

## Mill, James, and Ricardo

James Mill (1773–1836) was educated at Edinburgh University where Dugald Stewart was his professor. He moved to London and tried to earn a living as a journalist, was adopted by Jeremy Bentham as a secretary, became the Philosophical Radicals' main organizer, and finally obtained a prestigious position at the East India Company. Besides a large number of reviews, he published tracts on political economy such as *Commerce Defended* (1808), politics, such as the *Essay on Government* (1820), ethics, such as the *Fragment on Mackintosh* (1835), and a bulky historical work, the *History of British India* (1818), and a no less cumbersome treatise on the theory of knowledge, the *Analysis of the Phenomena of Human Mind* (1829) (Ball, 2010).

### Mill and Ricardo on political economy

James Mill and Ricardo first met in 1810, at a time when the latter had already published his first articles on monetary issues in newspapers, while the former was already an established essayist on political and economic issues (Henderson, 1997: 274–86). The relationship between them started as some kind of master–disciple relationship and soon evolved into a warm friendship, and then, as Ricardo won more and more intellectual independence, into a more complex and dialectical relationship.

It is far from clear whether Ricardo owed Mill any single idea in economic theory. It is beyond any doubt, though, that without the latter's practical help the former's intellectual career would have been much less successful. Mill provided decisive moral support in making the writing of everything Ricardo published up to 1817 possible, and his role in the gestation of Ricardo's *Principles* was very important. He encouraged Ricardo, gave him advice about organization of ideas and writing technique, and kept promising help in terms of editing and revisions (Cremaschi, 2004). However:

Mill's contribution to the making of the *Principles* was less than might have been expected from his promises and encouragement. On the theory there is little doubt that his influence was negligible. . . Mill's letters of the period are full of advice relating to 'the art of laying down your thoughts, in the way most easy to apprehension'. But despite his repeated assurance that he would see to the order and arrangement. . . in the main the sequence of topics has been left as Ricardo had originally worked through them. (Sraffa, 1951, *Works*, I: xx–xxi).

In fact, in 1817, Mill had been out of touch with political economy for several years, and Ricardo's evident intellectual superiority placed him at a level where only Malthus could compete with him.

Mill's *Elements of Political Economy* (1821) corroborates well his renown as 'an egregious simplifier of complex issues' (Ball, 2010) as it was a popularization of Ricardo's *Principles*, trying to establish a new Ricardian orthodoxy alternative to Malthus by offering simple answers where Ricardo had given highly qualified ones, for example, by simply identifying the determinants of value with labour.

### **Mill and Ricardo on the science of legislation and philosophy**

After the *Principles* were published and before Ricardo was elected to Parliament, he undertook a massive programme of philosophical and political reading, following Mill's suggestions. If one looks at the works mentioned it seems that the latter just handed over to him his own reading lists from Edinburgh University. Among authors mentioned in the correspondence between October 1817 and December 1818 are Bayle, Locke, Hume, Millar, Bacon, Dugald Stewart, Reid, Berkeley, Warburton and Beattie. Mill also wanted to initiate him to the 'science of legislation', to which his own *History of British India* could be 'no bad introduction' (*Works*, VI: 195).

A reference to the Benthamite School in the correspondence has been mistaken by Halévy and followers for a profession of faith in Benthamite methodology. Ricardo wrote to the writer Maria Edgeworth: 'I like the formal method, after the manner of Bentham and Mill' (*Works*, IX: 259), but, from the context, the formal method turns out to be the expository technique Mill had taught him. Two more references to the school's ethical doctrine need be taken more seriously. On two occasions, with reference to the principle of utility, he expressed apparent support for 'the Bentham and Mill school' (*ibid.*: 52 and 239). The first time, he was writing to Francis Place and defending Malthus's use of the words 'right' and 'law of nature' by arguing that it meant actually something close to 'utility' or 'the good of the whole'; the second time, he was writing to Maria Edgeworth and delivering a semi-serious statement in favour of cultivation of potatoes if it could be proved that it would be a remedy to famines, concluding that he would fight 'till death in favor of the potatoe, for my motto, after Mr. Bentham, is "the greatest happiness to the greatest number"' (*ibid.*: 238–9). In fact, in the former case he was arguing that differences in theory between utilitarianism and natural law were irrelevant in practice, and in the latter he was poking fun at Bentham.

Ricardo, when Mill's *History of British India* was published, expressed admiration for such a performance, but once he started reading he also started raising objections, precisely on utility as a mark of rational action, challenging the possibility of measuring and comparing utility of different goals for action (*Works*, VII: 242).

### **Halévy's and Hutchinson's mythology**

In Mill's dreams, Ricardo should have been in charge of the Utilitarian School's economic branch. Hollander rightly writes that 'James Mill was interested in economic theory as a weapon in the service of his political program' (Hollander, 1985: 28). The dream, albeit unfulfilled, turned into legend in Halévy's hands (1901–04, II: 246). In reaction, Schumpeter ([1954] 1994: 473) and Samuel Hollander (1979: 109–13, 593–7) adopted the opposite strategy of trying to detect in Ricardo some purely 'scientific' contribution, free from any philosophy. Sraffa shared basically the same attitude, but at least pointed at Ricardo's acquaintance with natural science as a possible source of methodological inspiration (Sraffa, 1951, *Works*, I: xxi).

Hutchinson staged an attempt at resurrecting Halévy, but with a difference, namely he tried to have it both ways by arguing that Mill was, more than a Benthamite, the performer of a Millian 'scientific revolution' yielding an 'economic science' more abstract and more scientific than Adam Smith's (Hutchinson, 1995: 50–83). De Marchi (1983) elegantly dismantled the argument. Hollander argued that 'a sharp distinction must be made between the methodological orientations of James Mill and David Ricardo. It is James Mill who was guilty of what has been termed by Professor Schumpeter "The Ricardian Vice"' (Hollander, 1985, I: 1), and that Ricardo 'was unhappy on empirical grounds with James Mill's oversimplified behavioural assumptions' and felt that the latter 'went too far by adopting

simplifications which yielded positively misleading conclusions' (ibid.: 24). Dascal and the present writer have elaborated on De Marchi's and Hollander's conclusions by reconstructing the philosophical context in some more detail (Cremaschi and Dascal, 1996, 1998). Last of all, Depoortère resurrected Hutchinson's thesis of a Millian-Scottish (as contrasted with a Millian-Benthamite) methodological legacy (Depoortère, 2008).

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**See also:**

McCulloch, John Ramsay, and Ricardo; Tooke, Thomas, and Ricardo; Torrens, Robert, and Ricardo; Trower, Hutches, and Ricardo.

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**Commentato [UW1]:** Reference to Works in already there in the in-text reference. SShould be dropped from bibliography?