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From Ethology to Political Economy: J. S. Mill and the Foundations of Modern Social and Political Thought

Frederick Rosen. 2013. *Mill*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 330 pp.

Helen McCabe

John Stuart Mill has several good claims to be considered as one of the founders of modern social and political thought, particularly given his central role in the foundations of liberalism, and thus, though a good deal has been written about him already, a book on Mill in this 'Founders' series should be welcomed. Frederick Rosen brings his wealth of scholarship on both Mill and Jeremy Bentham to play, giving a fresh and informative perspective. The book is structured around Mill's two largest compositions, the texts which made him famous in his own age – namely, the *System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1843) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) – which Rosen follows Alexander Bain in describing as being where 'Mill's creative energy was mainly confined' (7). It is refreshing to find a book on Mill which is not centred around *On Liberty* or *Utilitarianism* as being the only works of interest in Mill's canon, though Bain's remarks seem a little harsh.

Rosen's avouched plan is to discuss in Part I the themes arising in Mill's political and social (though not philosophical) thought from the *Logic*, and in Part III to turn to themes arising from the *Principles*. This means Part I is concerned with truth, liberty, democracy, 'Mill's method of reform', ethology and representative government, whilst Part III covers liberty, 'active character', co-operation, socialism, property, distributive justice and religion. The final chapter (on *The Subjection of Women*) acts as a conclusion for the whole book, covering despotism, equality, justice, liberty, utility, character, civilisation, improvement and progress (31-94, 131-260). The two parts are bridged by a discussion of Mill's correspondence with Auguste Comte, which Rosen describes as a Platonic dialogue with two authors (neither of whom knew that was what they were creating) and, though perhaps not elevating it to the same status as the *Logic* and *Principles*, places serious weight on as an important text, giving it almost a third of the book (12). Rosen justifies this privileging by arguing that the emotional engagement between the two makes this the 'most important' of Mill's relationships (112, 22).

Part I offers the most original contributions to understanding Mill's political and social thought, containing as it does Rosen's discussions of Mill's concern with truth, his liberalism, his method of reform, and that oft-overlooked aspect of Mill's thought – ethology – which Rosen believes is central to Mill's philosophy (3). Rosen presents an engaging account of Mill's interest in, and his reasons for writing, *Logic* in the first place (31-7), then proceeds to link Mill's approach to truth to his arguments about freedom of expression. *Contra* Bernard Williams, Rosen argues that, rather than freedom of expression aiding truth, Mill thought that taking truth seriously would aid freedom of expression – presumably because we would therefore ensure the 'lists are kept open' (38; Mill 1963-91, XVIII: 232). This is an intellectually stimulating interpretation, and is worth further consideration.

Rosen goes on to say that Mill thought social improvement necessitated people having a 'Socratic moment' where they realised their own ignorance, which became the starting point for their taking truth seriously, and improving their opinions (39-40). This seems less persuasive: Mill evidently thought the hope for future improvement lay in the fact that men's ideas were 'corrigible', but it is not clear he necessarily saw them as having to be conscious of their ignorance before their ideas could be changed (Mill 1963-91, XVIII: 231; cited 39). Indeed, in one of his more lyric passages Mill writes of helping men to form new opinions by 'giving them that knowledge which will enable them to form right ones that will push off the wrong ones, as the new leaves push off the withered ones of the last year' (Mill 1963-91, XII: 42). This does not

seem to involve an initial realisation of ignorance, but only that people's opinions are somewhat sensitive to knowledge, logic, proof and truth.

