

Mill's Method

Rosario López, *Contexts of John Stuart Mill's Liberalism. Politics and the Science of Society in Victorian Britain*. Nomos. 2016. 201 pages. ISBN 9783848736959.

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The main focus of Rosario López' book lies on the way Mill's methodological, historical, social and political views are connected with each other. She treats different aspects of these interrelations in the eight chapters of her book – all of which can easily be read separately. López starts with an examination of the meaning of antagonisms throughout Mill's political actions and his writings. For Mill, the existence of multiple viewpoints, of many-sidedness, is a ubiquitous and desirable feature of any present and future society. The author not only succeeds to show that in detail, but also explains Mills's advocacy of many-sidedness in light of his personal experience with debating societies in London and his intellectual struggle with utilitarian and rival intellectual schools of thought as a young man. For Mill only genuine antagonism, which needs passionate opponents, produces new insights and collective learning. Thus, Mill not only advocated political reforms in order to make parliamentary debates more controversial, but also transposed this idea into his methodological reflections for the social sciences.

The two chapters in which Rosario López examines the influence of French historiographers on Mill – like Michelet, Guizot, Mignet, and Sismondi – and his intellectual debt to Comte, Coleridge, and Saint-Simon (p. 49–81) are among the best parts of the book. According to the author, Mill's strong interest in history and the different ways in which different intellectual schools dealt with historical events paved the path for his program for a methodology of the social sciences in the final chapters of his seminal book *A System of Logic* (first edition 1843). By making this point, Rosario López intends to restore the significance of Mill's seemingly apolitical methodological writings for a "historically-minded interpretation of his political philosophy" (p. 14) and thus puts the issue of methods for the social sciences on the table of political debate. In my view, the author could have made her point even stronger if she would have linked it to recent methodological debates in the social sciences too.

Also impressive is the chapter on the use of metaphors in Mill's science of society (p. 129–52). Mill borrows his vocabulary and images heavily from biology, medicine, mechanics, mathematics, and astronomy. Rosario López illustrates his use of metaphors with a lot of telling examples. To me, her sections on "consensus" (p. 135–37) and "astronomy" (140–2) were particularly illuminative. Mill's use of these metaphors is in line with a lot of other philosophical

theories and journalistic writings of the epoch. However, Rosario López points out that Mill stands out for his very much divergent use of naturalistic images. She identifies a particular linguistic strategy of Mill behind the use of disparate naturalistic images: In doing so, he aims to enforce the bonds between the various natural sciences of his times and his own socio-political theories. By way of this metaphorical vocabulary, Mill clearly wanted his basic categories for his analyses of social and political issues (like static and dynamic or progress) sound less opinion-like but more up to the standards of serious and evidence-based science.

However, Mill himself was by no means free from the influence of his own subjectivity. In another chapter Rosario López pays closer attention to the numerous revisions Mill made in the new versions of *A System of Logic* until its final edition in 1872. Here she follows the detailed references of changes and corrections listed by John M. Robson in his edition of Mill's *Collected Works* and reads the different editions of the book as a palimpsest. Close attention is paid to the ways Mill treated Auguste Comte in the various editions. Her closer look shows in detail how Mill was recasting Comte's role over time (p. 117–23). Following Robson on this issue, she argues that Comte's later tendency towards absolutism and his ongoing defense of the lower social status of women played a crucial role in Mill downplaying his intellectual debt to Comte. But Rosario López rightly adds another important point: Mill's normative reflections on the "Art of Life" – the formula appears for the first time in his work in 1851 – clearly contradict Comte's positivism and Mill obviously had the feeling that Comte should get less credit than he deserved for some of the passages in *A System of Logic*.

Other chapters deal with a comparative look at the argumentative usages of "order" and "progress" by British intellectuals in newspapers, journals and pamphlets in the Victorian Age and with Mill's concept of nationality. Against the mainstream of Mill-readers the author challenges the view of Mill as a "liberal nationalist". According to her, Mill does not regard nationality as intrinsically valuable, but rather as ancillary to normatively more important values such as order, liberty, and progress (p. 153–79).

Rosario López has written an instructive book in which she smoothly weaves in the scholarly debates on Mill in the rich secondary literature. And she undoubtedly is correct in emphasizing the importance of methodological questions for Mill's academic work and political practice. Mill coined his approach "The Inverse Deductive or Historical Method" (p. 52) and Rosario López elaborates Mill's reflections on methodological questions in his debates with his contemporaries clearly and convincingly. However, throughout her book the author is less clear on the distinctiveness of Mill's method and, consequently, on its possible relationship to contemporary methodological considerations in the social sciences.

