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Pleasures of Benthamism. Victorian Literature, Utility, Political Economy, Kathleen Blake, Oxford University Press, 2009, 267 pages.

Kathleen Blake offers a fresh look at Victorian literature in the context of political debates in the Victorian Age and especially in connection with Utilitarianism. The received opinion that dominated literary studies opposed Bentham school and political economists to Victorian writers and literati, Dickens and Carlyle being the most notable figures enrolled among the opponents of Utilitarianism and classical political economy. In her book the author aims at deconstructing the conventional wisdom showing how the main themes of Utilitarianism are indeed present in outstanding novels in Victorian literature, such as the principle of pleasure or the radical criticism of the judicial system. She points out affinities between the ideologies of Victorian literati, as they are embedded in their plots and characters, and the reforming vision of the great Utilitarian scholars, from Jeremy Bentham to James Mill and John Stuart Mill.

Jeremy Bentham, as the founding father of Utilitarianism, is the central character of the book, though he died in 1832 before the opening of the Victorian era according to the usual historical dating. His life and activities took place in the Georgian era and he was in many ways a man of the eighteenth century, but his philosophical and political heritage was well alive in the Victorian era. A large part of the book is thus devoted to the reassessment of his complex figure through a quite detailed reading of his writings on various issues. Blake rejects the simplified image of Bentham as the defender of authoritarian social reform, notably proposed by Foucault among others. She enrols Bentham with James Mill the father and John Stuart Mill the son in the liberal troops of the contemporary Age, in domestic policy much as in imperial policies, positively associating the Utilitarian ideology with the market economy, liberalism and political campaigns for social progress. 'A view takes shape of a broadly Benthamite, capitalist, and liberal age in pursuit of utility alike in commerce and industry and in socio-economic and political reforms, in good measure favourable to freedom and levelling in terms of class and gender.' (p. 7).

To develop this thesis the book goes in various directions. Let us have a closer look at the literary and political themes it addresses.

The discussion of Bentham's thought is complemented with ample references to James and John Stuart Mill. The historical reconstruction Blake achieves aims at reducing the distance John Stuart Mill placed between Bentham and himself at some point of his life, to affirm the continuity between the three scholars, or at least the ample heritage of ideas they shared. On the literary side, a number of Victorian novels are read through Utilitarian lenses to underline the similarity of their perspectives on society with the Utilitarian vision, in the effort to show that a core of shared feelings and common values linked Victorian writers to the great Utilitarian scholars. According to Blake's reading of Victorian writers, this core notably includes a loose inspiration to the pleasure principle that in her interpretation is to be discovered in literary narration looking at the legitimate impulse of characters to search for one's own happiness and enjoy life, against an ethics of sacrifice and renounce. According to the author, the shared values include also the ethics of saving and industrious work, since for Utilitarians and classical economists saving and work enter the balance of pleasure and pain on the pain side, but in the service of prospective utility, and the classical school underlined productive labour as the ultimate source of value in the labour theory of value.

The literary texts scrutinized include *Hard Times* and *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, *Sartor Resartus* by Thomas Carlyle, *The Warden* by Anthony Trollope, *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot. In *Hard Times* Blake reads Gradgrind, the strict Utilitarian school master that Dickens

satirizes, more as a failed Utilitarian than a true follower of Bentham, underlying the many loci where Bentham openly appreciated popular amusements and the simple pleasures of life. Dickens, thus, in satirizing Gradgrind, seems faithful to the more genuine Benthamite philosophy of pleasure. Moreover Blake underlines that in *Bleak House* the writer was openly campaigning against the judicial system much as the reforming Benthamite troops did. In *Sartor Resartus* Blake discovers 'retention of a principle of pleasure' in a text that repudiates it as proposed by Utilitarian philosophers and political economists, and a striking similarity with political economists in emphasizing a Victorian ethics of work, a 'Gospel of Work' as 'ultimate Political Evangel' (92, 100). At the core of the plot in *The Mill on the Floss* Blake sees the unsolved conflict between the obligation of reciprocal gift exchange in a pre-capitalistic economy, and the obligation to repay loans jointly with the freedom to pursue self-interest in the emerging market economy. The tragedy of Maggie is that she is imbued with an ethics of self sacrifice, and accepts erotic sacrifice and even the sacrifice of her own life.

The book finally includes two chapters that do not easily fit into the frame thus far exposed, though they deal with related subjects. One full chapter is devoted to 'Time and the textile industry'. It addresses the 'cloth economy', an expression of no easy interpretation that echoes Carlyle's 'philosophy of clothes'. It refers to the crucial role the textile industry had in the industrial revolution, in connection with fashion, the role of conveniences and ornaments in Victorian society, and with the delocalization of the textile industry from India back to Great Britain. In this chapter two novels are examined: *Cranford* by Elizabeth Gaskell and *The Home and the World* by Rabindranath Tagore. A final chapter is devoted to the view Utilitarian scholars had of the British Empire, from Bentham's proposals for reform of colonial legislation, to James Mill's proposals for reform of the penal code and education in India, and to J.S. Mill's proposals on land revenue collection. The chapter is rich and interesting as an overview of the reforming attitudes of the two Mills in their service of the East India Company.

