

BOOK REVIEW

Vincent Guillin 2009. *Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill on Sexual Equality: Historical, Methodological and Philosophical Issues*.

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One of the most stimulating debates in nineteenth-century political and social philosophy is the debate on women's social status. At issue were the arguments publicly adduced to justify either inequality or sexual equality. Vincent Guillin invites the reader to explore a diverse array of related topics, disciplines and points of view providing a comprehensive picture of the intellectual debates of the time.

Focusing on the personal and intellectual relationship between Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill opens a wider space of analysis. Besides, the debate on sexual equality further illuminates other public and academic controversies. Among them, the one about the links between society, politics and scientific knowledge; and particularly, discussions both in France and Britain on the methodology of the social sciences. Furthermore, in order to grasp the precise character of the debate on sexual equality, both social and political demands should be examined against a broader background, since what was also at stake was the entire architectonics of scientific knowledge. The result is a fruitful study on the intersection between the natural sciences and social and political philosophy. The author examines the issue of sexual equality from the correspondence and mutual intellectual

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influence of Comte and Mill. The comparison is the prism through which to study the historical, methodological and philosophical contributions to the debate. For the sake of clarity, my review will follow this three-fold division in the book.

Concerning the historical contributions, Guillin provides a comprehensive picture of the debate on women's social status. When we try to understand the ideas of the past, as it is the case, it is highly interesting to pose not only the question about what their authors thought, but also why did they think that way, what were the arguments already available that supported or refuted their position and to what extent did they make advance the state of the question. In my view, this is one of the most significant achievements of the book under consideration: it provides a frame in which the philosophical activity takes place including both intellectual supporters and adversaries of Comte and Mill. As a result, we ascribe a dialogical character to the philosophical activity itself.

Their correspondence is an essential source of information, insofar as the majority of opinions on sexual equality are to be found in their epistolary exchange. One would even say that sometimes the correspondence becomes the book's guiding thread. However, it is important to recognise the value of this choice, which enables to explore both the biographical dimension and the theoretical details of their respective standpoints, assuming eventually that personal stories are also a part of the history.

Regarding their methodological contributions, Guillin addresses the inquiry on the proper method of science, especially concerning phrenology, which the author defines as a "naturalistic attempt to account for the nature, variety and development of human mental powers."¹ While phrenology, and therefore physiology, provides Comte with the basic argument to justify his idea of the subjection of women, Mill's attitude is to question the existence of any conclusive evidential support therein. In other words, whereas Comte argues that the physiological features of women's brains justify their social inequality, Mill regards the environmental factors as responsible for such inequality. Eventually, the issue led to a methodological discussion on how to explain moral phenomena.

Notwithstanding the centrality of phrenology in the assessment of methodological contributions, Guillin still presents Comte's and Mill's disagreement on psychology and, more interesting, Mill's at-

tempt to establish the science of ethology. These three examples share a common concern, that is, concern on the conditions for scientific knowledge. Comte's repudiation of psychology to explain moral phenomena and Mill's failure in the design of ethology's proper method, along with the lack of empirical justification for phrenology constitute the main areas of reflection.

Undoubtedly, the reader will soon realise that nineteenth-century intellectuals regard the link between natural and social sciences as legitimate. This is what Guillin calls "scientization of politics", although neither Comte nor Mill used this expression. Nevertheless, they both share a similar ambition to turn politics and sociology into positive sciences, even if they do not agree with each other on the method. It is precisely this discussion what remains highly interesting nowadays, since it sheds light on how politics' and sociology's scientific claims were made.

As the author himself concedes, his philosophical goals are "critical with respect to Comte and constructive with respect to Mill."² This fact can explain why Comte is often charged of incoherence and Mill defended against his alleged inconsistency. On the one hand, concerning Comte's weaknesses, Guillin rightly remarks that even if he claims the autonomy of sociology, his ideas on sexual equality are suffused with arguments coming from biology, which compromise such autonomy. Moreover, as Guillin argues, Comte's failure at this point undermines sociology's independence, which challenges Comte's traditional portrait as one of the forefathers of sociology.

On the other hand, a deep understanding of Mill's rhetoric dispels the supposed inconsistencies of his arguments while providing an interpretation for his sketchiness as regards ethology in the *Logic* and his mature feminism in the *Subjection of Women*. Mill's frustrated endeavour to turn ethology, the study of character formation, into a proper science still remains a puzzling aspect of his thought, due in part to the lack of clarity its exposition reveals. In the *System of Logic* he dedicates a chapter to a to introducing a new discipline which, taking education into account, should be able to explain the differences in character among individuals. This chapter has been charged with inconsistency, due precisely to its rawness. However, as Guillin shows, we can better understand Mill's thought by appealing to his dramatic style, which may explain the strategy he follows. Eventually, this project never saw the light and the history of ethology as a science is still

to be written. However, while unfinished, ethology certainly plays a prominent role in Mill's defense of women's equality, since education and environmental factors are key explaining women's social condition and their possibilities for improvement.

