analysing the evolution of the idea of Stationary State in economics, more precisely in classical economic thought.

This concept has been introduced in a first place by the “father of liberalism”, Adam Smith, since then it has progressively acquired popularity, and the interest of many important economists and philosophers among which Ricardo, Malthus and Marx, which agreed basically on two fundamental points on which we will investigate throughout the following chapter of this thesis.

Certainly, the more essential and modern description of the Stationary State has been the one provided by John Stuart Mill, less than two hundred years ago, which represents a breaking point with its brilliant predecessors, but we would have to wait until the second part of the thesis to know about what we are talking about.

Because of the progressive evolution of the concept of Stationary State, “Part I” will follow a chronological order beginning in the XVIII century up to the XIX.

First of all we will examine Adam Smith's (1723-1790) idea of Stationary State, which has later on inspired and worried also David Ricardo (1772-1823), and how both economists developed this thought.

In the second part we are focusing on Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) perspective on the topic; and finally, in a third part we will concentrate on Karl Marx (1818-1883) point of view.

These three first steps listed above are necessary to the comprehension of Mill thought and are extremely related to his analysis on the Stationary State.

### **1. The Stationary State: According to Ricardo and Smith**

Adam Smith has certainly been one among the more important exponent of classical period; in fact its treaty *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* published in 1776 inspired many of its successors. Among them we can count David Ricardo, which has also characterized its period, with

the publication of *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* in 1817.

After many innovative ideas, and deep analysis of the economic problem that have lead them to have a tremendous influence on economic thought, both authors agreed on one point that is more than relevant for this thesis. Although driven by different reasons, they both reached the conclusion that on a long run, economy would have faced a decreasing rate of profit, leading to a Stationary State.

### **a) Stationary State according to Smith**

After Mercantilists, the economic issue has been faced in the XVIII by Adam Smith, which started his studies with the same assumption regarding the egoistical nature of humans, but reached different conclusions.

In its most famous book Smith explain that in a non-regulated market economy, self-interest and egoism of every human being will lead to the public good; analysis that represent the heart of its reasoning.

From here Smith introduced the character of the egoistic capitalist, which is simply an individual that has as only desire, to increase its profits and accumulate capital. According to the author the engine around which the entire wealth of a nation was built on, was precisely *capital accumulation*.

The society described by the “father of economics” where workers and landowners did not produce any accumulation of capital on their own, but only capitalists did, through savings and investments, has to thanks those last for any growth or any allocation of resources. Indeed they would have make lands available to work, and increase technological development allowing labour division, leading to economic growth.

But Smith knew that the virtuous cycle that has *capital accumulation* at its heart could not continue perpetually; profit could not increase to the infinite.

He knew that on a long run profits would have to decrease, leading to a reduction in capital stock. This effect would be caused by an increase in competition that would rise up wages in first place and reduced them to the minimum in a second one, reduced prices to marginal costs, and used up every investment opportunity. He recognised into Holland of its century a clear example of diminishing investment opportunities, as their interest was decreasing and exportations to foreign countries increasing.

The fall of the rate of profit and the increase of competition, would be provoked in turn, by an excessive accumulation of capital that, driven by individuals selfishness, would have consumed every source of profit and pushed down growth to its minimum together with interest rate, causing a non-growth situation.

The theory of decreasing profits described by Smith is the base on which the idea of Stationary State is built on.

But Smith's Stationary State was far from being an enjoyable place where to live. In fact an interconnected system of increasing population, draining of natural resources, and the impossibility of further production, would have made the Stationary State “dull” and unsustainable.

*“It deserves to be remarked, perhaps, that it is in the progressive state, while the society is advancing to the further acquisition, rather than when it has acquired its full complement of riches, that the condition of the labouring poor, of the great body of the people, seems to be the happiest and the most comfortable. It is hard in the stationary, and miserable in the declining state. The progressive state is in reality the cheerful and the hearty state to all the different orders of the society. The stationary is dull; the declining melancholy”*

We find here the origins of what later on will inspire John Stuart Mill and many others.

Decreasing profits theory will be analysed and enhanced in the following years, and with it the just-born idea of steady state, reaching its deepest explanation in the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*.

It will be with the earlier publications of David Ricardo in the XIX century, that the question of Stationary State advanced by Smith will acquire more consistency.

### **b) Stationary State According to Ricardo**

After Adam Smith the wave of classical economists continue to dominate the whole economic thought, thanks to the innovative ideas of David Ricardo. The author has become famous and shows to deserve a place among the major economists after the publication of *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. With him we speak for the first time about marginal productivity.

As his predecessor he believed that on the long run the rate of profit would have approached 0, leading

to a situation of Stationary State. But the reasons that brought him to this conclusion are not the same. Ricardo based his studies of the Stationary State on the principle of *diminishing returns* in agriculture mixed with an increasing population. We start assuming that when profits are positive capital stock is increasing, and that an higher demand for labour will temporarily increase wages.

Going on with his reasoning, as wages increased population increased in return, and with it the need to cultivate more lands in order to feed more and more people.

In the long run this cycle will lead to a decrease in land fertility and to a higher price of food. In order to avoid that workers died, their wages, which were already at their subsistence level, had to increase, diminishing profits for the capitalist, slowing-down economy growth.

Ricardo gives just a palliative role to technological progress that can help to postulate the Stationary State, but he admits that its achievement is unavoidable.

*“The natural tendency of profits then is to fall; for in the progress of society and wealth, the additional quantity of food required is obtained by the sacrifice of more and more labour. This tendency, this gravitation as it were of profits, is happily checked at repeated intervals by the improvements in machinery, connected with the production of necessaries, as well as by discoveries in the science of agriculture which enable us to relinquish a portion of labour before required, and therefore to lower the price of the prime necessary of the labourer”*

As Adam Smith he was not expecting the Stationary State to be a pleasant place where to live, as every gift of the nature would be completely drain.

We will see later on, that the argument of a limited natural supply will also have an important role in Mill's analysis of the steady state.

Smith and Ricardo are the founders of the classical economic thought and liberalism. Their publications are famous in the whole economic field and will inspire many of their successors, among which the work of John Stuart Mill.

Smith has been a pioneer of the concept of decreasing profit rate, and therefore of the Stationary State. The father of economics has been also the first author to give a wide description of the capitalistic system, which includes also an in depth analysis of humans desires and behaviour, that will be retaken by Mill. His idea has inspired his successor Ricardo, who blamed the increasing population and the



diminishing return of lands, for the unavoidable approach to stagnation. Ricardian idea of steady state, together with the one provided by Malthus played a fundamental role in the construction of Mill though.

Smith and Ricardo admit the existence of a falling profit rate that would lead to a Stationary State, agreeing on the fact that a non-growing state would not be a pleasant place where to live.

The following author that will face the argument was a contemporary of Ricardo, but was far more inclined to give priority to inductive than deductive arguments, to “*experience, the true source and foundation of all knowledge*”.

## **2. Malthusian Population Theory**

It might have being his British nationality, the same of his contemporary David Ricardo, or his religious inclination, to encourage the curate Thomas Robert Malthus to write in 1798 his main article “*An Essay on the Principles of Population*”. The fact remains that his role on economics accompanied a change of perspective, from the supply point of view to the demand side or what he called “effectual demand”.

As Ricardo, T. R. Malthus identified in A. Smith an inspiration for his works, and shared with him many ideas among which the pessimism regarding the Stationary State. But, differently from them, he will mostly focus on the relation between production and reproduction, leading to a more “flexible” and dynamic idea of stagnation.

In a first hand Malthus works on population will represent an obstacle to Mill's Stationary State, helping him to improve his theory; in the other hand it will provide a well organised support his studies.

### **a) Increasing Population vs. Decreasing Natural Possibilities**

For this curate of the XIX century the heart of the economic issue was population growth. He agreed with Ricardo and Smith about the diminishing returns of agriculture, and on the fact that the saving-

invest process would have encouraged a state of stagnation.

But, to this analysis he added his point of view, focusing on the demand side.

That's why Malthus explained Ricardian idea of diminishing return arguing that population was increasing (geometrically) faster than agricultural production (arithmetic), this intuition gave him the idea of the existence of some unbreakable natural barriers. While Ricardo introduced at this point the idea of Stationary State, Malthus investigated deeply into the subject.

If there was some insurmountable limit, economy growth could only increase or decrease within those barriers.

According to Malthus, economy had to evolve within these “natural bounds”, and managing population changes, because of the following system, called Malthusian Trap, could only control its fluctuations.

