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Louise Villeneuve

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the exclusion of “consumption” from John Stuart Mill’s definition of political economy (1836). Unlike production and distribution, consumption is not an economic activity that Mill included in the theoretical framework of the science of political economy. Consumption could not be subject to a law of political economy and could only be a law of human enjoyment. This article shows that although Mill understood the desire to consume and observed its practice in the Victorian society of the 19th century, he didn’t think of consumption as a productive activity that could lead to the accumulation of wealth. The article argues that consumption for Mill belongs to the realm of art, which he distinguishes from scientific knowledge, and which explains its exclusion from the science of political economy. More specifically, the article shows that consumption belongs to domestic economy, which according to Mill is an art. The purpose of every art is the promotion of happiness, the article hence argues that consumption was part of Mill’s moral theory of happiness influenced by Aristotle rather than the science of political economy, which dealt with the production and distribution of wealth.

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1. Introduction

The concept of consumption has a peculiar place in the political economy of the 19th century. Historians have suggested that classical political economists didn’t pay much attention to this phenomenon (Moffat 1878; Leslie 1888; Bowman 1951; Carrier and McC Heyman 1997; Winch 2006; Pietrykowski 2009; Trentmann 2017; Perrotta 2020; Kuiper 2022) and, indeed, the place of consumption was not always central in the classical treatises of political economy. In the early 19th century, the discourses

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focusing on the activity of consumption and its treatment in political economy were, nevertheless, important. Indeed, with the industrial revolution, the focus of political economists moved towards the question of production and accumulation (Roncaglia 2005, p. 164). Moreover, the end of the 18th century luxury debates emancipated the concept of luxury from its moral dimension (Berry, 1994), while the capacity of consumption to participate in the accumulation of wealth was questioned by political economists (Perrotta 2020). Even though consumption was not systematically subject to a law of political economy in the early 19th century, classical economists questioned the capacity of countries to enrich or impoverish themselves through it. In doing so, their discourse questioned the nature of consumption and its morality: is consumption good or bad for oneself, for others, for the environment and for society? This perspective on consumption eventually disappeared with the advent of the marginalist revolution.

This article analyses John Stuart Mill's conceptualisation of consumption. Mill is particularly relevant because of the importance of his political economy in the 19th century, situated at the end of the classical period and just before marginalism (Peart 1995; Sotiropoulos 2009; Backhouse and Tribe 2018, p. 153), which changed the relationship between consumption and economics.² This article aims at explaining the exclusion of consumption from Mill's definition of political economy. Indeed, Mill defines the abstract science of political economy as the laws of the production and distribution of wealth in his essay *On the Definition of Political Economy and on the Method of Investigation Proper to it* (Mill 1836a/2006). While historians have mostly justified this exclusion by looking at Mill's attachment to the supply side of the economy, this article analyses Mill's conception of consumption, specifically of productive and unproductive consumption. It shows that Mill did not think consumption could be subject to a law of political economy. Indeed, the article argues that consumption for Mill, and precisely its unproductive form belongs to the realm of art, which he distinguishes from scientific knowledge. More specifically, the article shows that unproductive consumption belongs to the art of domestic economy. The purpose of every art is the promotion of happiness. The article hence argues that consumption was part of Mill's theory of happiness rather than his science of political economy.

The article looks first at the intellectual context in which Mill published his essay in 1836. The section focuses on the early 19th-century debate on general gluts and the origin of the distinction between productive and unproductive consumption. The article then analyses Mill's 1836 definition of political economy and the exclusion of the laws of the consumption of wealth from it. According to Mill these laws don't exist in political economy and can only be laws of human enjoyment. Lastly, the article analyses the connection between unproductive consumption and Mill's theory of happiness. It explains the distinction Mill established between science and the art of political economy in the essay *On the Definition of Political Economy* (Mill 1836a/2006), which he extended to all moral sciences in *The Logic* (Mill 1843/2006). The section then shows that unproductive consumption belongs to the domestic economy, which is an art. The final section argues that consumption was for Mill a practice, an action desired on its

² For a reconstruction of Mill's political economy and methodology, see Hollander (1985a, 1985b). See also, Persky (2016), Hollander and Peart (1999), Akdere (2021) and McCabe (2021).

own, in the Aristotelian sense of *praxis*. It, therefore, shows that there was a philosophical and ethical understanding of consumption in Mill's work, which eventually justified that consumption was about practice, art, and happiness.

2. Context: General gluts, productive and unproductive consumption

In the late 18th century, the effects of industrialisation on the rising levels of production in Britain led political economists to focus their attention on activities that could contribute to the accumulation of wealth. Hence, they distinguished between activities productive and unproductive of wealth. Adam Smith first established the distinction between productive and unproductive labour in the second book of *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1776) and argued that manufacturers were productive labourers contributing to national wealth. Moreover, for Smith growth was driven by savings rather than by the luxury consumption of the landlords, as previously argued by the Physiocrats. The distinction between productive and unproductive labour led to controversies in the early 19th century. Political economists envisioned the possibility that manufacturing nations could produce too many goods that could not be absorbed at current levels of consumption and debated over the possible existence of glutted markets.

