BLAKE, KATHLEEN

THE PLEASURES OF BENTHAMISM: VICTORIAN LITERATURE, UTILITY, POLITICAL ECONOMY (Oxford 2009) 267 pp.

Reviewed by Regenia Gagnier

I have been referring students and colleagues to Kathleen Blake's scattered essays and lectures as a corrective to less informed treatments of Bentham and utilitarianism since I first heard Blake speak about Bentham on sex at the "Locating the Victorians: Interdisciplinary Conference for the Sesquicentenary of the Great Exhibition" in London, July 2001. Now her articles and lectures have appeared in the book that makes the strongest case we have in literary studies for classical utilitarianism. Since Foucault brilliantly but reductively made Bentham's Panopticon the exemplar of carceral modernity in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), a combination of Foucault's Bentham and Dickens's representation of him as Gradgrind in *Hard Times* has made Bentham's philosophy the victim of much uninformed criticism. Blake's thorough study, engaged with the fullest range to date of what has come to be called the New Economic Criticism, may not win converts among literary critics for the philosophy of pleasure and pain, but it will certainly get it the fullest hearing it has had in the discipline. Bentham and utilitarianism have had patient and sophisticated defenders in history, philosophy, and political theory, and Blake has read them. Some literary critics have also resisted reductionism to varying degrees, but to my knowledge, this is the only literary critical book that sets out to do Bentham and utilitarianism justice.

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), moral philosopher and jurist, entered Queen's College, Oxford, at 12 and after graduation entered Lincoln's Inn and was admitted to the bar. He never practiced but spent his life advocating in print utilitarian applications to British and international law. He was the leader of a radical group around the *Westminster Review*, which he founded, and influential in criminal law. Bentham held that pleasure and pain were the only tests of good and evil and that they could be measured in intensity, duration, proximity, and after-effects, and then summed up for all persons affected. The greatest pleasure for the greatest number was the Good. It followed that evil was the causing of pain, and that causing pain was the only reason for punishment.

Recently, Bentham has been better known for his plan for a panoptical prison system and mechanical calculation of happiness ("Quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is a good as poetry"), but representations of these have not done justice to his wide sympathies, thoughtful social planning, radical tolerance, and consistent justice. His friend John Stuart Mill criticized him for not agreeing to a hierarchy of pleasures and wrote eloquently of a utilitarianism based less in individual hedonics than the Golden Rule, for Mill liked to think that in the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth we could read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. Bentham likewise thought Utililitarianism altruistic, but he declined to make it hierarchical, and his reluctance to claim some pleasures as higher than others today suits modern relativism rather more than Mill's refinements. Today, the debate between Mill and Bentham on a hierarchy of pleasures, and on whether some might be supported and some might be prohibited by the state, say, is one of the more urgent debates in global market society.

Yet Dickens's Gradgrind and then Foucault's Bentham went far toward obliterating this complex picture, and Blake has carefully restored the philosophy of utility in its fullness and history. With massive evidence, she shows that it is anti-hierarchical, individualist, freedom-promoting, and of a piece with the larger culture of Victorian Britain, including the larger views of Dickens himself, Carlyle, Trollope, Eliot, Gaskell and Rabindranath Tagore (see below). She defines utilitarianism as a system in which each person's pleasure or pain counts equally in the sum of welfare, and each person's free pursuit of desire and self-interest contributes to the sum of happiness. She is most concerned to show how the doctrine is disposed against distinction of persons for privilege or disability by group, especially by any group defined by inherited birthright, blood, or race. As Bentham defined it, utilitarianism always sought to combat asceticism, or falling in love with pain, as in Christianity, whose masochism Bentham exposed before Nietzsche. Just as Freud and the Unconscious would later provide the great critique of Millian notions of Progress, Bentham and utilitarianism provided the great critique of Christianity and all philosophies that consider suffering or pain a good.