An increase in wages will make people feel more happy and the higher standard of life will make them to increase reproduction; this increase in population leads to an higher demand for labour, to an increase in food demand and then to a decrease of food availability (increasing prices), decreasing wages and so on. On the long run wages come back to equilibrium.

*“The passion between the sexes has appeared in every age to be so nearly the same that it may always be considered, in algebraic language, as a given quantity. The great law of necessity which prevents population from increasing in any country beyond the food which it can either produce or acquire, is a law so open to our view...that we cannot for a moment doubt it. The different modes which nature takes to prevent or repress a redundant population do not appear, indeed, to us so certain and regular, but though we cannot always predict the mode we may with certainty predict the fact.”*

The Malthusian Trap was stressing the importance of the population issue. Malthus argued that from it was depending the demand for labour, and its supply, and that to increase wealth there should have been less people on earth, in order to assure a better allocation of resources. He was sustaining that people had to stop to concentrate on a “biological” reproduction, but rather, on an “economic” one. It means that people had to begin to have kids only if they could assure their economic independence, fitting the idea that on a long run too many children (especially the ones from poor classes) would have decreased wages at a subsistence level, and drained up natural resources risking reaching a catastrophic Stationary State. This is why Malthus has been enthusiastic of the introduction of the nowadays-named

“West European marriage system”, and would be glad if he had known about contraceptives.

Malthusian economy is one that includes slow “oscillations” between higher and lower standards of living that could be managed by more control on reproduction, supporting the desire of a stagnant population growth. He suggested, differently from Smith, that individual situation could evolve on the long run, taking as example countries such as China, which he assumed to have a stationary population, as its standard of life was surprisingly high.

Malthus introduced the matter of morality that will be retake by Mill. To avoid an excess of new-born, he encouraged the state to sustain education and culture because “despotism, ignorance, and oppression produced irresponsibility”

*“From high real wages, or the power of commanding a large portion of the necessaries of life, two very different results may follow; one, that of a rapid increase of population, in which case the high wages are chiefly spent in the maintenance of large and frequent families; and the other, that of a decided improvement in the models of subsistence, and the comforts and conveniences enjoyed, without a proportionate acceleration in the rate of increase”*

To conclude, Smith, Ricardo and Malthus shared the conviction that economic growth must be limited because the land was a necessary factor in almost all forms of production, and on the fact that the supply of land was naturally fixed.

We can say that Malthus analysis introduced new aspects on the topic of the Stationary State as he faced the problem from a different prospective. After an explanation of an economic system centralized on population growth, as his predecessors, he admits the existence of a long run Stationary State where natural resources are drained up, and where wages have reached their subsistence level.

He speaks also about the importance of morality and of a State intervention on what regard information and culture, in order to postulate the day judgement, by lowering population growth.

All those aspects will be found in Mill's reasonings on the Stationary State. He will agree with the curate T. R. Malthus on the fact that a too high population is far from desirable, and will analyse deeply the question of morality.

After Ricardo and Malthus, history of classical economic thought will be basically divided in two parts.

We are close to discussing one of them. The following philosopher and economics rejected Malthusian theory on population, and didn't give the fault to lands for the fall toward a Stationary State.

### **3. Marx's Stationary State.**

The economic thought of the XIX century has been, without any doubts, deeply marked by his theories, and his personality. While Smith, Ricardo and Malthus interpreted the decreasing profit rate either as a consequence of competition or as the sign that rent was eating profit, a twenty-nine years old German and his friend Engels explained in *The Communist Manifesto* that it was a incontestable proof that the capitalistic system was approaching its end.

Karl Marx works are extremely inspired from Ricardo. But he sustained that there existed other sources of value than the ones studied by his predecessor and he expressed another idea on the reason why the profit rate was decreasing and would have continue to fall down.

Marx analysis on Stationary State begun with the description of a unstable, unjust capitalistic system close to a brutal fall. The German philosopher and economist did not thought the state of stagnation as a developed stage of capitalism, but as a new form of dominant ideology.

There was just twelve years of difference between Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill, and their ideas didn't start very far one from the other, and the study of one author is complementary with the in-depth analysis of the other.

#### **a) Breakdown of Capitalism**

An essential difference that characterize the breaking point between Marx and the others classical economists, was that Marx did not only focus on small marginal changes, he rather used the Hegelian dialectic to advocate the fundamental revolution that would have marked the end of capitalism.

The collapse of the capitalistic system would be due to an imminent contradiction. Between: in one hand *forces of production*; everything used to produce something (labour skills, technology, tools) made dynamic by the possibility of innovations, and in the other hand, *relations of production*; which

are indispensable and independent for men will; they include social relations, relations with rights as property. *Relations of production* are static, and this nature is reinforced by what Marx called the “*superstructure*”, everything that regard politics, jurisprudence, and others cultural forms accepted by the society that prevent any change. Marx was convinced that the obsessive desire from capitalists to increase profits, would have lead them to reduce wages at minimum, as they represent an high cost, and it would also have led to an increase in investments of high productive machineries, creating an *army of unemployed*.

Marx rejected Malthusian population doctrine, justifying capitalist's capital accumulation through the theory of *the army of unemployed* that represents a constant excess of labour supply in the market that would maintain profits positive.

He argued that when the forces of production will become aware of the fact that all profit made by capitalists, it's thanks to the exploitation of the working class, they will star a brutal revolution, that would change the relation of production and the whole superstructure, declaring the end of capitalism.

*“At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.”*

According to Marx the end of capitalism was not only imminent but also unavoidable. History tells us that he was wrong, and that revolutions didn't appear because the capitalistic system won. Instead, others are still waiting for this revolt of the working class.

### **b) Toward a Stationary State**

Despite Ricardo influence, Marx did not believe into a stabilized economy with a growth equal to zero and into a post-capitalistic chaotic or chronic depression.

Differently from its predecessors, and similarly to Mill, Marx's Stationary State is an high developed society and a socialist, more rational and more productive economy.

He envisaged a communitarian state where the working class becomes the leader and will be free from any commitment or any duty, listed in *The Communist Manifest* (as propriety, taxes, heritage,...). The concept of individual would not be that far from the one of community, in this society people do not consider others as means to advance egoistic aims.

Marx imagines a State in which conflicts would disappear, and where economic scarcity has been eliminated. All alienations and impersonal economic laws driven by the continuous sink of profit would be gone and the goodness of people will come out.

Instead, in contrast with Mill thought on Stationary State, Marx was not considering the Stationary State as a stage of capitalism. As explained above, he was expecting a violent break down of that system. He perceived capitalism as a cyclical model, oscillating between crises, depressions and prosperity periods. It's for that reason that he believed that stagnation and capitalism were two completely opposite ideas, and their union a paradox.

Marx get inspiration from German socialist concept, which he describes as the only true socialism in *The Communist Manifest*. But the Marxian idea of communist economy is quite different from a socialist economy. People would not be motivated to work by monetary or material incentives, and the social classes are gone.

The fact is that: it's true that, as in socialism, everyone has an income according to his or her contribution or ability, but differently in a communist society everyone consume according to his or her needs.

Communism is Marx synthesis to a teleological Hegelian conflict between thesis and antithesis.

Karl Marx, as his classical predecessor, is a great supporter of the fall of average rate of profit.

Although its final result to growth economy is far from the one of Smith, Ricardo or Malthus.

We have seen just above that, whereas in Ricardo reasoning the lack of technology represented a limit to additional profit, according to Marx the decrease in profit rate was the consequence of an excessive technological innovation.

Furthermore, thanks to Marx we faced an innovative idea for what regard the Stationary State, which take another nuance less apocalyptic and more peaceful.

The processes that will bring us to the heart of this thesis, is now more clear as Marx Stationary State is

very close to the one idealised by Mill. Even if there is still some difference between the two authors, Marx thought analysis was necessary to prepare the meeting with Mill in the second part.

This first part introduced us to the classical world through the analysis of the giant economists of several centuries. Adam Smith gave the start to a movement of thought called classical economics, that would speak for the first time about an economic analysis putting at the core of its reasoning individuals, considering their desires and egoistic behaviour. Smith gave also for the first time a pertinent description of capitalism, stressing the importance of capital accumulation for a growing state, and raising up interests and questions among his successors. Those doubts will be in part solved lately by Ricardo theory of diminishing returns and by the intervention of Malthus and his theory on population growth. The concepts expressed by those latter are complementariness, in the sense that the exploitation of lands and the raising population, are strictly interconnected. Finally arrived Marx, which, remaining a classical, will be in part, detached from his predecessors. He foreseen a brutal end of capitalism, as he argued that the economic condition was crushing the working class, but after this collapse, Marx considered also that the whole society would have found its perfect equilibrium with communism.

