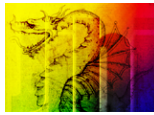


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– Section 4: Reviews –

Book Reviews

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## Book Reviews

D. Ragnolini, R. Soliani

*Reviews of López, Contexts of John Stuart Mill's Liberalism. Politics and the Science of Society in Victorian Britain, Nomos 2016; Verri, Méditations sur l'économie politique, éd. Tiran, Classiques Garnier 2015.*



**1** ROSARIO LÓPEZ, *Contexts of John Stuart Mill's Liberalism. Politics and the Science of Society in Victorian Britain*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2016, p. 201. ISBN 9783848736959, € 44,00.

Rosario López's book on John Stuart Mill and liberalism provides a fresh account of the development of the English thinker's political thought by means of a renewed methodological approach to his works. The research is presented by the author as a result of two overlapped methods applied to Mill's texts. First of all, it pays particular attention to show "Mill's use of figurative language as legitimizing rhetorical strategy" and, in doing so, it addresses some topics "beyond an understanding of Mill's texts as self-sufficient for scholarly interpretations" (p. 15). Beside this "contextualist" approach, as it has been devised by the Cambridge's 'New History of Political Thought', according to which 'texts' are not but 'contexts' to decipher in their own time and place, the author tries to enrich its upshots by intertwining this method with a more traditional approach: the *Begriffsgeschichte* peculiar to the Koselleckian history of ideas. The latter enables him to recover the significance of a cluster of key-concepts,

“such as antagonism, history, order, progress, nationality” and even metaphors drawn from natural sciences, in an attempt to provide an internal history of their meanings in Mill’s texts. As a methodological result, the book presents a “kind of multilevel approach to the history of ideas” trying to cope with the ambitious twofold task of combining “the perspectives of conceptual history and the so-called ‘New History of Political Thought’” (p. 16).

The challenge posed by such a methodological option springs from the difficulty to assess the “many-sidedness” of the aspects of Mill’s background, so much imbued with the “readings of Coleridge, Comte, Guizot, together with some Platonic dialogues and Grote’s *History of Greece*” (p. 23). As regards to the context, the author is aware that, aside from these great texts, “Victorian periodicals provide new channels to explore widespread beliefs and political arguments in use and in continuous transformation”, as well as “how people discussed pressing political issues and how political theories were popularized” (p. 30). Moreover, “the backbone” of most of the book’s chapters (p. 29) is represented by the analysis of multidisciplinary concepts and vocabulary of natural sciences selected by Mill over the time in order to shape his own philosophical-political theory of liberalism.

The second chapter deals with Mill’s reception of two great historians of his times, namely François Guizot (1787-1874) and Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834), who provided him the intellectual materials for devising a “multi-layered and complex concept of antagonism” (p. 47). If the first one emphasized the historical role of social antagonism as “normative rule” (p. 48) of human political existence, the latter stressed the importance of “equilibrium, and therefore progress” (p. 35), in the history of societies, laying the groundwork for a philosophy of history that Mill would later endorse. It is argued that the intellectual clash between his father and Thomas Macaulay, who led a straightforward attack to the first’s “way of proceeding *a priori* in politics” (p. 41), prompted a new Mill’s interest in history as empirical basis to study the society and its evolution.

The third chapter deals with Mill’s growing interest in history up to the rejection of “Benthamite ahistorical way of treating politics” (p. 58), coming to appreciate the historical background of intellectuals as John Sterling, Frederick Maurice and Samuel Coleridge within the London Debating Society. This led the author to examine in the following chapter the extent to which Mill was indebted to Coleridge, Comte and Guizot for the binary concepts of “progress”

and “order”, and “statics” and “dynamics”, providing him with a fundamental theoretical tool to assess the development of past and present societies. The way in which such binary concepts work in human history, granting the development of society, is the subject matter of the fifth chapter, which takes into account the usage of these concepts in the ordinary political thinking of nineteenth-century Britain, from 1846 to 1899. For this period, the author attests the striking frequency of the terms “progress” and “order” in a widespread group of printed material and common newspapers, with at least “one-hundred and twenty-two articles” that used the expression “order and progress” (p. 93).

The context explored suggests the British trend “to represent England as an exemplary society in contrast to other countries, being sometimes part of a discourse that legitimizes political control over less-developed countries” (p. 106). The political task to reconcile these two extremes political values in Victorian Britain unveils a common source of apprehension for both Mill and British public opinion, thus pointing out some shared social demands that found expression in an enduring philosophical reflections within Mill’s writings.