In this context, the French political economist Jean-Baptiste Say substituted the distinction between productive and unproductive labour with one between reproductive and unproductive consumption (Perrotta 2020, chapter 8). According to Say, reproductive consumption³ is advantageous to society, and this advantage is a gain (Say 1803, Book V, chapter 2). The gain is the possession of a new product, which value is greater than the value consumed through reproductive consumption. On the contrary, the benefit of unproductive consumption is the enjoyment attached to the satisfaction of a need, which according to Say, is a loss to society. Nevertheless, he considers that this loss can be useful. Indeed, he says that the food that feeds, the wood that heats or the clothes that cover gave some benefit to man, although the food, wood and clothes are destroyed in the process (Say 1803, Book V, Chapter 2). Consumption is a destruction of utility and, thus, a loss of value. Therefore, Say criticised the theories according to which consumption should be encouraged to absorb the surplus of production. Besides, Say established his *Loi des débouchés* (1803), according to which production is the source of effective, not actual, demand (Baumol 1977). According to Say, the quantity of specific commodities produced by producers is greater than their consumption of it because of the need they have to exchange with other commodities which are necessary for them to live a good life. The exchanges of goods that producers make between themselves offer these products what are called “*débouchés*”, that is a market (Say 1803, p. 152). Therefore, Say argued that the investments drive growth, that is, reproductive consumption, rather than the consumption of luxuries, or unproductive consumption (Baumol 1977). In line with Adam Smith, Say criticised the Physiocrats for thinking that savings are not consumed and should be prevented.

³ Say indicates in the following chapter that reproductive consumption does not generally bear the name of “consumption”. Indeed, for Say reproductive consumption is productive investment (Say 1803, Book V, Chapter 3).

On the other hand, underconsumption theorists argued that capital could accumulate too rapidly and that the excess of savings and investment could cause periodical gluts of unsold goods. Therefore, they considered two remedies: restraining investments or consuming the surplus unproductively (Perrotta 2020, chapter 9). Indeed, they saw the necessity to encourage unproductive consumption to counterbalance this tendency (Winch 2006).

Malthus, who became famous and influential on economic issues with the publication of *The Principles of Population* in 1798 was an important contributor to the debate on gluts. Malthus criticised Say's Law and argued in his *Principles of Political Economy* (Malthus 1820/1836), that accumulation could lead to gluts, not because of excessive savings but because of an insufficient demand due to a lack of productive workers. Malthus criticised Ricardo who argued that the surplus could be absorbed by the increase of productive workers, due to population growth. For Malthus, children only become workers at the age of sixteen or eighteen and, hence, he argued that "yet as from the nature of a population, an increase of labourers cannot be brought into market, in consequence of a particular demand, till after the lapse of sixteen or eighteen years, and the conversion of revenue into capital by saving, may take place much more rapidly" (Malthus 1820/1836, p. 319). Moreover, for Malthus consumption depends on customs and habits which change slowly compared to accumulation, which proceeds rapidly. Therefore, for Malthus "produce in excess can only be absorbed by unproductive labourers", which category includes the landowners and nobility (Perrotta 2020, chapter 8).

John Stuart Mill's essay *On the Definition of Political Economy and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It* was published in 1836 in the context of such controversies. In this essay, Mill attempted to give a definition of the science of political economy and to determine its methodology. Mill distinguished himself from previous interpretations of classical economists⁴ by rejecting the possible existence of these "laws of the consumption of wealth" and their inclusion in the framework of the science of political economy.

3. John Stuart mill's definition of political economy

In his essay *On the Definition of Political Economy*, Mill defines political economy as "the science which treats of the production and distribution of wealth, so far as they depend upon the laws of human nature" (Mill 1836a/2006, p. 94). In a note, Mill explains that he does not consider the consumption of wealth subject to a law of Political Economy:

we say, the production and distribution, not, as is usual with writers on this science, the production, distribution, and consumption. For we contend that Political Economy, as

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Say defined political economy as the science which treats of the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth (Say 1803). Similarly, at the beginning of the fourth chapter "Consumption" of his *Elements of Political Economy* (Ricardo 1821/1996), James Mill, John Stuart's father, considered the consumption of wealth as the end of all things and the fourth economic activity defining the science of political economy. The three others are the production, distribution, and exchange of wealth (1826). Following Jane Marcet's *Conversations of Political Economy* (Marcet 1816) and James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy* (1826 (1826)), Harriett Martineau states in her tale "Briery Creek" that "having illustrated the leading principles which regulate the production, distribution and exchange of wealth, we proceed to consider the laws of its consumption. Of these four operations, the three first are means to the attainment of the last as an end" (Martineau 1832, p. 153).

conceived by those very writers, has nothing to do with the consumption of wealth, further than as the consideration of it is inseparable from that of production, or from that of distribution. We know not of any laws of the consumption of wealth as the subject of a distinct science: they can be no other than the laws of human enjoyment. Political economists have never treated of consumption on its own account, but always for the purpose of the inquiry in what manner different kinds of consumption affect the production and distribution of wealth (Mill 1836a/2006, p. 94).

The 1836 essay was republished in 1844 together with four others, composing the volume *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*. In the second essay “*On the Influence of Consumption on Production*” (Mill 1844/2006), Mill denies the possibility that consumption could be the condition of the prosperity of countries, as others have argued before him. Moreover, consumption does not need to be encouraged, according to Mill, because it naturally follows production.⁵ Everything that is produced is consumed either for reproduction or with the purpose of enjoyment. Indeed, according to Mill, two types of consumption naturally flow from production: productive consumption, which aim is reproduction and the only one which adds to national wealth, and unproductive consumption, which aim is direct pleasure and diminishes national wealth (Mill 1844/2006, p. 263).