As explained in the introduction of this first part, all of them have two fundamental points in common. In a first hand they all accepted the idea that on the long run the rate of profit was destined to fall, although they justify this decrease through different reasons, they all admit that the living standards of their time could not be sustainable forever.

In a second hand, all classical economists agreed that when growth would have reached the minimum point, society would have approached a Stationary State. But one more time, whereas Smith, Ricardo and Malthus were in accord to the imminent catastrophic situation, Marx idea of Stationary State was peaceful and self-governed, although he was foreseeing a violent breakdown of capitalism.

Mill get much of its inspiration from the authors of the past, mostly from Ricardo. In fact, from Ricardo we may say that classical thought split in two parts: on one side there is Marx, and on the other one Mill.

As we will see in the following part Mill had much in common we all of his predecessors, especially Marx, but his differences made his reasoning on the Stationary State unique and essential.

## PART II: John Stuart Mill and the Stationary State

In the first part we have presented the evolving idea of Stationary State, from the XVIII to the XIX century, from Smith to Marx. We are now arrived to the heart of this thesis and to the heart of the concept of Stationary State.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was twelve years older than Marx, and since his younger age his father James Mill has pushed him, to read the classics. When he was three years old he has been forced to study mathematics and history, at ten he could speak and read fluently both Greek and Latin. At twenty all the accumulated stressed from the studies let him enter in a deep depression, from which he lately came out. His most famous publication is *On Liberty* in 1859, which is still today a symbol of Liberal Parties, as a copy is, gave to the president of the British Liberal Democrats, and to the president of the Liberal Party. Furthermore, influenced by his father and his friend Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher and economist played also an important role as an utilitarian, putting at the core of his discussions the concept of individual happiness that will be face several time in this chapter.

John Stuart Mill in the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of its famous *Principles of Political Economy*, published in 1848, ask to his reader and to himself “*Toward what ultimate point is society tending by its industrial progress? When does progress cease?*” And tried to find the answer to these questions through the concept of Stationary State, exposed in the following lines.

This second chapter, will be divided into three parts:

In the first part we will focus in what Mill is different from his predecessors and which points in common he has with them.

Afterward we will discuss about how Mill was imagining the achievement of the Stationary State, facing the idea of “degrowth”

And finally we will fully describe the perfect world that Mill was expecting that soon or later humanity would have reach, through the concepts of happiness and harmony.



## 1. From Capitalism to the Stationary State

His publications are even nowadays texts of enormous importance. *On Liberty* and *Principles of Political Economy* are used and discussed in meetings and conferences. The brilliant and innovative ideas of John Stuart Mill have much in common with all his predecessors, from Smith's idea of free competition to Marx's revolutions and communism, passing through Malthusian Population Doctrine and Ricardian Diminishing Returns Theory. All of them gradually shadowed different routes, but most of the time had concluded their reasonings in the same way. This part will precisely describe this aspect, focusing in a first point, on differences and on similarities between Mill and predecessors. The second point will be more characterized by Mill's critic of the capitalistic condition, exposed in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Principles of Political Economy*.

### a) Mill's Differences and Similarities with predecessors.

Taking as base the whole first part, in which we have examined the theories of Mill's predecessors and contemporaries, we can now go across this first point of the second chapter of the thesis.

Much of Mill's originality comes from the model created by classical authors.

Firstly we will compare Mill with the "father of economics", Adam Smith.

Mill picked up much from Smith, as all the successors of this latter. He agreed on the fact that the profit rate was destined to fall on a long period, although he did not give the entire fault to competition. In fact according to Smith, people can be satisfied only into a progressive state, differently from Mill.

The concept described above is due to the fact that they both admit, as in mercantilism, that people of a capitalistic economy are selfish and are driven by egoistic desires. But if in Smith individuals were determined by an obsessive desire of capital accumulation, according to the utilitarian philosopher, people's final goal is happiness, and goods are just a means to reach the Final Goal.

Mill believed in a Stationary State populated with individuals with major interests, and different perspectives from the ones necessary to live in a capitalistic system. He recognized that to reach a steady-state people would have to be independent and free, in order to find "their own way" to be happy.

To summarize, Mill considered that the population of a steady state was an evolved form of the one described by Smith of a capitalistic society, which would not find as solution to the satisfaction of his desires, material goods, but rather, virtue and moral, as these characteristics would bring high quality utilities.

Again, Smith and Mill agreed on the fact that the role of the state should have been very limited; they argued that the total absence of government intervention does not necessarily result in an increase of freedom, some rights, as property should have been protected by a superior power. According to Smith it was education and defence, in Mill it was a transitory element that should have focus on distribution.

But both economists, was disappointing on some aspect regarding the concept of Stationary State.

According to Smith's idea, retaken lately by numerous authors, that growth would “*end in shallows and miseries*”, foreseeing a catastrophic end. This apocalyptic final step of the economy was unbelievable or certainly avoidable in Mill discussions. As we will see later his vision on the topic was much more optimistic and peaceful.

In his publication of *Principle of Political Economy*, Mill quotes the name of two economists, the first one is Smith and the other one is Malthus.

On Malthus, the utilitarian and liberal Mill, has been reproofing and acclaiming. He firstly feel to prevent the reader on the fact that the idea exposed by Malthus, of a catastrophic end that would have led to an apocalyptic Stationary State, has not its origins in Malthus reasonings, but was advanced earlier by Smith. But for the rest, more precisely, about what regard the population doctrine he agreed on most of the points. We can perceive here part of the enormous influence that Mill had from Ricardo, as both spend a lot of their time and study on the *Malthusian trap*.

As we will see below, Mill believed, as Malthus, that a too high population would have been unproductive, as it would have led to a constant and unaffordable increase in technology in order to feed and maintain a too extended population.

*“Before attention had been directed to the principle of population as the active force in determining the remuneration of labour, the increase of mankind was virtually treated as a constant quantity; it was, at all events, assumed that in the natural and normal state of human affairs population must constantly increase, from which it followed that a constant increase of the means of support was essential to the physical comfort of the mass of mankind. The publication of Mr. Malthus' Essay is the era from which better views of this subject must*

*be dated (...)*”

Going few years back in time, we meet David Ricardo, on which Mill drew heavily his vision of Stationary State. The similarities with him are many, the following are the more relevant for this thesis. Both were assuming, like Smith, the imminent decrease in the rate of profit as:

*“The cause of this decline of profit is the increased cost of maintaining labour, which results from an increase of population and of the demand for food, outstripping the advance of agricultural improvement.”*

They justified this fall of profits, with the theory of *diminishing returns* of lands, as population was growing faster than the technological progress. This idea is at the core of Mill's Stationary State. Furthermore, the two of them admit that property was a gift of nature, and that any labourer has every right on its production. Instead, they recognised that wages were *“only their stipulated hire”* of workers, and production were transferred *“to someone who as merely supplied the funds”*. They were aware about a class conflict between landlords and the rest of society, aspect that brought both of them to the concept of Stationary State.

Ricardo works have been analysed and interpreted by Mill and Marx, splitting classical economy in two different parts.

Including the century, Marx and Mill have much in common. Both of them were expecting a decreasing rate of profit that would have reach a state of stagnation, different from the one described by their predecessors. Their idea was not a catastrophic situation, but rather, a harmonious and desirable place, where to live, which in Marx took the form of a utopian Communist world. Again, they both agree on a cyclical capital system with tendencies and counter-tendencies, prosperity and crisis.

But they are also in disaccord on many points. Marx accused Mill of *“shallow syncretism”* and *“contradictions”*. In a first hand, Mill was expecting a peaceful decrease of the profit rate, and was considering the Stationary State as an integrated part of capitalism. In the other hand, Marx decreasing rate of profit would have led to a revolution or *“breakdown”* declaring the end of capitalism. In this sense he could not imagine a coexistence of Stationary State and capitalism.

Finally, Marx was acclaiming the idea of Communism, but Mill point of view was different. He approved Communism and he pointed out that it was certainly better than the economic order of his

time, but he argued that he would have preferred a system of private property at its best, to communism. Further, he believed on the fact that this idea was a utopia, and that the maintenance of every one would have led to increase population.

