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Nathalie Sigot. *Bentham et l'économie. Une histoire d'utilité*. Paris: Economica, 2001 261 pp. F 185. E 28.20. ISBN 2-7178-4215-2.

After Halévy and Robbins, a twofold optical delusion «that made utilitarianism look like a philosophy of homo oeconomicus, and political economy as a science based, from its very beginning, on a utilitarian foundation [...] became commonplace among twentieth-century economists" (Guidi, 1993, p. 32). There were a number of odd circumstances at the root of this die-hard delusion: one was the fact that Bentham's formulation of the principle of utility and of his calculus of pains and pleasures stress the crucial role of calculus carried out by individuals, as well as the role of information. This is why Benthamite utilitarianism found one of its primary fields of application precisely in economics. But, ironically, Bentham's contribution to economic thought was either understressed or grossly misunderstood. The first outcome was a consequence of the fact that historians of economic thought kept looking for an alleged Benthamite contribution to *classical* political economy, and – of course – did not find very much. The second resulted from a reading of the *Defence of Usury* which isolated it from other works, while reading into it an expression of unqualified economic liberalism. This was followed by one of those notorious "discoveries" that such readings unfailingly yield, namely that of a "contrast" between this work and other works by Bentham, where he vindicated a somewhat heavy intervention by the State.

Some fresh interest in Bentham *qua* economist has been revived by the proposal of a new reading, that makes Bentham's economic theory dependent on his theory of utility. Shared beliefs among the last generation of Bentham scholars include an (up to now unsuspected) distance between Bentham's economic theory on the one hand and Mill's and Ricardo's on the other, and an "unclassical", even "pre-Smithian" character of Bentham's economic theorizing. Sigot on principle does share the new shared view, and intends to present the new image of Bentham to the French-reading public. What she has to add to the new shared view is first, a faith in the still actual character, at least to a point, of Bentham's economic thinking" (p. 8) and a faith in the still actual character of Halevy's reading of Bentham.

Concerning the first item, she declares that Bentham's stress on the economic agent's information and motives for action leads him to inquire into topics that had been overlooked by Ricardo and Mill, topics that still have a certain interest for today's economists (p. 8). It is an opinion hardly shared by anyone among recent Bentham scholars, who tend to think instead in terms of Bentham's "inactuality" - what does not imply lack of interest, but implies a different kind of interest (see for ex. Guidi 1991, p. 16). Such an effort of paddling against the stream is often what makes a book an exciting reading.

The result of Sigot's effort is a book entirely dedicated to Bentham as an economist, as well as to the significance of Bentham for later economic thought. Compared to Guidi (1991), Sigot's book focuses in a more exclusive way on Bentham's economic doctrines. The plan of the book includes a first chapter on individual utility, a second one on collective utility, a third on Bentham and the classics; a fourth chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the relevance of Bentham's contribution for today's thinking. As a whole, the book provides the French reader with an overview of Bentham's contribution to economic thought, with conclusions rather different from those of still circulating textbooks.

The general conclusion summarizes briefly Sigot's appraisal of Bentham's work: Bentham is not an "unorthodox" economist, but instead a "dissident"; that is, his work does not offer a consistent body of alternative claims; instead, its "dissident" character resulting from the isolation in which it was conceived and carried out (p. 188).

Concerning the second item, one peculiarity of Sigot's reading of Bentham, sharply different on this point from almost all Bentham scholarship from the last three decades, is a vindication of Halevy's interpretation, which notoriously focuses on an opposition of law (where the harmony of interests results from artificial intervention) and economics (where the spontaneous harmony of interests holds sway), as well as on the assumption of Bentham's firm belief in psychological egoism, from which the very problem of conciliation of interests arises.

Elsewhere Sigot has argued that Halevy's reading is still shared by most Bentham scholars and that Halevy's idea that the principle of utility is both a normative principle and a "fact" about human psychology is correct (See Mongin and Sigot 1999). Discussing such a vindication goes beyond the scope of the present review, but let me note that it is perfectly true that Bentham in one passage states that the principle of utility is the name for both a fact and a normative principle, but also that elsewhere, indeed in the introduction to the *Principles*, he announces in a somewhat emphatic tone that the principle qua normative principle is not based on a fact, but instead on a quasi-transcendental argument: that nobody could ever make any meaningful ethical judgments without relying unavowedly on this very principle. Bentham himself had been tolerably clear on this crucial point. He had written:

In its expository sense, the compound appellative "principle of utility" contains in it the essence of a proposition to this effect, viz.: Of every human being the conduct is on every occasion at every moment determined by the conception which at that moment he has of his individual interest... Very different from, howsoever connected with, the expository sense is the deontological sense of the appellative "principle of utility". The proposition of which it contains the essence is to some such effect as this: It is desirable – fit, right, proper, desirable, any one of these words may be employed – that on every occasion the course taken by every man's conduct should be that which will be in the highest degree conducive to the welfare of the greatest number of those sensitive beings on whose

welfare it exercises any influence (Bentham Manuscripts [1816], *University College*, box XVII, fol. 173-174).