At the end of the 19th century, Mill was criticised for having ignored consumption in his political economy (Jevons, 1871/1888; Moffat 1878; Leslie 1888; Marshall, 1890/1988). Historians have argued that Mill’s attachment to the supply side of the economy and Ricardo’s cost of production theory could justify that exclusion (Winch 2006). According to Trentmann (2016, 2017, pp. 151–2) David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill’s economics was about land and production and could not focus on an economic theory of consumption. Moreover, Bowman argued that Ricardo and Mill marked a retreat rather than an advance in conceptions of the role of consumption and that Mill “made the whole question of any active role of the consumer in the economy largely irrelevant” (Bowman 1951, p. 11). de Marchi (1972) explained that Mill’s unwillingness to develop the mathematical tools necessary for the emergence of the concept of marginal utility prevented him from analysing the laws of demand. For Arena et al. (1993, p. 532), the idea of marginal utility was known by Mill but absent from his economic analysis. Indeed, his conception of demand was not based on a psychological theory of consumption, which would explain the motivations of the consumer, like the psychological law reflecting economic behaviour which consists in preferring more wealth than less. These explanations suggest that Mill’s focus was on the supply side of the economy. Conversely, this article aims to understand precisely what Mill meant by consumption and which could explain its exclusion from the science of political economy. The next section, hence, analyses what consumption and specifically unproductive consumption meant for Mill.

3.1. Mill’s refinement of the concepts “productive” and “unproductive”

In the essay *On the Words Productive and Unproductive* (Mill 1844/2006), Mill refines the concepts of productivity and unproductivity which he argues were previously

⁵ John Stuart Mill follows Jean-Baptiste Say’s *loi des débouchés*, to which his father James Mill also adhered.

defined in a limited sense.⁶ On the one hand, Mill considers as “always productive” the labour and expenditures the object of which is the creation of a material product which is useful and agreeable to mankind. Those which aim at endowing man with faculties and qualities which are useful and agreeable to humanity, and which have exchangeable value. Those which indirectly aim at promoting one or the other of these ends. On the other hand, Mill labels as entirely unproductive “labour exerted, and expenditure incurred, directly and exclusively for the purpose of enjoyment, and not calling into existence anything, whether substance or quality, but such as begins and perishes in the enjoyment” or “labour exerted and expenditure incurred uselessly, or in pure waste, and yielding neither direct enjoyment nor permanent sources of enjoyment” (Mill 1844/2006, p. 287).⁷ For instance, Mill explains that the labour of a musician is unproductive because it consists in directly providing enjoyment. Conversely, the labour of the artisan who made the musical instrument is productive because the instrument is a source of enjoyment and can be accumulated. Besides, although they are immaterial, Mill thinks that the skills of the musician are a permanent source of pleasure because skills have exchangeable value, acquired through labour and capital. They can be stored and accumulated. Skills must, therefore, be considered as wealth. Mill explains that the skills of the musician and the musical instrument are, at the same time, the result of productive labour and consumed unproductively for the direct enjoyment of the audience (Mill 1844/2006, p. 285).

The concept of “*unproductive*” is specific to political economy and should only be understood as unproductive of wealth. Indeed, in the third essay ‘*On the Words Productive and Unproductive*’ (Mill 1844/2006), Mill explains that, by productive and unproductive labour and consumption, he means productive or unproductive of wealth. Indeed, he states that:

In proportion to the amount of the productive labour and consumption of a country, the country, they allow is enriched: in proportion to the amount of the unproductive labour and consumption, the country is impoverished. Productive expenditure they are accustomed to view as a gain, unproductive expenditure, however useful, as a sacrifice (Mill 1844/2006, p. 284).

Mill adds that permanent sources of pleasure can be accumulated and stocked whereas pleasure cannot. The wealth of a country « consists of the sum total of the permanent sources of enjoyment, whether material or immaterial, contained in it: and labour or expenditure which tends to augment or to keep up these permanent sources, should, we conceive, be termed productive” (Mill 1844/2006, p. 284). The only way to increase wealth is, hence, through the accumulation of sources of enjoyment, that is through productive labour and consumption. Unproductive labour

⁶ For Adam Smith, unproductive labour is unproductive of value and “does not fix or realise itself in any permanent subject or vendible commodity” (Smith 1776, p. 313). Smith includes in this category the sovereign, the officers of justice and war, the army and navy, the churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds, players, buffon, musicians, opera-singers, opera-dancers.

⁷ Mill also classifies as partially productive or partially unproductive the labour and expenditures that create useful material products or faculties, but which are not exercised for this proper purpose, or which direct purpose is pleasure or enjoyment. For instance, he includes in this category the labour and wages of domestic servants. Indeed, domestic servants are subjected to the enjoyment of other persons. These domestic servants are, nonetheless, involved in productive services, such as cooking or gardening (Mill 1844/2006, pp. 286-7). For a discussion on the productive status of domestic labour in Mill see (Hirschmann 2008). On the question of women’s work and wages see (Gouverneur 2019).

participates in the decrease of aggregate wealth, due to the consumption of the worker unproductively employed. Indeed, the consumption of an unproductive worker is necessarily unproductive. More precisely, the labour which results in immediate pleasure, and which does not participate in the increase of the accumulated sources of pleasure is unproductive. For instance, Mill explains that, while useful, saving a friend's life is not a productive task, unless the friend in question is a productive worker who produces more than he consumes (Mill 1848/2006, p. 106).