*“We must remember too, that Communism, as a system of society, exists only in idea”*

*“Communism is similar to that so often urged against poor laws: that if every member of the community were assured of subsistence for himself and any number of children, on the sole condition of willingness to work, prudential restraint on the multiplication of mankind would be at an end, and population would start forward at a rate which would reduce the community, through successive stages of increasing discomfort, to actual starvation”*

Differently from Marx, Mill rejected the idea that private property was the major cause of evils of society, and that competition was the cause of many difficulties. Instead he believed that everyone should have owned his land, within the limit that of public good, allowing to everybody to be independent.

About competition, as Smith he accepted its essential part and beneficial aspect in society:

*“every restriction of it is an evil, and every extension of it, even if for the time injuriously affecting some class of labourers, is always an ultimate good. To be protected against competition is to be protected in idleness, in mental dullness; to be saved the necessity of being as active and as intelligent as other people”*

As Marx, Mill based most of his work on Ricardo studies, in fact most of his similarities are related to Ricardo and Marx. But considering that Ricardo's studies have more of Smith and, as assumptions, more of Malthus, we find much of them also in Mill. We can conclude that there are some aspect as the fall of the rate of profit toward a stagnation, and the Stationary State, that are in common with all classical authors. Furthermore all of them criticised the capitalistic system in one way or another.

### **b) Mill's critic of the capitalistic condition.**

Admitting the existence of the “homo economicus” introduced by Smith in the XVIII century, Mill

constructs a direct critic to this latter and his capitalistic selfishness.

As his predecessors Mill perceived the economic system in which he was leaving unsustainable in a long run.

Firstly he wasn't agreeing with Smith on the fact that the continual excess that characterize a capitalistic economy was correct or that it was representing the whole mankind. He expresses his disappointing in these lines:

*“I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress”*

He considered Capitalism just as a transitory stage of what would have brought humanity to an higher level.

Mill argued also that the situation of his times was focusing on a too materialistic aspect, omitting what he considered as more important, and necessary to mankind happiness. In fact we have to keep in mind, Mill's utilitarian nature, that promotes happiness as the final goal of each person. His idea was slightly different from the one advanced by his teacher and friend Jeremy Bentham, indeed, recognising the quantitative aspect of utilities, he introduced also a qualitative aspect, preferring cultivation of virtues to capital accumulation.

Furthermore, Mill critics the capitalistic condition since it was destructing the whole environment, proposing the necessity of putting a limit to consumption and production, and advancing the idea of what today is called “degrowth” or “decroissance”.

He was assuming, as Ricardo, the diminishing return of agriculture, and that lands will be drained at their higher productive capacity. From an environmental point of view his ideas of degrowth, as in Malthus, suggest a decrease in population through birth controls, in order to preserve the beauty of nature.

Finally he was considering that there was an excessive focus on production whereas, people should have been more concentrate on distribution. According to Mill the laws of distribution were not fixed and immutable, differently he believed that those law would have to change, in order to accord to

everyone the possibility to be independent and free.

Many of Mill critics of the capitalistic condition are related to critics on his predecessors, as the latter are the founders of the theories on the subject.

Mill was against many assumptions of his predecessors for what concern the capitalistic system.

Given that, he argued that capitalism was a necessary step that would have brought humanity to reach the Stationary State or a “*considerable improvement of our present condition*”.

From Smith to Marx, Mill had much in common with his predecessors, but also many differences that make his way of reasoning that charming and actual. Mill was basically agreeing on the fall of the profit rate, that would have reached a stagnation and later a Stationary State. And admit the importance of population control as Malthus, believing in Ricardian Theory of *diminishing returns*. But he didn't thought the end of capitalism as a breakdown as Marx, but like the latter, Mill perceived the future Stationary State as a “*considerable improvement on our present condition*”. Those distinctions converge in the fact that he construct deep critics to the assumptions of the capitalistic system, that are very related to what he said on the precursors of this thought. In his analysis the author introduced the concept of degrowth, stressing its importance. This topic will be the core of the discussion of the following part.

## **2. “Degrowth”, reaching the Stationary State.**

John Stuart Mill has been certainly the major exponent of the idea of Stationary State. He picked up from his past what he judged to be the best, and gather it in order to build up a powerful and actual idea of Stationary State.

In this part we will briefly discuss which are, according to Mill, the elements that would have brought humanity to a Stationary State, describing his innovative idea of the nowadays named degrowth.

The first point will be about the idea of decreasing population, afterward we will analyse in depth the degrowth theory and finally will concentrate the attention on the distinction between distribution and

production.

### **a) Population and “decroissance”**

Beside the fact that they are going toward opposite direction, degrowth, or *decroissance* in French, has much in common with growth. In this sense both cannot be sustained to the infinite and will soon or later reach a situation of stagnation. Those two “tools” should be used to reach a perfect harmonization, which would not dangle neither in the positive or the negative side.

As seen above, Mill was a supporter of the Malthusian Population Doctrine. Indeed, as his precursor, we believed that population was growing too fast, and that in a better economy this number would have to decrease. That's why he foresees a Stationary State where the number of people on earth would not only be much less, but also controlled in order to avoid that this number grow up.

Why should population decrease? According to Mill, if population increases, also the means of support to sustain a parallel increase in comfort needed and food would have to increase. Furthermore, a higher population would mean a faster drain of our natural resources.

In his *Principle of Political Economy*, he gives the example of countries where regulations are already established and which have a capital that is increasing less rapidly. This example means that other countries succeed to avoid that “*the increase of numbers from outstripping the increase of capital*”, introducing a “degrowing” economy that replaced the excessive capital accumulation.

Furthermore, Mill perceived the excessive increase in population as a deterioration of the poorest classes, which he considered being at the bottom of society. He identified in the “poorest classes” the working class, which without birth control would have met a decrease in capital accumulation and a less efficient and abundant distribution of the fruits of their work. Indeed, the excessive number of people on earth had come across the necessary level to create cooperations, associations, or a well-being work. In Mill's times, workers were producing superficial comforts, for an unreasonable number of individuals; therefore a great part of their work was undue and unnecessary, as only source of illness. We may say that the excessive work due to overpopulation had drained its utilities, becoming a source of illness instead of joy.

*“Even in a progressive state of capital, in old countries, a conscientious or prudential restraint on population is*

*indispensable, to prevent the increase of numbers from outstripping the increase of capital, and the condition of the classes who are at the bottom of society from being deteriorated”*

Finally, as we will see in the third part of this chapter, Mill believed that a too “crowded” population would have forced men to be in presence of others men most of the time. In fact Mill used to give much importance to the virtue of solitude.

*“There is room in the world, no doubt, and even in old countries, for a great increase of population, supposing the arts of life to go on improving, and capital to increase. But even if innocuous, I confess I see very little reason for desiring it. The density of population necessary to enable mankind to obtain, in the greatest degree, all the advantages both of co-operation and of social intercourse, has, in all the most populous countries, been attained. A population may be too crowded, though all be amply supplied with food and raiment. It is not good for man to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species. A world from which solitude is extirpated is a very poor ideal”*

To summarize, population should decrease in order to prevent an overexploitation of lands, and an ecological disaster, that would certainly occur with the increasing of consumption. In this sense, population growth has outdated its efficiency, reaching a useless level that is providing less pleasure than an inferior one. From a utilitarian point of view we are speaking about the fact that an overpopulated earth brings less utilities than what an inferior number of people would have supplied. That is why not only degrowth is needed, but it would also be source of more pleasure and happiness. Mill supported the Malthusian idea that population should not be too high in order to prevent a decrease in the efficiency of distribution. For the same reason he considered the control of birth as a necessity, that cost him to be arrested in 1823 while distributing pamphlets on birth control. According to Mill population should not exceed the perfect number needed for an optimal cooperation and social intercourse. He also pays much of his attention on the valour of solitude that we will encounter again in the second part.

## **b) Production and distribution**

This idea has much in common with the point approached above. In fact Mill believed that society



should start to focus on distribution rather than production, and sustained that a decrease in population would have immediately lead to a better distribution.

J. S. Mill admitted the importance of production for a national independence and as his predecessors, he knew that the laws that were governing production could be change, but he considered it as of “*little importance*”. He could not sustain the idea that people who are already rich should have doubled their abundance, that after a while it would just acquire a representative function. Moreover although production could not be changed, distribution could.

The philosopher was considering that production without a just distribution could only be source of inequalities.

