

Are we living in Mill's 'Stationary State'?

John Stuart Mill was a progressive in many ways. The English philosopher was a proponent of Bentham's theory of utilitarianism, an abolitionist, and a feminist. (In fact, he was the first Member of Parliament to advocate women's suffrage.)

But Mill parted ways with other prominent thinkers—Marx and Nicolas Condorcet, among them—whose philosophies embraced man's indefinite progress. Mill believed there was an upper limit to a state's progress, a point at which they reached staticity. This is what Mill had to say on the subject in [*Principles of Political Economy*](#):

It must always have been seen, more or less distinctly, by political economists, that the increase of wealth is not boundless: that at the end of what they term the progressive state lies the stationary state, that all progress in wealth is but a postponement of this, and that each step in advance is an approach to it. We have now been led to recognize that this ultimate goal is at all times near enough to be fully in view; that we are always on the verge of it, and that if we have not reached it long ago, it is because the goal itself flies before us.

While thinkers such as Marx believed human progress was essentially limitless if humans effectively harnessed the engines of industry and mass production, Mill was more skeptical of human advancement.

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. 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.

Mill's vision of a stationary state might sound pessimistic, but that is not an entirely accurate description. Mill's state is stationary at a material level, but he did not tie human progress to capital accumulation. He believed that a stationary state had the potential to offer "all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress" once the human mind "ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on."

We're currently witnessing [a massive slowdown](#) of the global economy. Could we be entering the stationary state theorized by Mill? If so, could it be a peaceful flowering of art and culture? Or did Mill underestimate the human (material) appetite and other social factors (i.e. generational conflict) that inhibit moral, ethical, and intellectual progress?

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Jon Miltimore is the Senior Editor of Intellectual Takeout. [Follow him](#) on Facebook.