The main message conveyed by the book is that great Victorian writers, even when ideologically opposed to Utilitarianism as Carlyle was, shared in the cultural currents of their times and faced the change society was undergoing towards the dynamic market economy and the forging of new values. Blake's picture of literature and politics in the Victorian Age is more nuanced than the tradition that she denounces in literary studies. The author underlines that 'utilitarian political economy' was not such a dismal science as it is generally held to be in Victorian studies, and its affinities with important writers of the Victorian Age are closer than usually acknowledged in the field. 'Utilitarian political economy – Benthamism, capitalism, liberalism – this bourgeois tradition of industrial

market culture, is more pleasure seeking than 'dismal'. It is reformist and 'improving', favourable to freedom, and levelling vis-à-vis gender and class. Altogether, it is too important to an understanding of the period and its literature to be confusedly known and as discredited as it is in Victorian literary and cultural studies' (224).

In this review I shall not venture on a survey of Victorian studies to assess the validity of the last assertion in the quote, although in recent studies a number of authors quoted in the book have explored the fertile and complex exchanges between literature and political economy in the nineteenth century, notably Philip Connell in his book *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of 'Culture'* (Connell 2001). As far as economists are concerned the bogus image of Bentham that Blake is rejecting did not dominate the scene. In economic studies Bentham has long been recognized as a liberal political scientist and law reformer, not to speak of John Stuart Mill, who is certainly recognized not only as an outstanding economist in the nineteenth century, but as an open-minded scholar, a philosopher of liberty, deeply involved in the battles for the equality of women and the end of slavery. Among historians of economics, John Stuart Mill is widely acclaimed as a scholar who crucially contributed to the development of liberal thought, attentive and sensitive to the ethical requirement of equal opportunities for all in a liberal society.

In June 1964 in his Address to University College 'Bentham in the Twentieth Century' Lionel Robbins underlined that Bentham was 'a great law reformer and a great inventor of constitutional and administrative devices' (Robbins 1964[1970]: 74). According to Robbins, the lasting influence of Bentham's ideas had a major impact along the nineteenth century to achieve important reforms in criminal law and public administration, such as the mitigation of punishment in criminal laws or 'the institution of a Civil Service, recruited by examination and not by influence' (Robbins 1964[1970]: 75). Robbins concluded defining Bentham 'a great historic figure to whom we owe so many of our liberties and better constitutional arrangements', though clearly recognizing that Bentham was a man of his times and many of his suggestions do not address or answer contemporary questions (Robbins 1964[1970]: 84).

Robbins's balanced overview is inspiring. Giving credit to Bentham for his reforming battles and liberal insights should not mean to forget on how many topics his horizon focused on the eighteenth century historical scenery, both in his political economy and in its reforming vision. Even when rejecting Foucault's one-sided reading of Bentham, it is hard to accept Bentham's idealized prison, the Panopticon, where prisoners are controlled by an unseen inspector placed in a tower within the building, the invisible watchman being in turn controlled by monitors, the press and the general public. Inspired as it could be in his author's mind

by humanitarian principles for the education and self-improvement of prisoners, the Panopticon was a paternalistic dream of full control over the weaker groups in society. Blake invites us to see the Panopticon as a progressive project aimed at improving social welfare through a device by which ultimately public opinion keeps a transparent check over both prisoners and inspector. She suggests that it is to be understood as an enlightened effort to find effective institutions that help people to self-discipline themselves through the incentives of pleasure and pain, and under the check of public opinion. Her plea is not convincing. The history of ideas should not deny the tensions that mark an author's thought. The rationalist roots of Bentham's Utilitarian vision run the risk of turning the principle of maximum pleasure into an engineering dream of societal control, aimed at pushing the unhappy members of society, unable to rationally pursue their best interest, into the troops of the happy rational citizens.

Radical perplexities arise regarding the conceptualization Blake adopts in her historical reconstruction. She adopts the label 'Utilitarian political economy' as an encompassing definition of wide meaning, covering according to her intentions Benthamism as much as capitalism, and including under the liberal label parliamentary radicals much as liberal Whigs or Gladstonians. Among economists, Adam Smith is associated with Bentham, James Mill, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill. This loose definition is conducive to oversimplification, and it does not help put in the right perspective the debates of the times. Bentham's utilitarianism appears to be one and the same thing with classical political economy. The specific political campaigns Bentham and philosophical radicals launched in parliamentary debates are superimposed on the various reform movements that spread in the Georgian or the Victorian era. That Dickens participated into the campaign against the disasters produced by a corrupt and ineffective judicial system is no proof that he was a Utilitarian in ethics or a strict adherent to Bentham's reforming proposals in the judiciary. Similarly, we know that young Jevons read and appreciated Dickens' novels for their social themes; but the inspiration he drew from Dickens is no proof of the identity of their vision on social or ethical problems.