In *The Principles of Political Economy* (Mill 1848/2006), Mill returns to this concept of unproductivity and explains that it has been negatively connoted in the past. Indeed, he explains that the term “unproductive” has often been associated with negative concepts such as waste or valueless. Indeed, Smith's idea of unproductive labour came to be associated with those who do not work, which eventually reached the illiterate class. Simon Gray⁸ or William Cobbett⁹ both participated in the popularisation of the work of Smith and his system was then associated with the distinction between the productive classes who produce wealth and the unproductive classes who consume that wealth (Claeys 1985). Mill explains that he does not denigrate the types of labour he categorises as unproductive. On the contrary, he thinks that there are many types of labour, which are more useful but for which the direct object is not production. According to Mill, labour is essential to production, but it does not always result in the production of material objects per se. Following classical economists, Mill considers that value comes from labour but, in line with Jean-Baptiste Say, he also considers that labour creates utility, of which he differentiates three kinds (Mill 1848/2006): “utilities fixed and embodied in outward objects,” “utilities fixed and embodied in human beings,” “utilities not fixed or embodied in any object, but consisting in a mere service rendered; a pleasure given, an inconvenience or a pain averted, during a longer or a shorter time, but without leaving a permanent acquisition in the improved qualities of any person or thing” (Mill 1848/2006, p. 104). Out of these three categories, Mill says that productive labour is the one which produces a utility fixed and embodied in material objects. According to Mill, the idea of wealth must be accompanied by the idea of accumulation. Things which cannot be stored or accumulated, even though they have a certain utility, cannot be considered wealth. The labour which participated in the production of these objects cannot be considered productive, hence what Mill means by unproductive labour.

3.2. Mill's productive and unproductive consumption

In the essay, Mill also refined the distinction between productive and unproductive consumption. For Mill, productive consumption enriches countries. It is the one that repairs, perpetuates, or adds to the permanent sources of pleasure. The commodity consumed with the aim of reproduction is transformed into another one which value is at least the same or superior due to the addition of a profit. Productive consumption comprises the tools, materials, and raw materials that will be used, and consumed (in the sense of

⁸ Simon Gray was a war office employee. In his book *All classes are productive of national wealth* (1817), Gray talks of the immoral character of Smith's unproductive category.

⁹ William Cobbett (1763–1835) was an English pamphleteer, journalist, and member of parliament.

destruction) in the process of production but that will also be transformed. Mill includes subsistence in the category of productive consumption because it serves to maintain the workers in the physical and mental condition necessary to ensure labour and production. Indeed, Mill later mentions in the third essay “*On the Words Productive and Unproductive*” that « as much as is necessary to keep the productive labourer in perfect health and fitness for his employment, may be said to be consumed productively. To this should be added what he expends in rearing children to the age at which they become capable of productive industry” (Mill 1844/2006). In contrast, unproductive consumption for Mill impoverishes countries. It is the one that brings direct enjoyment, provides the fulfilment of desires and whose satisfaction is desired on its own account. What is consumed with the purpose of direct enjoyment simply disappears.

In the preliminary remarks of the first volume of the *Principles of Political Economy* (Mill 1848/2006), Mill gives an example that illustrates the distinction between productive and unproductive consumption:

It has been proposed to define wealth as signifying instruments: meaning not tools and machinery alone, but the whole accumulation possessed by individuals or communities, of means for the attainment of their ends. Thus, a field is an instrument because it is a means to the attainment of corn. Corn is an instrument, being a means to the attainment of flour. Flour is an instrument, being a means to the attainment of bread. Bread is an instrument, as a means to the satisfaction of hunger and to the support of life. Here we at last arrive at things which are not instruments, being desired on their own account, and not as mere means to something beyond (Mill 1848/2006, p. 78).

Productive consumption is the mean or the instrument to obtain something else, such as corn, flour, or bread. Unproductive consumption is the one desired on its own account rather than to obtain something beyond. The concept of unproductive consumption notably refers to the consumption of national and foreign luxury goods or the consumption of pleasures. Mill explains that “consumption on pleasures or luxuries, whether by idle or by the industrious... must be reckoned unproductive: with a reservation perhaps of a certain quantum of enjoyment which may be classed among necessities, since anything short of it would not be consistent with the greatest efficiency of labour” (Mill 1848/2006, p. 108). Mill gives the following example of unproductive consumption: “the annual consumption of gold lace, pineapples, or champagne must be reckoned unproductive, since these things give no assistance to production, nor any support to life or strength, but what would equally be given by things much less costly” (Mill 1848/2006, p. 108).

3.3. Mill and the desire to consume

Through his conception of unproductive consumption Mill recognised that consumption is desired. Moreover, he did not only understand the desire to consume but also acknowledged that it is the desire to consume the result of work and accumulation that motivates humanity and drives it into productive industry. Unproductive consumption, which direct result is enjoyment is the end to which production is the mean. According to Mill, it is the desire of the end that pushes mankind to resort to the means.