*“For the safety of national independence it is essential that a country should not fall much behind its neighbours in these things. But in themselves they are of little importance, so long as either the increase of population or anything else prevents the mass of the people from reaping any part of the benefit of them. I know not why it should be matter of congratulation that persons who are already richer than anyone needs to be, should have doubled their means of consuming things which give little or no pleasure except as representative of wealth”*

Once again, Mill perceived that capitalism had led to overproduction, which were distracting individuals. It was creating an atmosphere dominated by material consumption, to the detriment of virtues and moral. According to the author the latter (virtues and moral) were providing much more qualitative utilities to individuals, leading to prefer them to the former (material goods). But he also sustained that the impossibility to “taste” high quality utilities was killing a person's ability to enjoy the higher pleasures and lead him to settle for a life of lower pleasures.

*“better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”*

Mill desired an economic system where each person would have enough to maintain his independence. An efficient distribution of properties, and of labour, that would have allowed everyone to dispose of some fruit of labour. He thought that only underdeveloped countries were still focusing on production rather than distribution, which goes together with the decrease of population. He gave much importance

the idea of independence and freedom of individuals, as he considered it as an open door to happiness.

*“It is not in poor or backward countries that great and costly improvements in production are made.”*

Furthermore, Mill gave to the state, through institutions and legislations the role of guaranteeing the maintenance of those rights, and to maintain an equalitarian justice by decreasing “*the heights of society, but they cannot, on themselves, permanently raise the depth*”. Industry had to play the role of approaching economy to degrowth, in order to decrease the level of production that had outstrip necessities and the optimal utilities provision.

According to Mill an efficient distribution is what distinguish a primitive country from an evolved one, a capitalistic economy from a country ready for a Stationary State.

### **c) Growth, Degrowth and a new role of Industry.**

In parallel to the idea of individuals, Mill introduced the concept of industry in a wide sense that has as role the one to support men and labour, in order to provide independence and freedom.

Before to affront the topic of industry into a Stationary State, we should speak about its important position in the transaction from capitalism to stagnation.

In fact it would have the role of controlling population, from a quantitative point of view and also from a density one. In order to avoid the drain of lands, and to allow people to have space if desired, to enjoy solitude or the gifts of nature. Industry would helped to drive the economy downward, in order to bring society toward a sort of degrowth. This concept has nothing negative, in fact is intended as the opposite of growth, and necessary to bring society to an optimal level. As growth, décroissance cannot be sustained to the infinite, and has as limit a stationary state.

*What is the difference between growth and degrowth?*

In a first hand we have the very familiar idea of growth, which is driven by accumulation of capital, consumption, production... As we have discussed above, according to Mill those ideas reached their excess into a capitalistic society, becoming overproduction, overconsumption, due to overpopulation. Furthermore, we have seen that those characteristics according to many economists are the reasons why a catastrophic stationary state would be reached, that why we have said that all authors, including Mill,

assumed that the capitalistic condition and growth are not sustainable on the long-run.

In the other hand we have “degrowth”, which is the opposite of growth, and differently from this latter, is an idea that we didn't meet. “Decroissance” in French, is the “tool” through which Mill intend to reach an harmonious stationary state, in fact recognising that the economic system is going toward a catastrophic end, he proposed to people to stop voluntary capital accumulation, in order to approach a more pleasant and peaceful state of mind. He proposed to replace overconsumption, overproduction and overpopulation with consumption, production and a controlled population, in order to avoid excess, preserving nature and mind stimuli. Mill argue that degrowth will be necessary, and that it should be voluntary as if imposed cannot be source of happiness. Accordingly, he believed in individuals more wise and of open mind that would choose to “downgrow” their economy in order to reach a more pleasant society.

Those steps could be claim by people under the guide of a correct industry, that should start to spread justice and moral, instead of consumption and exploitation.

We can notice here that, differently from Marx or from many liberals of nowadays but similarly to Smith, Mill was including the presence of the state in his perfect world.

We spoke earlier about complementarities between industry and men, because the philosopher attributed to the earliest the role of maintaining human independence providing properties and labour that would create enough leisure to cultivate freely the graces of life. Here Mill pointed out an important issue, in his Stationary State industry is completely subject to men and depends on them.

Indeed the philosopher was disapproving the behaviour of people of his time, that were depending on speculation, finance, and on money which was not a intermediary henceforth, but a commodity. Man was dominated by the Industry.

As in actual economies, in Mill reasonings the term industry is related to the concept of labour, but in another sense. In fact he imagined that industry had the objective of decreasing labour, and not just to produce objects that do not change the essence of humanity, and are simply adjacent to that person.

Once again Mill encourage degrowth.

*“Even the industrial arts might be as earnestly and as successfully cultivated, with this sole difference, that instead of serving no purpose but the increase of wealth, industrial improvements would produce their legitimate effect, that of abridging labour. Hitherto [1848] it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have*

*lightened the day's toil of any human being. They have enabled a greater population to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment, and an increased number of manufacturers and others to make fortunes. They have increased the comforts of the middle classes”*

Mill added lately that industry changed just in superficial ways humanity, but doesn't have an important impact on history of mankind. Although Mill believed in technological progress, he recognised that the level necessary to create cooperatives and associations, in order to decrease labour, was in this sense, overtaken, therefore, useless. Comfort had become laziness.

*“But they have not yet begun to effect those great changes in human destiny, which it is in their nature and in their futurity to accomplish.”*

Furthermore, Mill intend by industry a mix of entity and institutions placed above people, as a just and minimal governance that would provide judicious foresight and push humanity toward cooperation, concept that has much in common with Marx idea of superstructure. It will assure the right on private property, and the correct allocation of the fruits of lands, assuming that everyone is free to do wherever he wants with the fruits of his land.

We notice here integration between the liberal aspects of self-regulated market and the socialist environment, where the ideal of free market and a poor governmental participation last, holding the socialist idea of human and his rights.

To conclude we might say that Mill tried to integrate the idea of liberalism with the one of socialism, furthermore through his reasoning we understand that he perceived industry more as of transitory element, between a pre-Stationary State and a stationary one. In the long run people will be independent and respectful toward their society, tending toward cooperations and associations, eliminating the role of industry, because living in a Stationary State.

This part has the purpose of stressing the importance of degrowth in John Stuart Mill. In fact as in Malthus, for Mill the control of population growth was an important aspect on which to focus. He thought that the constant increase of population should have been stopped and replaced by a more

stable and inferior one.

This decrease in population would have led to a better distribution of means of production, properties and access to labour fostering comforts and wealth

Finally Mill speaks about an industry, he perceived the importance of a just and moral industry, in the wide sense of an entity above the population, to drive mankind toward cooperation and a decreasing need for labour, or a different conception of it. He considered that industry would guide people toward his harmonious Stationary State, through décroissance, and helping humanity to avoid the catastrophic end announced by his predecessors. Mill emphasize the importance of people responsibility, through the choice that individuals must to take, in order to start degrowth.

Those three idea are the steps necessary according to Mill to reach the Stationary State, and a much more pleasant situation where happiness will dominate the mind of its habitants.

### **3. Mill's Stationary State, a new harmonious social order**

John Stuart Mill eclecticism and genius, made him believe in a good state that would have had as goal happiness, well-being and improvement, criteria that could not be necessarily measured in material goods. Mill recognised that the final goal of progress, the final objective of all times would have been the Stationary State.

He knew that the pervert desire to excess and to accumulate would have reached its end, approaching humanity to a better place that he called Stationary State.

*“in perhaps a less remote future than may be supposed, we may, (...), see our way to a change in society, which would combine the freedom and independence of the individual, with the moral, intellectual, and economical advantages of aggregate production; and which, without violence or spoliation, or even any sudden disturbance of existing habits and expectations, would realize, at least in the industrial department, the best aspirations of the democratic spirit”*

Mill had faith into a future harmony that would have concern individuals, industry and nature. He

believed in the natural goodness of individuals, and felt pity for the “homo economicus” of his century. He was maybe perceiving a utopia world where individuals would have stop to compete on a material and egoistic base, but would began to appreciate and respect the gifts of nature. Industry would have satisfied human needs, respecting the environment and human labour.

In this third part of this chapter we are analysing Mill Stationary State, starting from a more utilitarian point of view, and discussing about the new role of individuals, where happiness is at the heart of the society. The second point instead will argue the role of environment in this harmonious Stationary State.

### **a) Individuals and Happiness**

Mill has been defined after his death as a socio-liberal, as he built up the idea of liberal societies in which socialism could be perfectly integrated. On the other side, utilitarianism recognise in his publications, innovation and originality.

Mill Stationary State gravitate around a new individual, that changed his mind, feel more inclined to altruism than egoism, and live in perfect harmony with himself, his similar and nature.

