

Mini Review

Review of Baum Bruce: Re-reading power and freedom in J.S. Mill, University of Toronto press, 2000

Vasilis Grollios

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. E-mail: vgrollios@gmail.com.

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One of the most interesting books about J.S. Mill's political and social philosophy is Bruce Baum's PhD thesis. His book is one of the very few that seriously try to lift to the surface economic freedom and distributive justice in Mill's social theory and to relate liberty and equality in this philosopher's social thought.

Key words: Social expediency, democracy, working class, competition.

INTRODUCTION

Baum's text rightly underlines the fact that "There is no guarantee, of course, that the kind of democratic politics that Mill proposes will adequately respect individual liberty" and that, according to Mill, we must determine which interests ought to be considered as rights. (Baum, 2000, p.170) Mill, indeed, was very clear in Utilitarianism writing that "All persons are deemed to have a right to equality of treatment, except when some recognised social expediency requires the reverse." (Mill, utilitarianism, cw 19, p. 258) So, we must decide which actions are prejudicial to the interests of others (On liberty, cw 18, p. 292) according to "social expediency".

Democracy and its class content

The question that immediately comes to our mind is the extent which "social expediency" can promote working class's interests and the democratic demands of his era and more specifically the most important of them that of equal vote to everybody, that of "one man, one vote". Unfortunately Baum nowhere poses this question.

Baum defends Mill from the socialists' attack, which would pose the demand for the participation of the masses in power. "...the core of Mill's developmental conception of political freedom in a representative democracy largely withstands this participatory critique." (Baum 2000, p. 265) Baum stresses the fact that participation in politics is not the only domain of human freedom and that many citizens will be too preoccupied with other activities to devote a large part of their time to politics. (Baum 2000, p. 265).

Baum also supports the view that Mill's "...theory of

freedom is limited by his flawed account of social changeHis faith in the power of speculation thought leads him to miss ...the degree of manifest social and political struggle needed to bring about emancipatory change." (Baum, 2000, p. 274) Despite this acknowledgment, he nowhere explains why Mill underestimates the social and political struggle that needs to take place in order for the enormous redistribution of power to become reality.

I think that although Baum's effort is creditable, it doesn't lead to a very satisfactory result. His analysis would certainly be deeper if he linked Mill's philosophy of history with Mill's views on human nature and on political economy. My belief is that these three core philosophical themes are strongly connected to each other. First, the idealistic character of Mill's philosophy of history is not by itself capable of explaining Mill's refusal to consider class struggle as the most suitable means of fulfillment of the demands of his theory. Mill doesn't think that the working class should conduct a class war because its demands are not unavoidably opposed to those of the capitalists. Contrary to Marx, for him capital is not a social relationship which unavoidably leads to exploitation and injustice. (Mill, principles of political economy, CW 2, 1965, p. 68-70).

Second, he doesn't have any great esteem for the political culture of the working class for the reason that their profession is manual and not an intellectual one. The gauge of a person's social culture depends, in Mill's thought, on his position in the hierarchy of the capitalist mode of production. "...the nature of a person's occupation is some test. An employer of labour is on average more intelligent than a labourer;..." (Mill, considerations of representative government, cw 19, 1977, p. 475).

Therefore he cannot trust the workers' ability to transform society all by themselves. The help by their employers, by the capitalists, is considered essential. Baum's defense of Mill's theory is, in my view, superficial and therefore weak. He doesn't try to come to grips with the core of the "participatory critique" which I prefer to call a socialistic one, because this was the critique adopted by the working class movement and by the socialist philosophers of that epoch. The reasons on the score of which Mill rejects the domination of popular power, that means working class's power, are much more ingrained in the core of the philosophical roots of his social theory than Baum believes. If we read Mill carefully, we can reach the conclusion that his thought stays hooked on the values that ground the capitalist mode of production, such as that of property, competition, production, enterprise and that he forms "social expediency" according to them. Mill realized that popular power would endanger their existence. That's why he feared democracy, having knowledge of the core element of its content, its class character, despite of not admitting it.

Baum's book lacks a deep analysis of the philosophical roots of Mill's social theory which could reveal its class orientation and could make its writer capable of explaining the contradictions in it.

We can confirm the adoption of these values by Mill in many of his texts, but I think this it is more obvious in Civilization and in his articles about the condition in Ireland, (Collected works 24).

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