Hence, consumption cannot be subject to a law of political economy, which has to be contextualised in Mill's methodological work aiming at defining the boundaries of the science of political economy, only concerned with men seeking enrichment in society (Zouboulakis 2001, p. 32). Indeed, Mill considers the direct end of consumption to be pleasure and enjoyment, which cannot be accumulated and therefore cannot contribute to the increase of national wealth. Therefore, there is no political economic law of enjoyment or pleasure. We can see in John Stuart Mill, that consumption is analysed in terms of the purpose it serves, that is, the satisfaction of desire. Conversely, previous classical economists analysed consumption in terms of the means by which it arises, that is labour. Moreover, previous classical economists' emphasis on the production of commodities as the essence of political economy was replaced for the first time by Mill who connected political economy to the motivations of an "economic man", although he never used the expression himself (Bee and Desmarais-Tremblay 2023). Indeed, Mill considers "the desire of the present enjoyment of costly indulgences" as a motivation of the economic man although he refers to it as a "disturbing cause" antagonising to the desire for wealth (Zouboulakis 2001, p. 32; Zouboulakis 2002, p. 4). He explains that political economy "makes entire abstraction of every other human passion or motive; except those which may be regarded as perpetually antagonising principles to the desire of wealth, namely, aversion to labour, and desire of the present enjoyment of costly indulgences" (Mill 1836a/2006). The desire of wealth is for Mill the most easily accessible means to other desires, such as the desire of the present enjoyment of costly indulgences. In the *Essay*, Mill says:

It is true that mankind are, for the most part, excited to productive industry solely by the desire of subsequently consuming the result of their labour and accumulation. The consumption called unproductive, viz.; that of which the direct result is enjoyment, is in reality the end, to which production is only the means; and a desire for the end, is what alone impels any one to have recourse to the means (Mill 1836a/2006, p. 64).

The same year, Mill wrote the essay "*Civilization*", in which he explains that the desire of wealth is "in the case of the majority, the most accessible means of gratifying all their other desires, nearly the whole of the energy of character which exists in highly civilised societies concentrates itself on the pursuit of that object" (Mill 1836b/2006).

At the end of the 19th century, the concepts of productive and unproductive consumption were abandoned in favour of a single concept: consumption. Mill is among the last influential economists¹⁰ who used and defined the concept of unproductive consumption. His insight is that wealth cannot be accumulated through unproductive consumption because consumption is an immediate destruction of value, whether the purpose of the destruction is waste or enjoyment. With the abandonment of this distinction, the classical conception of waste was equally lost. Indeed, the concept of waste in classical economics differs from our modern understanding of it in the sense

¹⁰ Veblen uses the concept of unproductive consumption in the *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen 1899) to introduce his concept of conspicuous consumption. He explains that, for the leisure class, "unproductive consumption of goods is honourable, primarily as a mark of prowess and a perquisite of human dignity; secondarily it becomes substantially honourable to itself, especially the consumption of the more desirable things" (Veblen 1899, p. 69).

of squandering. Classical economists understood waste and, hence, unproductive consumption as an immediate destruction which doesn't reproduce itself. Unproductive consumption in classical economics, therefore, refers to the original Latin meaning of consumption which meant the using up and physical exhaustion of matter, like food, candles and firewood (Trentmann 2017, p. 2).

While most of the classical economists have talked about unproductive consumption as a wasteful destruction, Jean-Baptiste Say and John Stuart Mill understood that the destruction can, nonetheless, be beneficial because it satisfies a need or a desire. In Say and Mill's conceptualisation of unproductive consumption, we find the origin of the "desire to consume" which became a foundational component of value with the marginalist turn and predominates modern economic thought today. Still, the difference between Say and Mill lies in the definition of political economy. Indeed, although they understood unproductive consumption in the same way, Say included the consumption of wealth in his definition of political economy while Mill excluded it. Indeed, for Mill, unproductive consumption and, therefore, the desire to consume as an object of study is situated outside of the frame of political economy which is only interested in the increase of wealth. Unproductive consumption is about "the present enjoyment" and is also the one which is "desired on its own". It explains what motivates production but cannot be accumulated and consequently decreases wealth. Therefore, it cannot belong to political economy or be subject to a law of political economy.

Nevertheless, Mill did not ignore this phenomenon. On the contrary, he lived through the Industrial Revolution and observed the growing desire to consume which characterised the Victorian society of the 19th century. Indeed, Trentmann (2017) argues that new products from America, India and China such as clothes, tea, coffee or porcelain arrived in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, which changed the consumption habits of the population. Moreover, the 19th century was characterised by the mass production engendered by new and emerging factories which created an industrial class of capitalists and workers whose desire to consume kept increasing (2017, p. 1). The next section shows that Mill was interested in the practice of consumption, which he considered an art, rather than in establishing scientific facts about consumption.

4. The art of consumption

Mill was a philosopher with a wide range of interests, including one for the various forms of human knowledge. Mill differentiated art from the science of political economy in the methodology he developed for the first time in his essay *On the Definition of Political Economy* (Mill 1836a/2006). He considered prescribing public policies and policy-making in general as an art. According to him, the arts of political economy would require considering factors excluded from the abstract science of political economy.

4.1. The science and art of political economy

To refine the definition of the science of political economy from previous definitions established by classical economists, Mill distinguished the science from the art of political economy:

Science is a collection of truths, art, a body of rules, or directions for conduct. The language of science is, this is, or This is not; This does, or does not, happen. The language of art is, do this; Avoid that. Science takes cognizance of a phenomenon, and endeavors to discover its law; art proposes to itself an end and looks out for means to effect it (Mill 1836a/2006, pp. 88–9).