Whereas Foucault in his chapter “Panopticism” in *Discipline and Punish* had focussed on the prisoner’s perspective—“He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject of communication” while the Guardian in the centre “sees everything without ever being seen” (Foucault, English trans. 1977, 200, 202)—Blake emphasizes the oversight of the Guardian by public opinion and focuses on utilitarianism’s contribution to representative democracy. In the panopticon Bentham imagines, the Guardian and Governors must be fully exposed not to the prisoner but to public scrutiny. Blake cites Bentham’s *Constitutional Code*: “To the pernicious exercise of the power of government, public opinion is the only check, to the beneficial, an indispensable supplement. Able rulers lead it; prudent rulers lead or follow it; foolish rulers disregard it” (cited 53). While not allowing false defamation, the *Code* expressly prohibits legal restrictions and taxation that obstruct publication of political tracts, especially newspapers or other periodicals. Bentham wrote, “The military functionary is paid for being shot at. The civil functionary is paid for being spoken and written at” (cited 54). In Bentham’s design for the operation of a reformed political constitution, ministry, and court system, the press can oversee civil functionaries because of provisions for public access.

Scholars of Bentham and his followers in political economy will have been aware of the political and economic liberalism (“laissez-faire”) that repealed the Corn Laws, extended the franchise, and sought to depose landlords of land that, utilitarians believe, belongs to the people. While Blake’s sections on Bentham’s attitudes to sex, sexuality, and the pleasures of the senses in his “Sextus,” *Chrestomathia,* and *Not Paul but Jesus*--which views would by most then and now be considered libertinage--is probably the most entertaining, her last two chapters on liberalism and empire are probably the most innovative.

Blake specifically links political and economic liberty with the empire, and not merely negatively. She traces the trade wars over cotton from the founding of the East India Company (whose Correspondence Office employed both Mills, father and son), to Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853) and Tagore’s *The Home and the World* (1916). Her argument is that the Anglo-Indian imperial engagement contributed in circuitous ways to the development of Victorian liberalism in its best expressions, not just to its economic dominance. Engagement with India contributed to a state-supported system of universal education that was levelling and secular in tendency, civil service reform, revenue collection, and land tenure, culminating in John Stuart Mill's radical position on landownership generally and Irish landownership in particular. (In a rare lapse, Blake overlooks Mary Jean Corbett's stunning book on Ireland, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870* [Cambridge 2000], in which Mill figures largely.) The British learned from India both positively, as in philosophies of public property, and negatively, as in caste and sati, where the principles of utility were violated by the ascetic subordination and sacrifice of self for another.

Similarly in Tagore's novel, self-abnegation is critiqued by a nationalist expression of material and political desire. Blake's political-economic reading of *Cranford*'s ladies' world, based on the rapid innovation of the textile industry, is the best I know, and her juxtaposing it with Tagore's critique—examination of the scope and limits—of westernization in India is genius. She rightly invokes Thomas Carlyle's Philosophy of Clothes in *Sartor Resartus* (*The Tailor Retailored*) as the spirit of the age of capitalist innovation (Carlyle wrote, "Society is founded upon Clothes. . .. but no fashion will continue" [cited 165]), but it occurred to me that a comparative study of the imaginative literature of the textile industry, building on Blake's comparison of Gaskell and Tagore, would tell us something new about both literature and the industry.

In all this work about the innovative, liberal effects of empire, work which I would call global and circulatory, Blake does not diminish the pain and suffering of empire that have been the focus of postcolonial studies. She does, however, have a special role for critical thinking, which she believes was developed precisely through imperial contact. This theoretical point, taking us beyond the history of trade and industry, has its own intellectual history, from Marxian and feminist standpoint theory to postcolonial phenomenology. Though Blake refers not to theories such as these but to the Mills' self-conscious reflections upon Indian encounters, those reflections are nevertheless correctives to more Manichean studies of liberalism and empire.

Blake is not afraid of taking these on, or indeed of taking anyone on. Since her first two books, *Play, Games, and Sport, The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll* (Cornell, 1974) and *Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature, the Art of Self-Postponement* (Harvester, 1983), everything she has published has been informed, researched, considered. She knows the art of scholarly engagement with her field and of the substantive footnote. If I have a criticism of this book, it is that she so diligently engages with every critic, historian, or political theorist, no matter how distinguished or ephemeral on the scholarly stage, that the overarching argument is to my taste too interrupted. But obviously this is infinitely better than the reverse fault, an unequivocal argument conducted with no one.

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