

Review: Nathalie Sigot, *Bentham et l'économie: Une histoire d'utilité*. Paris : Economica, 2001, 266p. (including appendices, bibliography and index.)

A new edition of Halévy's *Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* was published in France in 1995.¹ Along with a growing interest in modern utilitarian theory, the book prompted a renewal of Bentham studies in France. Such an impetus was greatly needed, for Bentham remained for many the (in)famous inventor of the Panopticon described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Today, though Bentham's name is familiar to scholars, translations of his works are still scarce, and there have been few attempts so far at producing comprehensive French versions of his texts.²

Despite these practical difficulties, there have been in the past ten years a number of studies focusing on specific aspects of Bentham's thought, such as the theory of fictions and legal theory.³ This year, two books have already been published, both opening new fields to Bentham research in France: Marie-Laure Leroy translated a collection of essays on misrule, which will certainly change the authoritarian image of Bentham, and his economic thought is the subject of Nathalie Sigot's book: *Bentham et l'économie, une histoire d'utilité*. She follows on previous studies by Annie Cot and Marco L. Guidi,⁴ who are also members of the same research project on the history of economic thought at Paris I.

¹ E. Halévy, *La Formation du Radicalisme Philosophique*, 3 vols, Paris, 1995.

² Apart from Etienne Dumont's nineteenth-century translations, a bilingual edition of C. K. Odgen's *Bentham's Theory of Fictions*, Paris, 1996, has been published. J. P. Cléro translated the *Fragment on Government* and the *Book of Fallacies*, (*Fragment sur le gouvernement. Manuel de sophismes politiques*. Bruxelles, 1996) and, together with C. Laval and P. Schofield, edited a bilingual version of *Of Ontology [De l'ontologie]*, Paris, 1997. Extracts from Bentham texts are also available in the *Anthologie historique et critique de l'utilitarisme* published by C. Audard (Paris, 1996, 2 vols). New translations of *Emancipate Your Colonies!*, *On the Liberty of the Press and Public Discussion*, and *Securities against Misrule* have just been published by M. L. Leroy, under the title *Garanties contre l'abus de pouvoir* (Paris, 2001).

³ See C. Laval's *Jeremy Bentham: Le pouvoir des fictions*, Paris, 1994, J. P. Cléro's introductions to his translations, and a translation of G. J. Postema's *Bentham and the Common Law Tradition*, Paris, 1998.

⁴ A. L. Cot, 'Jeremy Bentham et la révolution française' in *Economies et Sociétés, série PE*, n°7-10, *Oeconomia*, 13, 1991, pp. 472-483; 'Jeremy Bentham between liberalism and authoritarianism: the French mirror' in T. Lowry (éd.) *Perspectives on the History of Economic Thought*, London, 1992, tome VIII, pp. 61-79; 'Jeremy Bentham, un "Newton" de la morale' in A. Beraud et G. Facarello (eds), *Nouvelle histoire de la pensée économique. t.1. Des scolastiques aux classiques*, Paris, 1992, pp. 289-299; 'Une utopie utilitariste: Jeremy Bentham et les colonies' in F. Demier, et D. Diatkine (eds), *Adam Smith et les colonies*. (Cambridge, 1994); 'Utilitarisme, libéralisme économique et libéralisme politique: Jeremy Bentham et la boîte de Pandore des droits naturels' in *Oeconomia, série PE*, n°18, 1993, pp.117-145. M. L. Guidi, *Il sovrano e l'imprenditore, utilitarismo ed economia politica in Jeremy Bentham*. (Roma, 1991); "'Shall the Blind Lead Those Who Can See?'" Bentham's Theory of Political Economy' in D.E. Moggridge, (ed.) *Perspectives in the History of Economic Thought*. (London, 1990) vol. III, pp. 10-28; 'Le citoyen Bentham, "raisonnable censeur des lois", et l'économie de la révolution française' in *Economies et Sociétés, Oeconomia, série PE*, n° 13, 1990, pp. 482-502.

Nathalie Sigot begins with asserting that Bentham had no disciples in economics, despite the philosopher's famous claim that he was Ricardo's spiritual grand-father.⁵ Her book opens with an amusing fiction in which James Mill and David Ricardo are kept in a Panopticon-type house, with Bentham as their guardian, attempting to turn them into faithful utilitarians. It dramatises the main question of the book: how is it that, after having been thus exposed to Bentham's thought, neither James Mill nor Ricardo took up any of their master's ideas in economics?