Science and art are, still, closely connected. Indeed, according to Mill: “an art would not be an art, unless it were founded upon a scientific knowledge of the properties of the subject-matter” (Mill 1836a/2006). Art depends on science because the rules which constitute art are the results of science and must be founded upon it. Mill explains that: “rules, therefore, for making a nation increase in wealth, are not a science, but they are the results of science. Political economy does not of itself instruct how to make a nation rich; but whoever would be qualified to judge of the means of making a nation rich, must first be a political economist” (Mill 1836a/2006).

In the *Essay*, Mill also criticises prior attempts to define the science of political economy such as the one according to which “political economy informs us of the laws which regulate the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth” (Mill 1836a/2006). Mill is concerned about the familiar image used to illustrate this definition, that is, “political economy, it is said, is to the state, what domestic economy is to the family”. Indeed, according to Mill, domestic economy is an art:

Domestic economy, so far as it is capable of being reduced to principles, is an art. It consists of rules, or maxims of prudence, for keeping the family regularly supplied with what its wants require, and securing, with any given amount of means, the greatest possible quantity of physical comfort and enjoyment (Mill 1836a/2006, p. 89).

The purpose of the art of political economy or in this case, of the domestic economy is the satisfaction of these “wants” and “physical comfort and enjoyment” in themselves. The purpose of the art lies in the desire for the end, that is comfort and enjoyment. It relies on institutions, such as the family, and consists of rules and maxims of prudence. Nevertheless, science provides the means for the art to secure the ends.

4.2. The general Method of art: the Method of Ethics or practice

Mill further analyses the distinction between science and art in *The Logic* published in 1843. He extends the distinction to all moral sciences and not just political economy. According to Mill, “whatever speaks in rules, or precepts, not in assertions respecting matters of fact (such as scientific laws) is art: and ethics, or morality, is properly a portion of the art corresponding to the sciences of human nature and society” (Mill 1843/2006, p. 943). Science consists of claims asserting matters of fact while art suggests what should be. Besides, there are two types of art for Mill: The Art of Life and the other arts, which are subordinate to the former. The Art of Life is Mill’s theory of practical reason and is concerned with the three departments of “morality, prudence or policy, and aesthetics: the right, the expedient, and the beautiful or noble, in human conduct” (Mill 1843/2006, p. 949). To this Art of Life, all others are subordinate.

In *The Logic*, Mill characterises the general method of art, as the method of Ethics or Practice (Mill 1843/2006, p. 943). This method is explained in the concluding chapter of book VI, *Of the Logic of Practice, or Art, Including Morality and Policy*. Mill explains that the purpose of every art is the end and that it is also the responsibility of art to define this end: “The reasonings which connect the end or purpose of every art with its means, belong to the domain of science, the definition of the end itself belongs exclusively to art, and forms its peculiar province”. The connection between science and art is again evident since Mill explains that the connection between the ends and the means belongs to science. The method is summarised in the following passage of *The Logic*:

The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to the science. The science receives it, considers it as a phenomenon or effect to be studied, and having investigated its causes and conditions, sends it back to art with a theorem of the combinations of circumstances by which it could be produced. Art then examines these combinations of circumstances, and according as any of them are or are not in human power, pronounces the end attainable or not. The only one of the premises, therefore, which Art supplies, is the original major premise, which asserts that the attainment of the given end is desirable. Science then lends to Art the proposition (obtained by a series of inductions or of deductions) that the performance of certain actions will attain the end. From these premises Art concludes that the performance of these actions is desirable, and finding it also practicable, converts the theorem into a rule or precept (Mill 1843/2006, p. 944).

Therefore, it is the responsibility of the art to define the end. To proceed, every art enunciates the object aimed at in its first principle, or general major premise. It is also the responsibility of the art to affirm this object to be desirable. The general major premise of the Art of Life is the promotion of happiness. It concerns “rules of conduct, the cultivation of human feelings, the development of traits of character (that) are desirable insofar as they further the general happiness of humankind” (Eggleston, Miller, and Weinstein 2012, p. 35). Finally, the Art of Life explains that to be morally desirable or worthy, the practice or action must “be something capable of being desired and worth desiring for itself and not as a means to something else” (ibid).

The doctrine of the ends is further discussed and justified in the three essays on utilitarianism that Mill published in *Fraser’s Magazine* (October, November and December 1861). In *Utilitarianism*, he explains that the end is admitted to be good without proof, like the “art of music is good, for the reason, among others, that it produces pleasures; but what proof is it possible to give that pleasure is good” (Mill 1863/2006). Similarly, the pleasure induced by consumption cannot be proven. However, we can still admit that the art of consumption is good because we can observe the desire to consume through the practice of consumption. Indeed, Mill explains that “happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct” (Mill 1863/2006). The “test by which to judge” indicates whether the specific action should be done or not, and which prescription belongs to the art to establish. The rules and observation of practices inform us about the status of the action and whether it should be done or not. Mill observes in the Victorian society he is living in that people desire to consume and that this

desire is growing. Although he never explicitly stated it, we can infer that for Mill, it is good to consume because it brings people happiness.

Art, therefore, defines the end, that is, the satisfaction of comfort and enjoyment. Unproductive consumption for Mill impoverishes countries because, through the very act of consumption, the material or immaterial “object” consumed disappears and hence, cannot be accumulated. But it is also the one which brings direct enjoyment, the one that provides the fulfilment of desires, whose satisfaction is desired on its own account. Unproductive consumption, hence, belongs to art rather than science. It is a practice regulated by rules, observations, and maxims of conduct. This practice is morally desirable because it involves the consumption of the things desired for themselves and conducive to happiness. The consumption for pleasure or luxuries are examples of the things desirable in themselves because of the direct enjoyment induced by it.