In my opinion Mill's methodological considerations can be made even stronger in light of his consistently anti-metaphysical scientific program. According to him, human thinking is to be understood as a natural biological process that is triggered in response to environmental conditions and is further developed through training and habit. The laws of thought, like any other natural power, can only be learned, "seeing the agent at work" (Mill, 1974: 833). These reflections have an obvious similarity to the epistemologies of Hegel and Dewey. Observing the human mind in action leads to knowledge of how people make experiences and what they ought to do when they aim to respond appropriately to the environment. "Seeing the agent at work" is understood by Mill – following Rosario López' presentation about the dialogical core of Mill's thinking in chapter 2 – as an inherently dialogical effort, which compels us to understand how other people think. At the same time, it never produces more than statements of a limited knowledge which can be permanently corrected and thus improved.

As Rosario López mentions in her book only briefly, the psychology of associationism plays a fundamental role in Mill's social science methodology. Associationism is based on the idea that each new-born is a blank slate. It follows that human nature is inherently adaptable and thus open to progressive development. Associationism thus provides Mill with a conceptual bridge between the state of society, politics and human personality that we know, and a future, better state which we may achieve through reform. We can succeed in organizing social institutions to trigger a kind of "virtuous cycle" in which the character of individuals is improved thus prompting further socio-political improvements. In his *A System of Logic* Mill ultimately aimed at an empirically based theory of the development of the human species (and the particular use of metaphors in Mill's work, which Rosario López rightly emphasizes in her book, can be seen as his linguistic strategy to persuade his readers). At the methodological level, Mill wanted to establish the possibility of a universal theory of (civilization) history, of (industrial) society and (democratic) political development. He already sketched this out in programmatic form in his article *Civilization* in 1836.

Mill held on to this basic idea for the rest of his life. His writings on such diverse subjects as economics, religion, colonialism, freedom, socialism, or women's emancipation are no more and no less than spelling out his convictions on the past and future course of human history. Mill identified the general and fundamental interest of all people to want to live a better life as the driving force behind progress. These basic convictions about human progress and Mill's methodology are mutually-supportive. That is, he analyzed contemporary social and political phenomena with a clear normative orientation: the progress of the human species to less suffering and more happiness. The future of mankind lay for Mill in a society of free and equal persons in which all men

and women will have the possibility to realize their species-specific potential. In the *Principles of Political Economy* social development is understood to be moving towards an end-point – a “stationary state” as he calls it – greatly similar to today’s ideas of a post-growth society.

Rosario López rightly stresses the interrelationship between dynamic and static elements in Mill’s theories (for example, p. 33, 57, 67). However, in my view, the conceptual relevance of the stationary state for his methodology comes up slightly a little short. The stationary state is a state of society in which any further economic growth can be dispensed with, material goods are fairly distributed, and people have sufficient leisure and interest to engage in comprehensive cultural activity or to enjoy the natural world around them. Instead of engaging in a real dialogical activity with real persons Mill takes precisely the privileged perspective of this stationary state when he evaluates the most important events of contemporary society and politics in the context of the universal history of mankind. Mill never went to India and never entered into any real dialogue with a native person from India, but felt informed enough to know exactly what to do and what not to do in the British colony. The same is the case with North America. Mill never put his foot on that continent but he knew exactly how to judge on different issues of domestic politics in the US and in Canada. Mill reconstructs past and present events from the vantage of “progress” towards the anticipated future in a stationary state. In this way, he distinguishes between “bad” and “good” human desires and preferences thereby also sorting “regressive” and “progressive” social tendencies in the name of the unhindered development of mankind’s history.

From my point of view, Mill can be regarded as an early representative of the “Reconstructive Theory” in social sciences. Reconstructive Theory attempts to systematically describe the social conditions of the possibility of certain political-theoretical statements in an evolutionary perspective. Reconstructive theory is explanatory; it embeds its arguments in a comprehensive social theory identifying evolutionary stages and progress. Definitions of social problems, political vocabularies and normative political positions are understood as the building blocks of a whole-society evolutionary process. This approach has its roots both in Hegel, Marx and Dewey and has recently gained renewed interest among scholars in the social sciences. Among the most important representatives of reconstructive theory are authors of the early and middle stages of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School in the twentieth century, and Jürgen Habermas, Hauke Brunkhorst and Axel Honneth in contemporary social theory and social philosophy. (Gaus, 2013.)

Engaging with Mill’s methodology may draw attention to the possible pitfalls of the reconstructive approach in contemporary social sciences. Mill – as has been discussed in detail by Nadia Urbinati (2002: 105–120) – in the 1850s criticized plans to introduce the secret ballot and became a fervent defender of

the public vote in England: His “reconstructive view” on the state of British society blinded him from the manifold possibilities of abuse of this method of voting in his days.

The book by Rosario López is not only worth reading because it brings back Mill in the current methodological debates in the social sciences but even more since it sheds new light on the intellectual contexts and vocabularies in which Mill elaborated his work. The secondary literature on John Stuart Mill fills libraries. The last two decades in particular have seen numerous scholarly publications on nearly all aspects of Mill’s life and work. Thus it is a difficult undertaking to try to write something new and instructive on Mill’s work. Rosario López has impressively accomplished this difficult task.

References

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