He admit the importance for individuals to continue to fight, he recognised the importance of competition. That is why he suggested, and believed in the fact that, once the Stationary State reached, and once men would have stop “to get on”, people would have met their true nature, and star to compete on culture, moral and social progress. The beauty of nature, philosophy, and the “Art of Living” would begin to interest individuals. In fact, Mill considered the “homo economicus” as a temporary and limited idea that has been introduced by force into capitalism, that firstly didn't corresponded to the true human nature, and secondly, it was destined to be replaced.

*“I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the tramplng, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress”*

In contrast he believed that utilitarianism coincides with human nature, and as all utilitarians, the

philosopher was convinced that the final goal of individual desires is happiness: “*not only that people desire happiness, but that they never desire anything else*” and that any consumption of goods was a mean that would have approached individuals to this final goal. Mill defined happiness as “*pleasure and absence of pain*”, he thought that it was the sole component of morality, and added that people should act in a way that would bring the greatest aggregate happiness among all.

His proposal to compete at an “ethical” and moral level is an advice to those who believe that consumption is everything. Indeed, if those people are receiving a given number of utilities from consumption; money or fame, they would acquire the same number or more, of higher quality utilities from the cultivation of virtues, providing to those latter much more pleasure and happiness. We can notice the difference between J. S. Mill and the concept of “greatest-happiness-principle” advanced by J. Bentham, who were considering only the quantitative aspect of utilities leaving beside the qualitative one.

According to John Stuart Mill, as happiness was followed by everyone it was a component of moral, therefore, a final goal of humans desires. Given that he insisted on the fact, that people should promote and invest time in what could provide them the better utilities, thus, focus on virtues.

On this topic, Mill pointed out a fundamental difference between virtues and power, fame or money. Admitting that in all cases, we are speaking about desires that would approach individuals to a sentiment of happiness, Mill believed that the latter could “*render the individual noxious to the other members of the society to which he belongs*”. Instead, virtues have the characteristic of promoting “general happiness”, and are precisely from this fact, that it acquires its high quality as an utility. To sustain his idea that morals, ethical and philosophical interests could bring better utilities than others desires, come the fact that who tried both pleasures, preferred the former.

Mill also stressed the importance of independence in people’s life. In fact, the ideas exposed in the previous part, the decrease in population and the common interest into a better distribution, would have the role of enhance men situation. Further, providing a better allocation of properties everyone would have the possibility to work his own land, and to enjoy the fruits of his labour.

This aspect has an important role for the conquest of happiness, according to the author. In fact freedom and independence could allow people to discover new truths, and exercise new interests. In fact, Mill did not believe that anything imposed by someone else could bring to happiness, as, although the final goal is happiness for everyone, the ways taken by each individual to reach it are different.

Furthermore, Mill stressed a dual aspect of independence.

In one hand he relate it with the importance of labour, the essentiality of mind stimuli and freedom. Indeed, he noticed the importance for mankind to evolve and have ambitions, socially speaking, often advanced by the philosophers of its time (we should remember that it was the XVIII century and that French Revolution was just twenty years before Mill born, he lived in the period of Marx and Proudhon), and he proposed that the possibility to reach a certain objective should be open to all, without favour and without angry, to give to everyone the major number of possibilities in order to reach happiness. In fact Mill grants that deprived of opportunities to exercise the higher faculties, over time, might deteriorate his ability to enjoy those higher pleasures. In this sense, the philosopher speaks about the importance of *dignity*, which rend preferable virtuous choices.

*“a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other ... and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them.”*

But, as the more you use a bike brake, the more it in gets consumed. Similarly the less you cultivate moral, virtuous, and ethical interests the less you will appreciate it. That's why free access to all opportunities would approach individuals to happiness.

To conclude, as we have seen above, virtuous allow also the increase of general happiness, leading to a virtuous cycle.

In the other hand, Mill understands independence as a state of mind that will allow people to be self-regulated. Each individual will abstain from excessive production and population, and even from competitive pursuit of material wealth. He argued, given the preceding assumptions, that a much better state would be where no one is poor and no one is rich, and where individuals have reached the correct state of mind that would not bring people to desire to be richer. We can notice here the brilliant mind of Mill, that even in a time where the air was full of tensions, he recognised the importance of anachronistic values, here we see meritocracy, respect and satisfaction, going further in this part we will meet many others.

Mill makes distinction in his *Principle of Political Economy*, between his idea of Stationary State and the social perfection idealised by some philanthropists.



*“But it is not a kind of social perfection which philanthropists to come will feel any very eager desire to assist in realizing. Most fitting, indeed, is it, that while riches are power, and to grow as rich as possible the universal object of ambition, the path to its attainment should be open to all, without favour or partiality. But the best state for human nature is that in which, while no one is poor, no one desires to be richer, nor has any reason to fear being thrust back by the efforts of others to push themselves forward.”*

Mill separate the evolved men that will live in a Stationary State from the politicians of his age, that were pushing for the maintenance of the economic system of his century and of the interest on production rather than distribution. He was aware about the fact that they couldn't accept human improvement and economic progress, as they were attached too much to their wealth

Furthermore, John Stuart Mill spoke about the importance of solitude. In fact he argued that when minds would have cease to be *“engrossed by the art of getting on”* and when would have been population low enough to avoid to be “crowded”, the art of Solitude, in sense of being often alone would have made its entrance in society. He encourages people to be alone, because he considered meditation as a moment of self-cultivation, of harmony between a man and himself and nature.

Mill considered the cultivation of nature also as a benefice to the whole society, as it will inspire tranquillity and peace.

Here Mill introduced another aspect of the “invisible hand”, characteristic of Smith studies, where the capitalistic avidity in gone, and replace by a general harmony in respect among every component of the Stationary State.

*“A world from which solitude is extirpated is a very poor ideal. Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character; and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without”*

The new state mind that should characterized an evolved individual plays a fundamental role in Mill ideal Stationary State, even if the author of *Principle of Political Economy* admit the relativity of this aspect. Very different from the persons living in his century, those individuals would prefer to enrich and develop their moral, culture and respect for third parties instead than depending on a superficial

economy or a materialistic society.

## **b) Environment**

Has sad before, according to Mill that demonstrated along these pages and along his life to deserve to be called genius, the components of his Stationary State are interconnected, and in a totally harmony. This last point of this part, will describe Mill idea of environment into a Stationary State.

Assuming the Ricardian theory of diminishing return, he knew that the lands would be drained up if nothing changed.

For what regard the aspect of production, Mill was completely against the fact that the nature should have been sacrificed to increase a given comfort that give to humanity just an illusionary benefit.

From this point the economist and philosopher, pointed out two causes for the *“lose of that great portion of its pleasantness”*.

In a first hand he accused the population, because, as sad in the previous part, it was increasing to fast. An overpopulated earth would need to be feed more and more, accelerating the extirpation of nature. Mill argued also that agriculture increased wealth within a certain limit, and that once passed across that limit, the accumulation of goods coming from nature, was just an added and useless value who would not have increased happiness.

*“Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture. If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or a happier population”*

In the second hand, Mill discuss about an *“improved agriculture”* which is strictly related with the first point. Here the philosopher means that the increase in technological improvement in the name of an

higher productivity should be also controlled, in order to preserve the “*beauty of nature*”. We can notice here Mill separation from his predecessors as, recognising the possibilities of development, he didn't support an excessive productivity. Differently from Smith, who recognising some limit to the division of labour, expecting that it would be pushed at its maximum level.

Mill find a very strong relation between the deterioration of the ecosystem and the actual growth, in fact in order so save the environment his proposal is once again degrowth, as the whole planet cannot sustain this high level consumption forever.

Beside the productive point of view, Mill stressed the importance of the environment for the whole population, as a form a natural art that would enrich everyone would contemplate it. What he defines as “*the beauty of nature*” plays a central role into the conquest of individual happiness. This aspect goes with the idea of solitude that would enhance not just a person, but also the whole society. Mill explained that meditation, and the immensity of nature, would enhance people morality and spirituality, making them more inclined to appreciate philosophy, moral and virtues. All these “commodities” would bring to individuals much more high quality utilities, leading to general happiness.

Finally in the last sentence of his discussion on the environment, Mill says: “*I sincerely hope, for the sake of prosperity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it*”.