4.3. The practice of consumption

This section explains that Mill understands the practice in the Aristotelian sense of *praxis* and suggests that Mill was interested in a “good” and ethical practice of consumption. Indeed, we know from his autobiography that Mill was an avid reader of Aristotle since his young age (Mill 1873/2006). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (349 BC), Aristotle distinguishes between the scientific and calculating part of the rational soul. While the scientific part is concerned with “the things which could not be otherwise,” the calculating part involves “the things which could be otherwise” (Parry 2021, p. 7). Among the things that are not capable of change, we find knowledge and theory, that is, *epistême*. It concerns the necessary truths of mathematics or a necessary reality. For Aristotle: “The object of science, then, is necessary. Therefore, it is eternal: for whatever is of its own nature necessary is eternal: and what is eternal neither begins nor ceases to be” (Aristotle (349 BC) 2014, p. 184). Opposed to the necessary reality, there is the contingent reality, which involves the things that cannot be predicted with certainty, even though possible. Aristotle identifies different “virtues of thought” that deal with what is capable of change, including *technê*, that is craft or art; and *phronêsis*, that is, prudence or practical wisdom. *Technê* is a disposition with respect to making (*poiêsis*). *Phronêsis* is a disposition with respect to doing (*praxis*) (Parry 2021, p. 8). For Aristotle, each *technê* or *phronêsis* aims at some good but the ends vary. Indeed, “a difference is observable among these aims or ends. What is aimed is sometimes the exercise of a faculty, sometimes a certain result beyond that exercise. And where there is an end beyond the act, there the result is better than the exercise of the faculty” (Aristotle (349 BC) 2014, p. 1). *Technê* brings into existence things that could exist or not, such as making a house, that is, a product which is separate from the activity. *Praxis*, on the other hand, involves the activities whose end is in itself, such as playing the flute (Parry 2021, p. 8). Mill similarly explains that “the musical instrument and the skill of the musician (...) are themselves unproductively consumed” (Mill 1844/2006, p. 286). *Praxis* is part of the realm of practical thought. It is indeed the desire and reasoning towards an end that leads to choice subsequently causing action (Parry 2021, p. 7). Mill understands unproductive consumption in the

Aristotelian sense of *praxis*. It is, indeed, the end desired for itself. This understanding also suggests that Mill was interested in a “good” and ethical practice of consumption. Indeed, Aristotle finds virtue in practical wisdom. Virtue is a form of doing, a behaviour orientated towards what is right. The value of a virtuous action depends on the agent who deliberately chooses the action for itself. The value is hence in the activity itself (ibid, p. 8). Therefore, for Aristotle, practical wisdom and *praxis* are about doing well as a human being and living life well in general. Indeed, Aristotle says that: “it seems to be characteristic of a prudent man that he is able to deliberate well about what is good or expedient for himself, not with a view to some particular end, such as health or strength, but with a view to well-being or living well” (Aristotle (349 BC) 2014, p. 186). Moreover, it is in the *praxis* that happiness lies for Aristotle: “our account, again, is in harmony with the common saying that the happy man lives well and does well; for we may say that happiness, according to us, is a living well and doing well” (ibid, p. 19).

In the line of the distinction Aristotle made between *poiesis* and *praxis*, unproductive consumption is for Mill an action or practice, desired on its own and through which the goal of happiness can be achieved. Moreover, according to Berthoud (2005), if consumption is understood as an action having an end in itself, it becomes the most important moment of any economic society. At this moment, human beings reflect on the nature of their desire and consider if this desire is a good or bad one (Berthoud 2005). Mill understands the desire to consume as a desire to act, and this action is the *praxis* to which corresponds an ethic and virtue, which ultimately involves living life well.

The practice of consumption is furthermore discussed by Mill in *On Liberty* (Mill 1859/2006). For Mill, individuals are at liberty to choose, act and therefore consume according to personal preferences and tastes as long as the act does not harm others. Indeed, Mill’s principle of liberty “requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow; without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong” (Mill 1859/2006, p. 226). Moreover, according to Mill, “if any one does an act hurtful to others, there is a *primâ facie* case for punishing him, by law, or, where legal penalties are not safely applicable, by general disapprobation” (Mill 1859/2006, p. 225). In *On Liberty*, Mill discusses situations where the consumer is an “inadequate judge of the commodity” (Claeys 2013, p. 14). Indeed, Claeys argues that for Mill, “consumers were not universally, if they were generally, the best judges of the material commodities produced for their use” (Claeys 2013, p. 64). The consumption of such commodities may be harmful to the consumers or others. Consumption, as an art, involves policy and, hence could be subject to interference in circumstances where consumers are not the best judges of the commodity consumed or when the consumption of the commodity can harm others (Medema 2009, Desmarais-Tremblay 2017, pp. 417–418). For instance, Mill discusses the taxation of stimulants. Indeed, the consumption of alcohol may impose harm on others and, according to Mill “a further question is, whether the State, while it permits, should nevertheless indirectly discourage conduct which it deems contrary to the best

interest of the agents; whether, for example, it should take measures to render the means of drunkenness more costly, or add to the difficulty of procuring them, by limiting the number of places of sale” (Mill 1859/2006, p. 298). Moreover, according to Claeys (2013, pp. 70–1), taxes on luxuries consumed for other purposes than enjoyment, that is, “luxuries ‘which have most connection with vanity, and least with positive enjoyment’, like ‘the more costly qualities of all kinds of personal equipment and ornament’, were applauded by Mill.