Mill’s *A System of Logic*, in particular, is regarded by the author as the ‘litmus test’ to assess his “evolving views” (p. 109) on society in relation with Comte’s works, fleshing out his personal position towards the French philosopher, not passively deferential, nor lacking of subtle form of criticism. Starting out on the assumption that this work took thirteen-year of Mill’s research, the author explores its content by means of a textual criticism that take into account the textual instability of the eight different text’s versions for understanding authorial revisions. This helps the reader to follow Mill’s reception of Comtian social science through several rewritings, additions and deletions occurring over time, highlighting some points of contention, i.e. the alleged women’s inborn inequality, the reductive role attributed to art and science, and the “despotism of society over the individual” (p. 124). These aspects led Mill to downplay his debt to Comte in a considerable measure, thus modifying a number of passages concerning the French author and carrying out revision strategies for preventing readers “from assuming that he sympathises with the undesirable practical consequences of positivism” (p. 126).

The seventh chapter has been devoted to detect the ‘naturalistic’ origin of some Mill’s metaphors and terminology pertaining to the experimental sciences, both employed to study social and political behavior. The *topos* of so-

ciety depicted as organism underpins the “argumentative purposes” (p. 138) of concepts drawn by natural science, such as healthy state of society, social diseases (p. 132), the image of politicians-physicians (p. 133), the concept of “body politic” (p. 134), and even “consensus”, that is referred to the concept of interdependence among different phenomena in physiology (p. 135). As a result, according to Mill’s social philosophy “sociology consequently reproduces the methodological approach of the physical sciences to both determine its goals and organize its findings” (p. 138). López’s linguistic inquiry plays a very important methodological role in pointing out some crucial sources for those scholars who “aim at understanding past political utterances in their historical settings” (p. 151).

This study sets the conceptual framework for assessing the significant substitution of the term “nationality” by “cohesion” as it occurred in a revised edition of Mill’s *A System of Logic*, an effort that the author undertakes in the penultimate chapter of the book. To be challenged are the “mainstream interpretations of Mill as a forerunner of liberal nationalism” (p. 174) – crystallised in particular with Lord Acton’s view of Mill – by means of a reevaluation of the principle of cohesion that rather “points to Mill’s indebtedness to positivism” (p. 169). The interest in the concept of “nationalism” unveils the philosophical strife embarked on by the British philosopher to present it as “ancillary to more important goals such as order, progress and liberty” (p. 175).

An interesting upshot of such a new linguistic-based interpretation of Mill’s political thought offered by the author is the revision of Mill’s liberalism, reshaped through rhetorical strategies, metaphorical images, and multidisciplinary approaches to social problems. Shedding light on Mill’s “advanced liberalism” – i.e. the peculiar way in which political liberty is ‘safeguarded’ against a backdrop both of positivism and social heteronomy – yet not “sufficiently assessed in secondary literature” (p. 177), this book contributes to the mosaic of the philosophical history of liberalism.

*Davide Ragnolini*



2 PIETRO VERRI, *Méditations sur l'économie politique*, édition critique par André Tiran, avec la collaboration de Pier Luigi Porta, Anne Machet et Maria Vitali-Volant. Traduction d'Anne Machet, Maria Vitali-Volant et Frédéric Manche. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015, p. 442. ISBN 9782812437816, € 87,00.

Franco Venturi informs us that the first French translation of Verri's *Meditazioni*, reviewed by Condorcet, was done in 1772; but the Author was not satisfied, and it was not published. Indeed, the first French edition was released in Lausanne in 1773, with a Preface by Gabriel Mingard<sup>1</sup>. The translation of this great book appears as a hard task from the very beginning.

Intellectual well known as administrator and philosopher, Pietro Verri was undervalued as economist, especially in Italy. The *Meditazioni* were welcome by the European intellectual milieu just after their first edition. Then the book was published in Italy by Custodi (1804) and Ferrara (1852) in their collections of economic writings. Ferrara criticized Verri, Filangieri and the Italian economists of the xviii century, for their statalism old-style, with a negative attitude that we do not find, for example, in Pecchio (1829). In the following century, we can find Verri's influence on Romagnosi and Cattaneo: a sort of "Lombard line", as the late Pier Luigi Porta singles out in his contribution in the book we are reviewing. But, after Ferrara's edition, we must wait for the biographical essay by Nino Valeri in 1937 (in the meantime, the correspondence with his brother Alessandro was gradually, slowly published); and the editions of the *Meditazioni* by Renzo De Felice in 1964 and in 1998, the latter including also two contributions by David Bidussa and Franco Venturi. In 2003 begins the National Edition, directed by Carlo Capra: finally, Pietro Verri occupies the due place in the Italian Pantheon.