Interpreting those worlds that seem almost a threat, we can perceive a sort of relation between his Stationary State and the catastrophic one discussed by his predecessors. In the sense, that Mill Stationary State involve a population that has succeed to evolve to an higher mental level, but if this enhancement would not be reached, the catastrophic and drained Stationary State of his predecessor would appear. It maybe, that with this sentence Mill wanted to stress the importance for humanity to be aware of the declining situation, and that, soon or later the ecosystem would be excessively used, and so that they were still in time to choose to be stationary in Mill's perfect world instead of letting the Stationary State come by necessity. Of course in this hypothetic interpretation the important aspect is the concept of choice. In this idea the philosopher give to the whole mankind the *responsibility* to save itself and the planet earth, by recognising the excess and starting with a new decreasing growth.

In order to meet a harmonious Stationary State John Stuart Mill stressed the importance of a change of state of mind and human lifestyle, from the one adopted by capitalists, and “*homo economicus*” to a more moral and ethical one. He was hopping that individuals would have stop to focus on capital

accumulation, but would reconsider their priorities putting happiness at the first place.

Finally we have seen the essential role that environment has in Mill reasoning and sensibility, which is the key for allowing a harmonious Stationary State to make its entrance in a much more elevate society. Its preservation would be the proof of more mature humankind that would be ready for a Stationary State.

John Stuart Mill anachronistic and brilliant vision of the world of his time, led him to think about what should be instead of what he defined “*struggling, trampling, crushing elbowing (...) disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress*”.

The philosopher, economist, and one of the major exponent of liberalism and utilitarianism, could understand the phase that his contemporaneous were passing through, but was pointing his works and ideas toward something of more elevate, that would have as final goal happiness and wealth.

It's precisely these latter the answer to the question that Mill ask to the reader and to himself at the beginning of Principles of Political Economy, “*When does progress cease?*”. Progress cease when a wealthy and harmonious Stationary State is reached. Mill stressed the unavoidability of this stagnation, but he did not hesitate to describe it and to give instructions on how to attain a perfect Stationary State. His ideas have many similarities and differences with all his predecessors, from Smith to Marx, but certainly Mill distinct himself on the analysis of the Stationary State. As Smith, the utilitarian philosopher was aware about the egoistic nature of human beings, but didn't excluded from it altruism and virtuous, which he consider essential to reach a Stationary State. Furthermore, the author admitted the existence of a potentially catastrophic steady state, but he considered that as avoidable, through a process of degrowth, that would have eliminate wastes, bringing humanity to meet a new form of high quality utilities. In fact in his new vision of stagnation Mill putted at the core happiness that should be the first and unique goal of progress. He was arguing that happiness is the only objective in individuals behaviour, and that the beauty of nature and virtuous would have approached humanity much more faster to it, then materialistic and superficial commodities provided by the capitalistic condition of his times.

## **PART III: What happened to the Stationary State?**

John Stuart Mill described us a really comfortable and tempting world, that according to the author will not delay that much to appear. But many of the foresights of the philosopher, analysed in the previous sessions, are today called back in questions. Adam Smith believed that growth would last only 200 years after his death; the revolution of the working class assumed by Marx did not appear, or at least, capitalism is still the dominant system; and technology has reached incredible heights. On the other side, many of their threats are topic of discussions; many people are scared of a drain of lands, or of overpopulation. In the light of what we have discussed in the precedents parts, we are now considering the Stationary State in a more modern and contemporary vision. The concept that recognises in Mill its major exponent, has inspired many authors and has fostered many debates. Among those authors we cannot underestimate John Maynard Keynes. Can we consider the foresights described by Mill as realised? And, can we say that we are near to reach the Stationary State?

This third and last part of this thesis will briefly discuss:

Firstly the tremendous influence that Mill's Stationary State have had on the more famous economist of the XX century, John Maynard Keynes.

Secondly, through critics and confrontations with modern times, we will discuss about the actual manifestation of the Stationary State described by Mill. *Are his predictions realized? Are we close to our future?*

### **1. John Maynard Keynes post-scarcity society**

Many people consider him as the one that saved the world from the economic crisis of 29', many others accuse him for the actual situation. However, we can easily say, that thanks to the studies of John Maynard Keynes, the whole economic thought and the way through which government faced economic problems, have been revolutionised. Considered as the father of modern economy, his publication in

1936 of *The general theory of employment, interest and money* represents the core of today macroeconomics.

Keynesian theories on the Stationary State gather many ideas of his predecessors, especially from Mill, but he also rejected some of them. In this short part we will focus on the points in common that have two of the greatest economic thinkers of the Stationary State.

We are briefly comparing John Maynard Keynes idea of stagnation with the one provided by John Stuart Mill described above.

### **a) Keynes and Mill: two Stationary States.**

John Maynard Keynes has been the most important economist of the XX century; his contributions to the whole economic thought are unquantifiable.

His vision of the Stationary State, as the one of Mill before him, took the best from his predecessors and rejected what he judged superficial or wrong. In fact, leaving beside the many contradictions that his reasonings have been accused of, his idea of long run stagnation has more in common with Mill than with all the others authors analysed in this thesis.

As Mill, Keynes argued that into a future post-scarcity society or Stationary State, people will overcome the idea of economics, and will start to be interested in more moral and ethical topics. His idea was that the whole population will be less interested into “economic problems” and as Mill described one century before him, people will be seek of “*getting on*”.

*“I look forward, therefore, in days not so very remote, to the greatest change which has ever occurred in the material environment of life for human beings in the aggregate. But, of course, it will all happen gradually, not as a catastrophe. Indeed, it has already begun. The course of affairs will simply be that there will be ever larger and larger classes and groups of people from whom problems of economic necessity have been practically removed.”*

In fact he considered the economic problem not that hard to solve, he was conscientious of the fact that his theories would revolutionized the economic thought approaching humanity to a steady state: “*there*

*will be a great change”.*

Furthermore, Keynes idea of Stationary State differently from Ricardo and Mill, was not assuming the Ricardian theory of *diminishing returns* of agriculture, and was not giving the fault for stagnation, to overpopulation.

*“What is the result? In spite of an enormous growth in the population of the world, which it has been necessary to equip with houses and machines, the average standard of life in Europe and the United States has been raised, I think, about fourfold. The growth of capital has been on a scale which is far beyond a hundredfold of what any previous age had known. And from now on we need not expect so great an increase of population.”*

He did not believe that stagnation would be reached because of a decreasing of natural resources. In fact he perceived that an evolution in science or in technologies, would have foster mankind to overcome these limits, bringing humanity to surmount absolute material barriers to realize its evolutionary potential. Keynes thought was that humans were only temporarily dominated by those boundaries.

Analysing deeply his reasoning, we can notice that he rejected the idea of capitalists in the sense of Smith; he didn't perceived individuals as a source of unlimited desired. In fact, as Mill, he believed that *“when the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals”.*

Again they both rejected the neoclassical idea of catastrophic end, and apocalyptic future, agreeing on the fact that the upcoming Stationary State will be a pleasant place where to live.

Indeed at the core of Keynes studies there is consumption, and he argued that the way that would have brought humanity toward a Stationary State, was depending from this latter. When the propensity to consume will fall, when the additional quantity of consumption is exhausted, mankind would reach a much more pleasant condition, the Stationary State.

Another point in common that the two economists manifested to have through their publications, is that both of them were considering the capitalistic system as a *“necessary stage”* rich of unjustified inequalities. Both writers were assuming that the actual condition is surmountable. For what regard equalities, Keynes argued that to give the biggest part of wealth to few people was not the way for society to achieve its final goal. Instead, he proposed that to succeed, we should have more control on

population, as Mill advised. Further, he argued that a change of mind should have been done in order to be more inclined to morals, and peace, finally he recognised that the rate of capital accumulation should be fixed, within the boundaries of production and consumption.

*“The pace at which we can reach our destination of economic bliss will be governed by four things – our power to control population, our determination to avoid wars and civil dissensions, our willingness to entrust to science the direction of those matters which are properly the concern of science, and the rate of accumulation as fixed by the margin between our production and our consumption; of which the last will easily look after itself, given the first three.”*

Finally we can notice that in Mill as in Keynes, the discussions that regard the Stationary State don't consider classes as in Marx idea of capitalistic breakdown, but the subject of their ideas is always the whole human species.

We can conclude this part by saying that Keynes had much more in common with Mill than with the others classical economists. Even if they have different ideas on some topic, as Ricardian diminishing return, they both believed in a better and harmonious reachable Stationary State.