These ideas about a 'Socratic elenchus' also permeate Rosen's discussion of Mill's views on democracy. He rightly emphasises Mill's interest in, and praise of, Athenian democracy where freedom in the public arena spilled over into the private sphere, but then argues that Mill thought democracy was the best form of government only if society was already filled with people who had been awakened to their own ignorance – if people were not sufficiently 'active' in character, then representative government would not be supportable (40-43). This, too, is not entirely persuasive. Evidently Mill thought the best defence against the tyranny of popular government was a people who did not want too much doing for them by government, and also that the best security against the tyranny of opinion was a tolerant society in which people allowed, and indeed welcomed, the challenging of even their most deeply-held beliefs (Mill 1963-91, XVIII: 219, 242-8, 305-6). Thus, democracy would indeed be safest in the hands of those with an active character. But we ought not to overlook the role democracy has to play in awakening active character in the first place: one of Mill's reasons, for instance, for favouring co-operation was because work-place democracy would educate people in active character (Mill 1963-91, III: 776, 779-84, 793-4). Moreover, although Mill certainly moved away from an endorsement of his father's and Bentham's apparent faith that their preferred form of representative government was a kind of panacea for all social evils, we ought not to exaggerate the extent to which he gave up on democracy as a part of a (different) set of ideal institutions, nor too strongly claim that Mill thought societies currently unsuited to democracy would *never* be so (40-45). In particular, it is not certain that 'what makes democracy an end to be sought through reform is the willingness of the people to accept and support a particular version of it' (70), for this denies Mill any kind of normative project: although it is true that Mill adopted a certain relativism towards praising or condemning historical social and political institutions (saying, for instance, that criticising the barons of the Middle Ages for not being democrats is just as silly as criticising them for not using steam power), this does not mean he did not retain a secure belief that it was *better* to live in the nineteenth century with the chance of democracy than in the Middle Ages, nor that the barons were not, objectively speaking, bad rulers even if they were the best their society could produce, nor that he did not believe democracy (of some sort) was *the* right, and indeed best, form of government for the modern age (Mill 1963-91, XXII: 255).

One useful and stimulating addition to the debate on Mill and democracy in Part I is Rosen's discussion of Mill's 'method of reform', by which Rosen means Mill's development, during the 1830s, of a dialectic form of discovering truth where 'contraries' were posed as opposing ends of the same spectrum, and from the contemplation of both one could see a new truth which was not merely somewhere between the two, but a synthesis of the true aspects of both (49-71). Bentham and Coleridge provide the first of these two contraries, but Mill continues to use such a method much later, for instance in the *Considerations of Representative Government* where the liberal and 'new' conservative positions also form a pair of 'contraries' (65-6). Part I concludes with a very interesting discussion of Mill's projected science of 'ethology' and the importance to Mill of character and character-formation, which deserves a good deal more study and incorporation into mainstream thinking on Mill and his social and political thought. Some very stimulating and important topics are, therefore, raised in Part I, though an explicit link to the *Logic* is sometimes missing, and it might perhaps have benefitted from a brief exegesis of what the main arguments or themes of the *Logic* are rather than presupposing such knowledge. The same might be said for some of the discussion of existing criticisms of Mill.

As already noted, Part II is devoted to Mill's correspondence with Comte, which began as Mill was writing his *Logic*, and ended as he began the *Principles*. It also coincides with a period in which Mill appears to have turned from positivist sociology (back) towards political economy. Part II is entitled 'The Spell of Comte', and this is probably a good example of how Comte's role

is rather over-played. Yes, Mill's correspondence with Comte was written at an interesting time in the progression of his thought (though perhaps not as interesting a time as twenty years earlier, during his mental 'crisis'), but this book is not otherwise constructed as an intellectual biography. Yes, Mill was evidently much-impressed with Comte's early works, and approached him with a rather endearing humility, but this led to some diffidence in asserting (and, indeed, disguise of) thoughts Mill put much more clearly elsewhere, which does not necessarily make their correspondence the best source for Mill's ideas (Mill 1963-91, XII: 592, XXI: 42; Taylor-Mill 1998: 337). Yes, there was evidently *something* Mill wanted from their relationship, and from the promise of positivism (though what that was could perhaps be laid out more explicitly), especially in his battle against German metaphysics and the cult of intuition, and this something is important and interesting for a study of Mill's social and political thought, but one could consider that without placing quite this much weight on the correspondence.