The present French translation, edited by André Tiran and his collaborators, is published by Garnier in the collection *Écrits sur l'économie*, which "attempts

<sup>1</sup> P. Verri, *Meditazioni sulla economia politica*, a cura di R. De Felice, saggio storico di F. Venturi, premessa di D. Bidussa, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 1998, p. 184.

to re-actualise the major texts of economic science from the 14th to the 20th century. The publication consists of scientific editions, bilingual where necessary, alongside a system of notes and introductions essential for their contextualisation". The task has been brilliantly accomplished. Indeed, we have here not just a translation, but a fascinating journey in the Italian history and culture of the xviii century. Enlightenment is influent both in Northern Italy and in Naples and the South, and makes its best effort to rule State and economy by reason and to implement the necessary reforms, as André Tiran writes in the first part of the thoughtful *Vue d'ensemble*, which contextualizes Pietro Verri in his cultural, political and historical *milieu*. In this long (76 pages), dense essay the philological accuracy goes together with the convincing interpretation of the facts and the intellectual debate: e. g. let's look at the summing up of the discussion between Condorcet and Verri (42 ff.); or at the sharp understanding of the self-consciousness of Italian reformers to be a part of the "European republic" (44). Or even at the reference to the influence of Verri on Say, briefly mentioned here (37, n. 2), and widely explained later, in the contribution by Pier Luigi Porta. The two short titles *Facteur culturel et mutations économiques* and *État, fiscalité et nation au temps de Pietro Verri* mirror exactly the amplitude and complexity of the first part of the *Vue d'ensemble*, enriched with useful tables providing economic data, philological references and chronology, and exhaustive footnotes.

After clarifying these fundamental issues, the *Vue d'ensemble* goes on with the second part by Anne Machet, who has translated the *Meditazioni* with Maria Vitali – Volant and Frédéric Manche. Here the main theme is the nature of documents, their diffusion and their use, in order to avoid anachronism. But the treatment is wide-ranging, and, starting from a mazy question, Anne Machet offers an original, interesting view on the circulation of new ideas in the period. Finally, she expounds the difficulties of the translation, and the way by which they have been dealt with (and, I add, overcome). At the end, the *Vue d'ensemble* is a fine methodological example of doing history of economic thought along the lines that we find at the beginning (9), where the current tendency to give importance just to the *analyse interne* is questioned, in favour of the comprehension of the role of the economic thought, considered in its historical, economic, institutional and intellectual context, always keeping in mind the relationship between economic process and intellectual life (11).



The following essay by the late Pier Luigi Porta, translated into French by Marco Saraceno, is devoted to the political economy of Pietro Verri and the objectives and effects of the *Meditazioni*. Also in this case, the approach is wide-ranging. We find detailed references to old (McCulloch) and contemporary (Bartoli) authors who appreciated Verri, and the relation among political economy, politics and reforms in Verri's works is discussed in depth, paying particular attention to the concept of *Economia civile*, which links Verri to Genovesi and the Neapolitan tradition. The sources of Verri and his influence on the following authors are thoroughly treated.

The long, detailed biographical paper by Maria Vitali – Volant casts light on the multi-faceted personality of Pietro Verri and his circle, and various moments of his complicated life. The Author's also emotional involvement in the work on Verri appears, I believe, in the lines where she writes about Verri's death, just before the likely realization of his political aspirations. Here the refined reference to classical mythology, Rameau, Diderot and Voltaire gives real life to the argument. At the end of the paper, there are interesting references to the editions of the *Meditazioni* and the archives where Verri's papers are kept.

Now the reader should be able to fully appreciate the relevance and profound meaning of the book. The French translation of the *editio princeps* of the *Meditazioni* (1771) begins at pages 170-71, with, on the left page, the original Italian text, and, on the right, the translation, done with the utmost accuracy. A rich bibliography and index complete the volume.

The French edition of the *Meditazioni* is a very fine piece of work, not to miss by scholars, but also by people interested in history of (not only economic) ideas. It has been win a difficult challenge: to provide a fundamental tool for scientific research; and, at the same time, to create a lively book, which can fascinate also cultivated, non-specialist readers. The merit must be shared between the great Pietro Verri and the research group who, with courage and passion, edited the text.

*Riccardo Soliani*



*Innocenzo Fraccaroli, Monumento a Pietro Verri (1844), Accademia di Brera, Milano, partic. Foto Paolobon140, Wikimedia Commons, <https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q42747007>.*