For Nathalie Sigot, the answer is to be found in the nature of the relationship between Bentham and the tradition of classical economy. She stresses the formal differences in their approaches to economic issues and insists that Bentham cannot be labelled a classical economist. The first part of the book debunks the theories, such as Elie Halévy's, which present Bentham as an advocate of *laissez-faire* in economics,⁶ whereas the second contrasts Bentham's ideas with that of his contemporaries on several issues (such as value, currency and trade). According to her, not only do Bentham's conclusions differ from those of the classical school, but they also start from altogether different premises. Bentham's achievements in economic theory have been neglected so far, she argues, but she insists that his approach can be useful to contemporary economists. 'He should be recognised as an economist and the central role he gives to the psychological dimension of individuals deserves to be taken up'.⁷

The passages which focus on economic points are undoubtedly the best in the book. They bring out forcefully the originality of Bentham's position on specific economic issues, such as the links between wealth and happiness, or the theory of value. According to her 'Bentham's analysis of value involves both utility and labour ... On the one hand, the price is set by utility, while on the other hand, the financial cost is set by labour. Consequently, the same good has two values, though there is no clear rule as to how to adjust the one to the other'.⁸ This exemplifies how remote Bentham was from Smithian principles in economics. A similar point is made about his ideas on growth and money. Throughout, her analysis is based on two main

⁵ See *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J. Bowring, 11 vols., Edinburgh, 1843, x. p. 498.

⁶ Halévy, *Radicalisme Philosophique*, I, pp. 126-151.

⁷ 'il s'agit de le reconnaître comme économiste et de tirer les conséquences de la place prépondérante qu'il accorde au fonctionnement psychologique des individus'. (p. 95) (my translations throughout. EC.)

⁸ 'l'analyse de la valeur développée par Bentham fait intervenir à la fois l'utilité et le travail. ... D'un côté, le prix définitif est déterminé par l'utilité, de l'autre, le premier coût pécuniaire est déterminé par le travail. Il y a donc deux valeurs différentes pour un même bien, sans mécanisme d'ajustement de l'un à l'autre'. (p. 36).

sources: she relies on the standard ‘economic writings’ edited by W. Stark⁹ as well as on economic issues raised by other texts, such as those on Poor Law Reform and Constitutional organisation. Her studies of salaries and insurance are interesting in that context.

She insists on the importance of psychological principles in Bentham’s economic thought, which is especially illuminating in relation to his theory of money. Her analysis is based mostly on Dumont’s manuscript version of the text published under the title *The True Alarm* by Stark. She shows that Bentham’s atypical ideas on the role of the State in limiting inflation have to be understood in the light of his psychology: stabilising the value of paper-money is necessary to create a regular habit in the people, in order to build a secure economic and social environment. This analysis brings forward the importance of social habits in Bentham, and could also lead to useful parallels between his comments on the value of paper-money (as opposed to gold) and his analysis of real and fictitious entities. Ricardo’s disparaging comments on the manuscript in 1810 (he advised Bentham against publishing it) are explained by the fact that for him psychology was a secondary factor in economics. Here again, she makes a case for not considering Bentham as a classical economist along the lines of Smith and Ricardo.

The calculation of pleasures and pains is analysed in detail, and N. Sigot examines the ambiguous place of Benthamic arithmetics in the history of economic thought. Though many have taken for granted that the discovery of the possibility of quantifying pain and pleasure was an important step in turning political economy into a science, she insists that Bentham’s ideas were distorted or over-simplified by those who quoted him as their source. She is therefore anxious to stress the specificity of Bentham’s approach, and to legitimate it in the face of critics, such as Joseph Schumpeter, who accused Bentham of ‘turning [his] humane egotism into an ideal’.¹⁰

She insists on the fact that the *felicific calculus* is not simplistic, nor necessarily hedonistic in its applications:

The calculation of pains and pleasures is at the root of Bentham’s analyses. [...] Even though it undeniably runs into analytical problems, the way in which it is used in the economic field leads to original

⁹ W. Stark (ed.), *Jeremy Bentham’s Economic Writings*, 3 vols, London, 1952-54.

developments: by taking its source in the *felicific calculus*, Bentham's economics moves away from that of his contemporaries.¹¹

She rightly demonstrates that Bentham's principle, though based on individual pleasures and pains, is closely related to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. On the other hand, the emphasis she lays on the actual calculation is more debatable. She insists that, as a descriptive principle, it can claim a truly scientific status, an assertion which is supported by several quotes, mostly taken from the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* and from manuscripts. She does not point out that most of the sources she quotes from date back to before 1789, and though she is aware of the limitations that Bentham himself expressed as to the feasibility of the calculation, she never challenges the fact that it can be of use in devising utility functions. Though most of her statements are duly qualified and illustrated, they are scattered throughout the book, under various headings and integrated into discussions of other topics, which makes it hard for the reader to form a more general picture. The subtlety of Bentham's utilitarian calculation is ultimately what alienated James Mill and Ricardo, according to her, and led Jevons to publicise a watered-down version of it.

