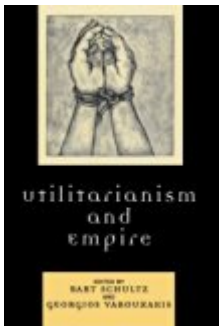
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bart Schultz, Georgios Varouxakis, eds.. *Utilitarianism and Empire.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005. ix + 263 pp. $26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7391-1087-4.



Reviewed by Lynn Zastoupil

Published on H-Albion (July, 2006)

Saving Bentham, Mill, and Spencer

This volume seeks to redress the balance regarding the English utilitarians on the contentious issues of race and empire. Many of the essays compiled here demonstrate that the views of Jeremy Bentham, Mill *père et fils*, and Herbert Spencer have been oversimplified, and those of Henry Sidgwick ignored. The editors' goal is to rescue the utilitarians from blanket charges of racism and imperialism by reintroducing nuance into their individual stances and recovering overlooked evidence of progressive views. If Sidgwick is exposed as a conventional late-Victorian racist imperialist, the others emerge as complex thinkers ill-served by recent scholarship.

Fred Rosen's essay debunks the idea that Bentham had little interest in slavery and, if anything, was more concerned with the property of slave owners than with the happiness of slaves. Rosen brings to light a hitherto neglected published letter in which Bentham weighed in during the first British debate on the slave trade, siding with those who argued for abolition without compensation and making plain that he believed the trade criminal. Rosen also shows how Bentham expanded the concept of slavery to include all forms of persistent injustice, thus making the peculiar institution an emblem of the need for reform in a wide variety of settings. Rosen could have gone further with this, since the impact of anti-slavery on British social reformers is widely acknowledged and the utilitarian sage was no exception. As anyone familiar with the early history of the animal rights movement knows, Bentham called on humanitarians to extend their compassion for slaves to encompass the sufferings of animals, too.

Bentham's rehabilitation is carried forward by Jennifer Pitts. Pitts posits that Bentham's critical stance on empire has been obscured, largely because of the two Mills, whose support for imperialism in India has led to the erroneous supposition that Bentham also favored the civilizing mission. Besides reminding us of Bentham's critical writings on colonialism in general, Pitts reconstructs his limited endorsement of reform in India. Bentham's distance from what James and John Stuart Mill together embraced for nearly

fifty years, Pitts notes, had much to do with the fundamentals of utilitarianism. Colonial rulers could never know the interests of the ruled better than the latter could; thus, a consistent utilitarian can never really endorse the concept of ***la mission civilisatrice***. It is the two Mills who strayed, Pitts argues, particularly J. S. Mill, who introduced the notion of character development into utilitarianism and with it the idea that some forms of individual and national character are more desirable and, thus, worthy of being imposed on others. This last point, Pitts reminds us, was alien to Bentham's thinking.

Something similar can be said about Herbert Spencer, also rehabilitated in this volume. As David Weinstein demonstrates, the prevailing image of a crude social Darwinist does little justice to the Spencer who remained true to the spirit of Bentham. Living in the age of New Imperialism, Spencer decried the greed, militarism, and jingoism propelling expansion in Africa and elsewhere. Weinstein locates Spencer's resistance to the colonial project in the latter's utilitarianism. Spencer "was so vehemently anti-imperialist precisely because he was so radically liberal utilitarian" (p. 202). The latter phrase refers to Spencer's defense of indefeasible moral rights, such as life and liberty, as essential to the pursuit of individual happiness. Such rights can never be sacrificed in the interest of humanitarian goals or because of cultural or ethnic difference. In Spencer's theory, the "universality and indefeasibility of rights leave no room for imperialism, no matter how loose, benevolent, or well intentioned" (p. 199). No individual's happiness counts for more than another's, and everyone deserves a share of the general happiness.

Two contributors address the question of J. S. Mill's purported racism and their difference in opinion and mode of argument is enlightening. David Theo Goldberg briefly presents the case that the younger Mill was a racist at heart, if a mild one. He argues that Mill's famous exchange with Thomas Carlyle on Jamaica's former slaves reveals the author of ***On Liberty*** (1857) sharing with the Scottish sage a belief in African inferiority, albeit an inferiority contingent on historical circumstances, rather than innate difference as Carlyle thought. Seeing this as "polite racism" Goldberg suggests that it was rooted in Mill's "Euro-centric [view of] history" (p. 130), which also undergirded Mill's support for the civilizing mission in India. Georgios Varouxakis challenges Goldberg, as well as Bhikhu Parekh, Uday Singh Mehta, and others who also see in Mill the telltale signs of Victorian racism. Varouxakis argues that these and other authors ignore the larger Victorian debate about race, in which Mill clearly belonged to the anti-racist minority camp. We need to distinguish between Eurocentricism and racism, Varouxakis insists, and once we do, then we can properly identify Mill as culturally prejudiced but decidedly not racist. The tendency to misrepresent Mill as racially biased, he attributes to a selective reading of Mill's major works and a careless tendency to ignore the nuances of contemporary debate. A good example of the latter, Varouxakis suggests, is a passage by Parekh (p. 147) where Mill is lumped together with Macaulay on the matter of educational policy in India, when, in fact, they sharply disagreed on the matter. Varouxakis fails to note, however, that Goldberg does Parekh one better, attributing to Mill a famous passage from Macaulay's minute on Indian education (pp. 133, 135 n. 16), a minute that Mill tried his best to refute in his official work at India House.

The volume contains other essays, some typical of the genre. There is a recycled, if brilliant, essay by Javed Majeed on James Mill's domestic agenda in writing his ***History of British India*** (1817). The obligatory tangential essay by a prominent scholar is provided by Martha Nussbaum on Mill's concept of happiness and its appeal to feminists. Bart Schultz removes all possible doubts about Henry Sidgwick's racism, while J. Joseph Miller retraces Mill's position on the Governor

Eyre controversy and H. S. Jones adds a few comments about the utilitarians and race.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Lynn Zastoupil. Review of Schultz, Bart; Varouxakis, Georgios, eds. *Utilitarianism and Empire.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11942