Because of Mill's failure in writing and designing the science of ethology, he displays new arguments in the *Subjection of Women*, written in 1869, twenty-six years after the *Logic*. Guillin succeeds in showing that even if Mill's opinion on the equality of women remained unmodified over the years, he needs to invoke a different way of addressing the problem, given ethology's absence. Mill emphasises the necessity of letting both men and women engage in "experiments of living" and argue for justice, freedom and utility.

This way, the problem of sexual equality appears as a recurrent topic in Mill's thought. It is addressed not only in the *Subjection of Women*, as it is commonly acknowledged, but also in earlier writings. The study of the correspondence between Mill and Comte shows that the egalitarian concern of the former was forged at least twenty-five years before the publication of the well-known manifesto on the women's social equality. Taking into account both the argumentative strategies and the historical context, Guillin disentangles Mill's lines of reasoning and defends that the sexual equality issue is a valid way to read the correspondence and disagreements with Comte, the motivation behind the science of ethology and the subsequent innovative arguments that he offers in the *Subjection of Women*. Therefore, it provides a unitary interpretation of Mill's feminism, drawn on the evidence of the *Subjection of Women*, but also on other less-known textual evidence.

For Mill the problem of women's social status became crucial. Nonetheless, Comte's personal situation played an interesting role in the dispute as well. In fact, it is precisely Comte who brings up the issue on the correspondence by telling Mill about his difficulties with his wife, Caroline Massin. His personal account triggers a reflection on the question of marriage and divorce, which eventually leads to a deeper discussion on human nature.

Guillin explores Mill's and Comte's mutual influence by comparing their views on sexual equality. However, there are more interpretive hypotheses around the many intricate details in the Comte-Mill relation. More precisely, the conscious choice of the sexual equality debate emphasises existing disagreements between Comte and Mill

while underestimates their agreements. Even if Guillin mentions the main areas in which harmony exists, the burden of the argument falls unavoidably on the dispute of women's social position. Given that this is one of the topics on which they more acutely disagreed, the overall impression is of a permanent dispute between them.

It is also necessary to acknowledge Comte's influence on Mill's social and political thought. They both intended to reform philosophy and sociology to turn them into recognisable sciences. Undoubtedly, this purpose is one of positivism's legacies. Likewise, it is possible to argue for the fundamental role played by the inverse deductive or historical method in the *System of Logic*, *Principles of Political Economy* and the failed science of ethology.

In addition, I would like to suggest what could be labelled as a partial disagreement. As Guillin remarks, Comte states that "social statics is the synchronic study of all the elements out of which societies are made."³ According to Comte, one of these elements, and indeed the central one, is the family. Due to this conception, the French thinker disapproves of divorce, insofar as it demolishes one of the pillars of society, and endorses a strictly patriarchal interpretation of marriage. Contrarily to Comte, Mill rejects the hierarchical vision of society and therefore Comte's idea of the family as one of the fundamental pillars of society, defending women instead. However, even if Mill disagrees on what Comte takes as social statics, it does not follow that he rejects the existence of elements conferring stability to a social union. In other words, Mill's reservations about the Comtian proposal on the family (and the patriarchal society) as one of the main constituents of society does not compromise the existence of social statics itself. This is why in the *System of Logic* Mill suggests a different idea on what the conditions of stability in political society should be. According to Mill, these elements are: a common system of education, the existence of a feeling of allegiance or loyalty and a principle of cohesion among the members of the same community.⁴

Mill does not question the necessary existence of a branch called social statics, nor its counterpart, social dynamics, which studies the change and progress of societies. The division itself can be regarded as part of the Comtian legacy, even if Comte's idea of social statics provokes a serious controversy in their correspondence. To support this argument, it is possible to add that the division between social statics and dynamics remains throughout Mill's subsequent works,

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such as *System of Logic, Principles of Political Economy, On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government*. Therefore, along with the discrepancies, we should also pay attention to their agreements. It is true that Mill rejected Comte's account of social statics, but it is equally correct to recognising that Mill did not get rid of the terms social statics and social dynamics. Guillin rightly points out a disagreement, although it should be regarded as a "partial" one.

On the whole, by addressing the topic of sexual equality, Guillin definitely provides a fruitful interpretation of Comte and Mill. On the one hand, Comte's opinion on the status of women helps understand his social philosophy. On the other hand, Mill's passionate defense of women's equality is an important part of his political thought. However, it is by combining what both authors thought that a wider view is achieved. It enables a profound understanding on the way ideas take place and develop in the past. Taking into consideration a varied scope of evidence, including both Comte's and Mill's major and minor works, their correspondence and, more conspicuously, the diverse sources of their ideas, the author draws a broad picture of the debate on women's equality. The final result is a captivating journey to the core of a debate where two of the nineteenth-century's most prominent thinkers argued for and against sexual equality and, by doing so, developed their different epistemological and methodological views.

NOTES

1. Vincent Guillin, *Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill on Sexual Equality: Historical, Methodological and Philosophical Issues*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, p. 82.
2. Vincent Guillin, *Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill on Sexual Equality*, p. 332.
3. Vincent Guillin, *Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill on Sexual Equality*, p. 13.
4. *A System of Logic*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. gen. John M. Robson, Toronto and London, University of Toronto Press & Routledge and Kegan Paul, vol. VIII, 1974. pp. 917-924.