A point of radical doubt has to be raised regarding Utilitarian ethics. Utilitarianism is a specific doctrine in ethics, and Adam Smith – it is to be noted – explicitly rejected the validity of ethical theories based on the principle of pleasure or utility in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The whole of Smithian ethics is based on sympathy, the human capability to resonate in emotion with other people's passions through the power of imagination. Smith clarifies that sympathy is not a selfish feeling. His complex philosophical conception is much richer and nuanced in the description of emotions and passions, and in assessing the way moral

judgements are formed, than Bentham's crude vision of man as living under the two masters of pleasure and pain.

Moreover, in the book Utilitarianism is loosely associated with a number of references to joy, happiness, amusement, entertainment or legitimate aspiration to a fulfilling and pleasing life, which are found in the quoted literary texts. Variegated feelings and values about joy of life or happiness expressed in the literary texts are read through Bentham's pleasure principle as proof of some inner affinity of vision; it seems as if Blake assumes that non Utilitarian ethical perspectives should be somewhat stained by a 'dismal' or ascetic feeling of life. These are highly distorting and simplifying lenses to read both Utilitarianism and Victorian literature. The quest for joy in human souls goes well beyond the adhesion to Utilitarian doctrine in ethics or to Bentham's philosophical construction. Are Schiller's 'Ode to Joy' or Shelley's 'Ode to a skylark' proof of Utilitarian elements in their poetical imagination? In *War and Peace* Tolstoy portraits happiness in all its shades in human feelings, from the mystical transport Prince Andrej is experiencing during his final illness to the quiet content of the peasant Platon, from the intense joy Pierre is discovering in his love to Natasha to the busy cheerfulness in their later family life. Shall we say that Tolstoy too is to be associated to Utilitarianism? It is especially hard to assimilate Dickens's ethics to Utilitarian ethics, contrary to Dickens's explicit intentions and the evidence of his novels. Let us just remember how Dickens writes of active and intelligent women, who are able of dispassionate devotion to their beloved ones out of generous, disinterested love, and certainly not out of the rational or impulsive balancing of pleasure and pain. In Tolstoy as in Dickens the Christian ethics of love is not 'dismal', after all. It is an ethics of inner joy, of spiritual mirth and a truly self-fulfilling life, though it is most distant from the conception of the human person as ruled by the supreme master of pleasure.

From the viewpoint of the historian of economics, the much debated issue of the shared 'classical canon' in British political economy should not cancel the specific differences within the group of the so-called classical economists, and specifically as regards Jeremy Bentham and James Mill versus Ricardo. It is true that Bentham used to pretend that David Ricardo was his 'spiritual grandson' and certainly Ricardo, as Blake mentions, accepted the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number as his 'motto'(Sraffa ed. 1962, IX: 239). In a letter to Place in 1821, Ricardo called himself 'a discipline of the Bentham and Mill school' (Sraffa ed. 1962, IX: 52), but he always kept his independence of mind and freedom of judgement on economic topics as regards James Mill or Bentham *qua* economists. Notably Ricardo criticized Bentham's loose manuscript notes on economics, on the conception of riches, utility, monetary matters and the way an expansion of paper money may affect the level of

economic activity. It seems that Ricardo and James Mill agreed to avoid the publication of Bentham's manuscript (Sraffa ed. 1962, III: 261).

In conclusion, the aim of questioning the received opinion is welcome and the richer picture that the book achieves is a precious addition to our historical reading of culture in the Victorian era; but the overall result is not balanced, since the author substitutes the conventional wisdom on the divide opposing the 'dismal' science and Victorian literati, with a new encompassing paradigm of 'Utilitarian political economy' that is neither convincing nor historically sound.

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Economic Methodology: Understanding Economics as a Science, Marcel Boumans and John B. Davis (with contributions from Mark Blaug, Harro Maas and Andrej Svorencik), Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, x + 209 pages.

Writers on economic methodology may be likened to Pirandello's eponymous 'Six Characters in Search of an Author'; what economic methodologists seek, though, is not an author but an audience. As the area of economic methodology has developed over the last 30 years or so into a sub-discipline of economics (with its own JEL classification), it has created an audience of those for whom, as Marcel Boumans and John Davis describe them, 'economic methodology is an end in itself' (p. 5). Creating a philosophical discourse which takes place between economic methodologists who see their pursuits as an end in itself, however, bespeaks a modest goal which most methodologists, I suspect, wish to transcend; for methodologists are in search of an audience of practising economists in the hope that the latter will produce 'better economics' (*ibid*.). By directing their book to undergraduate students, Boumans and Davis hope that economists of the future, by familiarizing