Furthermore, although Mill's intellectual relationship with Comte doubtlessly was important, that it was *the most* important relationship of his life is not so evident (here it is worth raising a related criticism that Harriet Taylor-Mill gets only thirteen brief mentions). Similarly, important parts of what Mill got from Comte – and which led him to start the correspondence – he got, also, more generally from the Saint-Simonians with whom Comte was at the time aligned. Moreover, the idea that Mill distanced himself from Comte in later years because he came to think that Comte was actually insane and that his work might be contaminated with the same taint at least in the popular mind seems a little unconvincing (118).

Part III starts with the laudable assertion that reading the *Principles* (and particularly Mill's discussions of '*laissez-faire*') can greatly improve one's understanding of Mill's conception of liberty, and particularly Chapter 5 of *Liberty* (133). The discussion of Mill's distinctive term 'Civil, or Social' liberty, and the laying out of the historical context of 'civil' liberty is very informative, as is Rosen's discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville (131-4, 152-7). The comparison of Mill's ideas about the relationship between security and liberty with Bentham's is also of note, though it would be interesting to know more concerning the apparent tension in Mill's ideas about security given its acknowledged importance for utility (Mill 1963-91, II: 360). Similarly, Rosen's account of active character is of interest, though it could perhaps be more clearly linked to individuality (160-65). These quibbles aside, Chapters 7 and 8 ought to be of interest to any student of *Liberty* and it is particularly refreshing to see the way in which Mill's concern with liberty led him to co-operation so clearly asserted and explained.

The discussions of on property, the working classes, distributive justice, equality and the contrast between revolutionary and non-revolutionary socialism in Chapters 9-11 are all interesting and will repay study, but slightly privilege what Mill says in *Chapters on Socialism*, leading to the general discussion of Mill and socialism being rather unsatisfactory. *Socialism* is unfinished and ought not necessarily to be taken as Mill's complete final position. Importantly, it mirrors what we might call the 'critical' passages of *Principles* concerning socialism without containing the 'positive' discussions which do appear in *Principles* (Stafford 1998: 328), and though we cannot be certain that Mill meant to continue *Socialism* with such chapters, this does not seem impossible. Similarly, Chapter 9 is entitled 'From Co-operation to Socialism', but we ought to recall that co-operation, in the nineteenth century, *was* socialism (Prothero 1997: 145), a fact which helps answer the question posed in Chapter 11 ('Was Mill a Socialist?') which Rosen not only does not answer, but implies is unanswerable (210-12). Moreover, Mill meant by 'socialism' a scheme where land and the means of production are owned communally, and where the surplus of production is distributed unequally according to some principle of justice agreed on by the members of the relevant community (Mill 1963-91, II: 203). *Principles* and other texts clearly reveal a commitment to communal ownership of land (at a national level) and the means of production (in co-operatives or other kinds of socialist experiment), where the surplus was distributed according to principles of justice determined by members or citizens (Mill 1963-91, I:

239; II: 207, 216, 222-32, 360; III: 756, 766-84, 794-6, 801, 806-7, 945, 986, 1006-8 and 1013-14; IV: 386-89) which at least looks like socialism on Mill's own terms.

The penultimate chapter on Mill and Religion is both interesting and erudite, and well justifies its inclusion of both Bentham and Comte. The concluding chapter on *Subjection* offers interesting accounts of the themes previously discussed in action, though rather at the expense of explaining Mill's feminism in the light of either contemporary or modern works and criticism. Like Part I, Part III would perhaps benefit from a clearer exposition of what the main themes of *Principles* are.

Overall, there is much of interest in the particular chapters and sections of this book for the student of Mill's political and social thought; what is a little harder to discern is an overarching view of Mill's thought or his contribution to the history of political thought. By taking two texts as the main pillars of the book, and then ranging backwards and forwards through time following certain themes, we lose a sense of Mill's developing thought (apart from that provided in Part II charting Mill's move from ethology to political economy), or a sense of whether it was significantly dissimilar at different periods of his life. Similarly, we do not get a sense of Mill's impact on the formation social and political thought amongst his contemporaries or successors – that is, of Mill's unique contribution(s), or his place in the history of political thought. This said, however, Rosen has written an informative and illuminating addition to the catalogue of works on Mill's social and political thought which will well repay study.

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