Moreover, this conceptualisation of consumption explains Mill’s criticism of material accumulation and his concern for the quality of pleasure as much as for the quantity of it. In the fourth book of *The Principles of Political Economy* (Mill 1848/2006), Mill talks about the stages of development of societies and of the humankind living in those societies. The development of those societies is driven by production and the accumulation of wealth, but Mill was critical of it, as he thought there is no pleasure in the process of accumulation:

I know not why it should be matter of congratulation that persons who are already richer than any one needs to be, should have doubled their means of consuming things which give little or no pleasure except as representative of wealth; or that numbers of individuals should pass over, every year, from the middle classes into a richer class, or from the class of the occupied rich to that of the unoccupied (Mill 1848/2006, p. 755).

In the passage above, we can appreciate Mill’s criticism of endless accumulation.¹¹ Moreover, Mill foresaw that accumulation, and the unlimited increase of wealth would have catastrophic consequences for the environment while not necessarily serving the ultimate purpose of happiness of the population:

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, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it (Mill 1848/2006, p. 756–7).

Mill was not only interested in quantitative accumulation and the quantity of pleasure. Indeed, he introduced the ‘dualism between quantitative and qualitative pleasures’ (Eggleston, Miller, and Weinstein 2012, p. 240) in the chapter on the stationary state (Mill 1848/2006, pp. 752–3). According to McCabe (2021, p. 78), Mill insisted in that chapter on the fact that “we need not ‘increased production’ but a ‘better distribution’ and to use technology to lighten people’s labour, rather than increasing the amount of stuff we produce”. In other words, “if political economists are also concerned with ‘quality’ (e.g., how to avoid the fact that the working classes’ condition deteriorates and pollution destroys nature), an inversion of perspective can be envisaged and the stationary state is not ‘in itself undesirable’” (Eggleston, Miller, and Weinstein 2012, p. 243). Indeed, Mill saw the stationary state as the desirable and ultimate stage of development of society, contrary to previous classical

¹¹ Marx will pick up on this after Mill. Persky (2016) argues that throughout his life, Mill didn’t know of Marx, however, Marx knew about Mill. Moreover, he argues that Mill and Marx’s economic theories shared similarities, although Marx did not admit of, mainly because he saw Mill as a bourgeois, endorsing a cooperative form of socialism he disagreed with.

economists.¹² Mill saw the advent of the last stage of capitalist development in a positive light. For Mill, the stationary state is the “best state for human nature”, 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 1848/2006, p. 754). Moreover, for Mill, the stationary state is compatible with continuous human improvement in mental culture, moral and social progress or in the “arts of living” which are conducive to happiness. Indeed, Mill was in favour of the improvement of the quality of pleasure not just of the quantity of pleasure “It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting” (Mill 1848/2006, p. 757).

Therefore, Mill did not ignore consumption although he considered it as unproductive of wealth and excluded it from the definition of political economy. Consumption for Mill was not scientific knowledge and shouldn't be theorised. On the contrary, it belonged to the realm of practical thought and was about what was capable of change. Moreover, for Mill, consumption was good as long as it was desired for itself, brought enjoyment and happiness, and contributed to virtuous behaviour.

5. Conclusion

This article analysed the concept of consumption in the political economy of John Stuart Mill, which was produced just before the marginalist revolution. The article shows that although Mill understood the desire to consume and observed its practice in the Victorian society of the 19th century, he didn't think of consumption as a productive activity that could lead to the accumulation of wealth. On the contrary, the article demonstrates that unproductive consumption belongs to art, and specifically to the domestic economy, which according to Mill, is an art. The article explains that the principle of art is that of practical actions desired for themselves and leading to happiness. Therefore, it shows that Mill understood consumption as a practice in the Aristotelian sense of *praxis*, that is, actions having inherent value and conducing to happiness. The article, therefore, shows that consumption belongs to the realm of art and connects Mill's conceptualisation of consumption with his theory of happiness rather than with the science of political economy and accumulation.

This article explained the transformation of the concept of consumption until its theorisation in economics. At the end of the 19th century, consumption became central in economics and the desire to consume became a foundational component of value for marginalist economists, which still prevails in neoclassical economic theory today. Indeed, Jevons included consumption and “*the laws of human wants*” in his *Theory of Political Economy* (Jevons, 1871/1888). He argued that “economics must be founded upon a full and accurate investigation of the condition of utility; and, to

¹² Indeed, Smith (1776) and Ricardo (1821) took a pessimistic view on the stationary state and saw the future exhaustion of resources as leading to the end of production and accumulation.

understand this element, we must necessarily examine the wants and desires of man. We, first of all, need a theory of the consumption of wealth. J.S. Mill, indeed, has given an opinion inconsistent with this” (1871, p. 39). Similarly, for Menger, “a correct theory of price must instead be directed to showing how economising men, in their endeavour to satisfy their needs as fully as possible, are led to give goods for other goods” (1871). Nevertheless, this article shows that, before the marginalist revolution, consumption was about happiness and living a good life. This interpretation was ignored by political economists at the time because their focus was specifically on accumulation and its drivers. The rising concerns about consumption, accumulation and their consequences on the environment in contemporary societies raise the importance that the concept of unproductive consumption had in the 19th century, although it disappeared at the turn of the 20th century.

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