

Murray Milgate and Shannon C. Stimson, *Ricardian Politics*, Princeton U. P., Princeton 1991, 169 pp.

This book is a convincing attempt at proposing a new “topic of conversation” to historians of economic and political thought, namely Ricardo’s political theory. The history of Ricardo’s papers before Sraffa’s edition – as the authors remark at p. 145 n. 5 – accounts for a distorted perception of the contents of the primary sources, a distortion that perpetuated itself by inertia well beyond Sraffa. Not surprisingly, the void of textual evidence provided a medium through which two forged myths were perpetuated: the myth of heavy dependence on James Mill and the myth of Ricardo, the spokesman for capitalist interests. Unfortunately, the authors are still the victims of inertia on a third item in Ricardo’s received image: the suppression of his adherence to Unitarianism.

The authors want to rescue from oblivion a neglected strand in the political thought of the philosophical radicals, by exploiting overlooked (even if published) writings by Ricardo, with a view at reconstructing a consistent Ricardian political theory. Their central claims are the following. First, Ricardo was more than just another economic adviser, in so far as he contributed “to democratic theory proper” (p. 15) by “formulating much of what is characteristic of the democratic political creed of early philosophical radicalism in a distinctive way” (p. 6) and primarily a quite sophisticated argument for democratic citizenship as a pre-requisite for economic progress (p. 18). Secondly, Ricardo’s economic theory itself had much to contribute to the strictly political question of the organization of the polity” (p. 15). Thirdly, Ricardo’s politics had little affinity with Bentham’s, and he “reached his conclusions independently, and indeed before, the publication of James Mill’s *Essay on Government*” (p. 18).

The attempt sounds quite convincing as far as it argues more autonomy from Mill and a more pro-working-class picture than the received image of Ricardo allows for (see pp. 61, 119). However, a severe pitfall is having ignored the relevance of Unitarianism as a matrix of political radicalism. A related defect is not having exploited less obvious sources than those included in Sraffa’s edition (let me mention Thomas Belsham’s *Elements* (1803), a book from which Ricardo may have learnt some political philosophy before getting in touch with James Mill and several writings by William Frend, another Unitarian acquaintance of Ricardo). Accordingly, while ch. 4 is dedicated to the issue of religious toleration, Ricardo’s religious background is rather dimly perceived. The authors intimate that his distrust of theology (a distinctive Unitarian motif) verges on atheism or agnosticism (p. 86). Also, the image of Ricardo’s predecessors and contemporaries economists sounds slightly second-hand. For example, they repeat familiar abuse of Malthus on no firmer ground than Stigler’s *ipse dixit* (pp. 12-13), and they believe that Adam Smith was “an other-worldly philosopher” confined to “the isolated little village of Kirkaldy” (p.5). It is not surprising, thus, that the authors misinterpret Brougham’s description of Ricardo as “a man from another planet”, not inappropriate to such an outsider, a Jew educated at Amsterdam’s Talmud Torah, and a Unitarian convert, as one more formulation of the myth

of “the impractical Ricardo” (p. 10). Also, they account for Ricardo’s sense of estrangement from the “ancient rights enjoyed by the freeborn Englishmen” as a sign of his “modernity” (p. 123), what amounts to a brilliant tautology, and do not even suspect the role of his biography in determining such attitude. To up, this book has contributed to dismantling a couple of items from Ricardian mythology, yet the topography of the planet from which Ricardo took off still waits for more careful surveys.

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