Concerning Halévy and utilitarianism as a philosophical doctrine, I would say that it is true that Bentham reading has been followed by Bentham scholars for decades, but that, since the start of the historiographic revision in the Seventies of the last century, to a vast majority of Bentham scholars Halévy seems to have preserved, and indeed contributed in disseminating, one of the most drastic misunderstandings concerning utilitarianism, and precisely the idea that the principle of utility (qua normative principle) is "a matter of fact", and utilitarianism is a kind of psychological *and* normative hedonism and egoism. As a result, because of the mentioned faith in Halévy, he is quoted about thirty times in Sigot's book, virtually always approvingly (in order to make some comparison: Dinwiddy scores two quotations, Mack 4, Parekh 5).

Let us have a look at another crucial point in the book's plot, namely Bentham's relationship with James Mill and David Ricardo within the context of British reformist politics in the aftermath of Napoleonic Wars. On the connection Bentham-James Mill-Ricardo four standard references are Henderson (1997), de Marchi (1983), Dinwiddy (1978), Hollander (1979). On British radicalism three standard references are Dinwiddy (1992), Hone (1982), Dickinson (1977). Sigot's reconstruction seems to ignore such recent literature, while quoting Bain (1882), Halévy (1901-4), Stephen (1900), and the reader is left with the doubt whether Sigot's reconstruction really starts with the state of the art as it was at the end of the twentieth century or at its beginning.

42 pages of the book are dedicated to addenda, which include a biography, a list of original editions of Bentham's works, the "bibliographie raisonnée" of Bentham's works compiled in 1826 by Saint-Amand, a list of ancient editions and of ancient and recent translations of Bentham's works, a list of collections, a list of modern editions, and finally a synoptical table of the location of the several writings in different editions. Preparing these addenda has been a demanding enterprise, one that we should expect in a general introduction to Bentham, and that perhaps could be dispensed with in a monograph on Bentham's economic theory. Such demanding enterprises are seldom carried out without leaving a few blanks, and this happens also with this book. For example, in sect. III (ancient editions and translations) the reader is never informed that in the list are included, besides translations based on ancient editions, also those based on the critical edition. Besides, the list is not accurate enough. I have done a partial check, limited to Italian translations. The result is that existing translations which are missing in Sigot's list include *Il catechismo del popolo*, ed. by L. Formigari, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1982 (an anthology from the *Fragment on Government* e the *Constitutional Code*); *L'utilitarismo classico*, ed. by F. Fagiani, Cosenza, Busento, 1990 (an anthology including excerpts from the *Introduction* and from the *Deontology*); *Jeremy Bentham, padre del femminismo*, ed. by L. Campos Boralevi, Roma, Carucci, 1980 (an anthology of

Bentham's writings on women's condition); more than once, a translations included in the list is mentioned while omitting important details: *Introduzione ai principi della morale e della legislazione* does have an editor (Eugenio Lecaldano), and its publisher is "Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese" (or in short UTET, not "Unione Tipografico" which, besides non-existing, is also ungrammmatical); also *Il libro dei sofismi* does have an editor (Lea Formigari). The Italian 'translations' (actually, anthologies, not full translations) of the *Deontology* before the critical edition were two: besides the edition published by Paravia, Turin, in 1930, which is listed, there was another published by SEI, Turin, 1926. The latter was an horrible anthology, as inaccurate as ferocious in its polemics against utilitarianism; but nonetheless it belongs to the ream of existing translations. Let me add that the first full translation published in 2000 by La Nuova (not "Nueva", which is a Spanish, not an Italian word) Italia, is 231 (not 240) pages long, and it does too have an editor who – sorry! – is the author of the present review.

Last, and least, accurate proof-reading may still be useful: Hutcheson 1725 (p. 49) is not in the bibliography; Mitchell 1937 (p. 119) corresponds perhaps to Mitchell 1934-5 in the bibliography ; Beccaria's formula was not "la misma felicità" (p. 49; "misma" is a Spanish word meaning "the same", not the Italian word for "the greatest") but instead "la massima felicità".

An extra remark is that the choice of quoting French translations every time they are available proves dangerous: in fact, quotations from nineteenth-century French 'traslations' such as Dumont's, are not really from Bentham's writings, but from rearrangements devoid of any interest for a scholar who is discussing Bentham's own ideas (not their nineteenth-century reception). This offers me the occasion for addressing a modest proposal to scholars publishing in languages different from English: please, abandon the practice of quoting classics from translations. A reasonable guess –recently made by Umberto Eco – is that the coming framework for communication in Europe is some kind of "imperfect multilinguism": that is, we will use English in conferences and in academic journals, while continuing to use national languages for writing books; a comparative novelty carried by this situation is that the *melior pars* of the readership of scholarly monographs published in the five/six most widespread European languages will be an European readership, made of academics who are able to read several languages even while not making active use of all of them. Since nobody in Spain, Greece, Danemark, Portugal, or Italy may find a French translation of Adam Smith or Beccaria in his own University Library, the practice of quoting Adam Smith or Cesare Beccaria from translations, while indicating just the page in the translation, for this part of the readership, turns out to be an act of sadism.

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