It would be also the case to conclude this part by a Keynes quote:

*“I look forward, therefore, in days not so very remote, to the greatest change which has ever occurred in the material environment of life for human beings in the aggregate. But, of course, it will all happen gradually, not as a catastrophe. Indeed, it has already begun. The course of affairs will simply be that there will be ever larger and larger classes and groups of people from whom problems of economic necessity have been practically removed. The critical difference will be realized when this condition has become so general that the nature of one's duty to one's neighbour is changed. For it will remain reasonable to be economically purposive for others after it has ceased to be reasonable for oneself.”*



## **2. The Stationary State today.**

Along this thesis we have discussed the evolution of the idea of Stationary State in different centuries, from Smith to Keynes. We have seen that the major exponent of this concept has certainly been John Stuart Mill, which influence last even in modern economists.

The idea of Stationary State has something of fascinating and tempting. But what last about Mill's Stationary State today? Does the author realized make the predictions?

This very last part of this thesis will briefly compare the concept advanced by Mill with the actual economic environment through empirical evidences, trying to figure out if we are really approaching stagnation and an harmonious future goal.

### **a) What last of Mill's Stationary State**

Here we are to the last point of our long discussion on the Stationary State, and on John Stuart Mill. For who believed into the controversial theme of stagnation, this last point risk to have a strong impact, in fact it seems that the idea of degrowth advanced by Mill, and predecessors, is not yet that close.

First of all the prevalent idea that was predominating the economic though of past economists, among which there was our dear John Stuart Mill, that in order to reach a Stationary State population would have to decrease, is certainly far from being true. Indeed, population growth has nowadays reached the highest records, and will continue to grow up. But even today, the idea supported by Malthus, and followed by Mill of overpopulation, stay and alarm scientists and economists.

The fear advanced by classical economists was that an excessive increase in population would have led to an overexploitation of lands, due to diminishing returns. People acknowledge this idea that the planet earth is suffering of too heavy consumption and that lands will not be productive to infinite and many movements promoting environmental sustainability rise up every year. Many changes have been done in order to save the ecosystem, but the situation is still alarming the experts.

In contrast, empirically it seems that the Keynesian idea that science and technologic progress would have helped to meet consumption and production needs, is more observable today. Beside, technology is fostering the exploitations of lands, and the risk of to exceed in the use of the gifts of nature flies

above us. People are aware of the idea that this rhythm of consumption cannot be supported to infinite. The idea of degrowth advanced by the utilitarian philosopher is retaken by many authors of modern times. Among which we can quote the French professor Serge Latouche, who's strong support of the topic is sensitizing every day more persons, that are step by step recognising the need of a radical change.

Furthermore, Mill discussed in his *Principles of Political Economy* that in order to reach a Stationary State the industry, intended in its wide sense, had to play a fundamental role.

In a first hand, industry should have helped humanity to focus on distribution rather than production, but having a look to actual system, it doesn't seem so. Indeed, inequalities are increased and people are still acting with a capitalistic view putting most of their attention on production. In the second hand, Mill believed into a moral and just entity that would have provided labour, leaving its place to independent individuals. However, especially those last years, unemployment is increasing in most of the European countries, and unstable government are far from inspiring justice and to spread morals. Another important aspect that we find in Mill and predecessors analysis of the Stationary State, but that we far from realize, is the decreasing rate of profit. In fact the accumulation of capital is still increasing today, and far from have reached stability. The fault of that could be attributed to the increasing predominance of a financial system, which assume that money is not just an intermediary used for an exchange, but becomes a commodity. In fact according to Mill in this case the law that sustained that supply produce its own demand, fails.

Going deeply in Mill vision of the Stationary State, we meet the idea of a quasi-illuminated individual that would prefer moral, culture and ethic, to materials, economic goods and excessive comfort. It's clear to the reader that even in this case, today society is far from have reached this ideal. In fact nowadays economy, maybe due to an excessive concentration on production rather than distribution, tend to focus on materialistic aspect leading to an increasing consumption of economics goods. Is true that since Mill, literacy rate has increased but it also true that the comfort has reached unbelievable highest, manifesting and demonstrating that the capitalistic stage is not yet surmounted. It is not wrong to sustain that people are still preferring to search happiness into superficial commodities rather than virtuous, demonstrating to be still much inclined toward capital accumulation.

Mill argued also about the importance for a man to cultivate solitude, in order to enhance him and society. But, also in this case, globalization and technology are going toward the opposite direction.

Thanks to new social networks, and to the increase of economies of scale, cell phones are accessible to everyone and no one is unreachable.

We can notice a two-side aspect of technology and scientific progress that from one side is supporting Mill's Stationary State, through contraceptives, reducing labour, bringing science to incredible discovers and today gives the opportunity to access to culture and knowledge from everywhere. But on the other side, it helped to increase leisure in an excessive way, has decreased the possibility of solitude, focus mostly on production and so on.

This second point was necessary to clean actualize the idea of Stationary State, and helped us to figure out that humans are still far from reaching the Stationary State acclaimed by John Stuart Mill. In fact many of the aspect on which he was counting are today more present then ever. Capitalism has adopted new forms and is still the predominant system in this high-tech society.

We recognized here that even if the progress are almost 200 years higher, what above all will bring humanity to a Stationary State will be his choice.

This brief third chapter of this thesis was necessary to have a concrete idea of the evolution of Mill's Stationary State and its duration across the years after his death.

We have seen that many of the concepts expressed into his works have been retaken from his successors, above all John Maynard Keynes, which reworked the idea of Stationary State, in a XX century prospective, leaving a great part of Mill analysis, but agreeing on the importance of a change in individuals mentality.

In the second part we have analysed the actuality of the Stationary State noticing that even if people sensibilities are starting to change, especially from an environmental point of view, the ideal advanced from Mill is still very far from being realized, and the capitalistic system is not yet defeated.

Furthermore, although many steps toward a Stationary State are claimed, thanks to many authors that are reworking and enhancing the analysis on the topic, the capitalistic system is not yet defeated and an harmonious stagnation remands a dream.

Mill's ideas on Stationary State have proved to be extremely modern, and raised up important issues on which even today the debates are open, the question that is still today dominating the economic the

economic field is when will society reach a Stationary State or this idea will remain theory?

## Conclusion:

Our discussions about the idea of Stationary State and its relation with John Stuart Mill have now reached their end. In the first chapter of this thesis we have analysed the origins of Mill's idea of Stationary State, through the major exponents of classical economy. We have noticed that Smith, Ricardo, Malthus and Marx, although they have chosen different ways, had basically two points in common for what regard the concept of Stationary State. In one hand all of them, were agreeing that the rate of profit would have decrease along time; and in a second hand they recognised that the economic system was not that far from reaching a Stationary State. From the XVIII century to Malthus, the dominating idea was that a catastrophic end was imminent, as the increasing capitalistic living standards could not be afforded up to the infinite. Karl Marx was agreeing with his predecessors, accusing capitalism of exploitation, and believing that communism would have led to a much more sustainable society.

In the second chapter we focused entirely on Mill idea of stagnation, discovering that he gave a very detailed description of what he was considering as imminent. We have also seen that the author had much in common with his predecessors on the topic, especially with Ricardo, but differently from the other classical economists he was not supporting the idea of catastrophic end or of capitalism breakdown. Furthermore, we have discuss in depth the concept of Stationary State, finding that Mill was arguing that through a degrowth process society would have reached a peaceful, respectful, and harmonious environment, with an interconnected equilibrium among individuals, industry and ecology. The philosopher, economists, and brilliant John Stuart Mill built up his reasoning around the idea of individual happiness, and on that he introduced the innovative idea of qualitative utilities associated with the cultivation of virtuous and moral. He believed that happiness was the only human purpose, and so, deserved the focus of the whole society, industry and economy.

Finally, in the third and last chapter we've find out that also contemporary economists as John Maynard Keynes were fascinated by the argument, and in that case, his analysis was not that far from the one provided by Mill in the XIX century. Moreover, we have tried to actualized Mill concept of steady state noticing that the predictions, or advises supplied by the author are still far from being reached, although sensibilities are much more aware about the impossibility of sustaining the actual standard of living.

To respond to the big question of this thesis: *When does progress cease?* We can argue that since XIXe

century, progress and development have not stopped to increase, leading to the discovery of new possibilities and horizons. In this prospective, progress cease when individuals will choose to give more importance to sustainability instead of production. Will prefer virtuous to consumption, and if this decision is not taken in time, a catastrophic stagnation might occur. To conclude we might also consider the idea, that a harmonious, ethical and stagnant Stationary State is indeed approaching, but *does he include people in their actual state on mind? And, would all individuals like to live into such a flat Stationary State?*

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