One could argue that though Bentham always maintained that the possibility of the calculation was at the root of his psychology, he remained evasive as to its concrete modalities. In the fragment *Of Ontology*, when reflecting on the principle of causation, he noted that it was even more arduous to trace a specific effect to a specific cause in the field of morals than in that of science:

Two concurring considerations may help us to account for this difference: 1. the elements of the calculation being in so large a proportion of the psychical class - such as intentions, affections and motives - are in a proportional degree situated out of the reach of direct observation: 2. in the making of the calculation, the judgment is in a peculiar degree liable to be disturbed and led astray by the several

¹⁰ J. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, London, 1994, p. 129.

¹¹ 'Le calcul des peines et des plaisirs constitue la base des analyses de Bentham. ... A côté des réelles difficultés analytiques qu'elle rencontre, son exploitation dans le domaine économique conduit à des développements souvent singuliers: en prenant sa source dans le *felicific calculus*, l'économie benthamienne se distingue de celle de ses contemporains'. (p. 22).

sources of illusion: - by original intellectual weakness – by sinister
interest – by interest-begotten prejudice – by adoptive prejudice.¹²

Nathalie Sigot does mention sinister interest, lack of education and prejudice, but she maintains that all these difficulties can eventually be overcome by the legislator, who could then claim to understand truly all individual interests. Indeed, for her ‘uniting the individual and the general interests supposes that one is fully informed of the interests of each and every individual, and of the general interest’.¹³ A few pages later, she adds that ‘the normative side of the principle of utility not only implies that the state should be aware of what makes up the general interest, but also that it should be able to assess the pleasures and pains of each individual’.¹⁴ She leaves out the details of Bentham’s theory of action, which relies on a complex analysis of motivation, will and understanding, none of which can be entirely predicted by the legislator. As a moral agent living in a political society, the individual is much more than a calculating economic agent. Her argument is illustrated by a study of two categories of individuals, the poor and the functionaries, but she does not mention that these classes of people are subcategories to which the legislator has to pay particular attention. In the case of the ‘subject many’, the picture would have to be qualified. On the contrary, one could argue that Bentham’s political writings allow for uncertainty on the legislator’s side, and for individual freedom on the part of the ‘subject many’.

As many commentators have noted, Bentham’s interest in economic questions extended much farther than issues that later came to be viewed as specifically ‘economic’. Nathalie Sigot insists that economic matters are subordinated to legislation, and that the goals of subsistence, abundance, security and equality justify the intervention of the legislator far more often than Ricardo was ready to allow. Taking Bentham’s theory as a whole leads her to show that all issues, be they political or economic, must be decided according to the principle of utility, by weighing their consequences at several levels. Her contention that economics is a branch of legislation can hardly be criticised. However, the passages on Bentham’s political

¹² *Of Ontology*, p. 146.

¹³ ‘Un tel objectif [unir l’intérêt individuel à l’intérêt général] nécessite en effet de disposer d’une information complète sur les intérêts de chacun et sur l’intérêt général’. (p. 167).

¹⁴ ‘La composante normative du principe d’utilité implique que l’Etat connaisse non seulement l’intérêt général, mais également qu’il puisse évaluer les plaisirs et les peines de chaque individu’(p. 173).

thought are the least convincing in the book, which is potentially damaging to her central hypothesis.

Indeed, her analysis of Bentham's political theory serves a single purpose in the book, which is to demonstrate that the intervention of the legislator is justified in order to reach the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The chapter she devotes to it is entitled 'the necessity of democracy',¹⁵ and stresses the fact that the utilitarian doctrine 'not only had to lead Bentham to democratic principles, but also contained elements which were intrinsically democratic'.¹⁶ But such an assertion is contradicted a few lines later, when she writes that 'there was no necessary link between utilitarianism and the democratic ideal'¹⁷ and emphasises Bentham's early leanings towards enlightened despotism. Though such contradictions are undeniably present in Bentham's writings, she does not clearly account for them, which gives quite a confusing picture.

Her account of the evolution of Bentham's political thought appears to follow closely Halévy's description of his conversion to representative democracy under the influence of James Mill around 1809, and she quotes him almost exclusively on this issue. She closes the part devoted to Bentham's politics with the image of the Panopticon, which is presented as a paradigm of Bentham's vision of the state. Such a description of his political 'authoritarianism' can seem reductive,¹⁸ and it does not fit into the description she gives of the power of the people within a Benthamite democracy.

Presenting Bentham's political ideal as an 'authoritarian democracy', to take up Halévy's phrase,¹⁹ allows the author to point out the main contradiction in Bentham's writings on economic issues: the role given to the state seems to waver between non-intervention and intervention. She attempts to reconcile these conflicting views within a consistent interpretation.

Her analysis shows the limits of Bentham's identification of areas of 'sponte acta', 'agenda' and 'non agenda' according to which state intervention can be justified or not. She argues that these boundaries cannot be fixed once and for all. Therefore, instead of defining *a priori* cases in which state intervention would be justified, she

¹⁵ 'La démocratie nécessaire' (p. 53).

¹⁶ '... non seulement devait nécessairement le conduire vers les principes démocratiques, mais en outre contient des éléments fondamentalement démocratiques' (p. 58).

¹⁷ 'aucune nécessité ne présidait à l'union entre l'utilitarisme et l'idéal démocratique'.

¹⁸ Especially in the light of recent Bentham scholarship by Frederick Rosen and Paul Kelly.

suggests that for Bentham the criterion is more relative: the degree of state intervention does not depend on the issues themselves, but on the perspective from which they are viewed:

When the economy is viewed as setting specific targets, [...] it is an isolated field, as defined by the will of the viewer. Within this sphere, there is no place for the state [...] But to account for the economic field as a whole, it is necessary to reintroduce [the goals of security and equality]: the economy can no longer be considered as an area closed on itself, but it becomes a branch of legislation.²⁰

Such a reading is challenging, and could indeed make sense of some of the contradictions which are blatant in Bentham's writings. But the author emphasises the distinction between a purely economic sphere and the field of legislation, each having its specific rules. She therefore falls back on the distinction established by Halévy between Bentham's political authoritarianism and his economic liberalism (to simplify his far more balanced views),²¹ that she had set out to challenge. Moreover, her passing comment that²² 'it would be necessary to distinguish two phases: the young Bentham, who adopted Smith's views, and the older Bentham, who moved away from it' is not extremely helpful in the light of the theory which has just been set out.

The book is mostly addressed to economists, and will be useful in debunking the prejudices according to which Bentham is not relevant to the history of economic thought. The originality and precision of his economic ideas are stressed convincingly throughout. His place in economic history is assessed with precision, and the comparisons with Smith, Ricardo, Jevons and modern economists are precise and

¹⁹ Halévy, *Radicalisme Philosophique*, III, p.80.

²⁰ 'Lorsque l'économie est abordée à partir de ses objectifs propres... elle est, par la volonté de l'observateur, close sur elle-même. Au sein de cette représentation, il n'y a pas de place pour l'Etat [...]'. 'Mais rendre compte du domaine lui-même, dans sa totalité, oblige dans un second temps à réintroduire ces objectifs: l'économie n'est plus alors analysée comme un domaine fermé sui lui-même, mais à travers ses relations avec la législation' (p. 66).

²¹ Halévy, *Radicalisme Philosophique*, I, p.150.

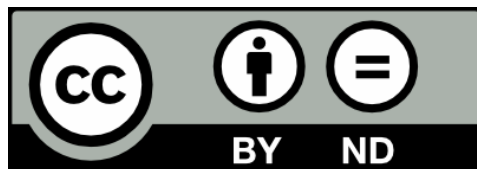
²² 'Plus nécessairement, on devrait distinguer deux périodes chez Bentham: le jeune, qui adopte la perspective smithienne et le vieux, qui s'éloigne d'une telle perspective' (p.102).

useful. It also allows the author to briefly sketch Bentham's ideas on education and poor relief.

For non-economists, however, the book does not distinguish clearly enough between ideas which belong to the sphere of economics and those which are merely stated in economic terms. The use of a pseudo-economic vocabulary is frequent in Bentham's writings, and one could maintain that it only serves to emphasise the scientific basis of the principle of utility. Being herself an economist, she eventually gives much more importance to 'economic' methods and reasoning in Bentham, at the expense of moral and political ideas. She does acknowledge that Bentham's thought must be taken as a whole, but she approaches his writings as if he were purely an economist, dealing with the behaviour of economic agents in various situations.

The question of Bentham's liberalism focuses on purely economic issue-based comparisons between his theories and his contemporaries. The author is aware that the definition of 'classical liberalism' is by no means simple, but she chooses to treat it in a mostly technical way, without connecting it to the issue of his political liberalism. A closer study of Bentham's political principles would have made it possible to question more extensively the status of his economic writings as part of his philosophical and political project, which allows the combination of individual action with state intervention and freedom with control.

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