

Mill: founders of modern political and social thought

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Author: Frederick Rosen

Edition: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, 315 pp.

José Luis TASSET

University of A Corunna

The extensive work on Bentham developed by Frederick Rosen, Emeritus Professor of History of Political Thought in University College, London, credited him as one of the most outstanding scholars on this classic of Law, Politics and Economy. However, far from being anchored in the specific field of Bentham's studies, in 2003, he gave birth to a work, to my opinion decisive and overwhelming, on the development of the concept of utility in the context of what he defined as Classical Utilitarianism (*V. Classical Utilitarianism: from Hume to Mill*, London: Routledge, 2003). This book by Fred Rosen included several chapters on Mill's thought yet (specifically chapters 10 and 11, although there were references to Mill throughout the work, see, for example, Chapters 13 and 14), although as Rosen himself pointed out; he was more concerned with the analysis of the variants and the development of the concept of utility, across the history of the Classic Utilitarianism, than with specifically reconstructing John Stuart Mill's thought. Nevertheless, the goal of developing a comprehensive, complete and original reading of the thought of John Stuart Mill has been the focus of Fred Rosen between 2003 and 2013. After maturation for over ten years, and although he was advancing some results in articles and book chapters published during this period, Fred Rosen has delighted us, and surprised, with a complex and combative book titled simply "Mill".

I cannot, nor should I, highlight each and every one of the elements or key points of the methodology of Mill's analysis developed by Rosen, because the book deserves a deep study; therefore, and in a very brief way, I will point out what I understand as crucial elements of that method.

The most original premise of the book by Fred Rosen, the one that not only changes our view of Mill, but fosters that a genuinely new Mill arises, is a hypothesis, seemingly simple, but very valuable, about the corpus of Mill's work and its internal hierarchy.

Opposite the standard Mill or the classic approach to Mill, Fred Rosen proposed to access Mill's work as a whole, much wider than usual, with an entering door that would not be his most popular works, but *Logic* and *Principles of Political Economy*. This gateway can be complemented by Mill vast correspondence, mainly the letters to and from Auguste Comte.

Part I of this book concentrates, from this point of view, in the *Logic* (caps.2-3-4), part II in the *correspondence with Comte* (5-6) and part III in *Principles* (7-8-9-10-11-12). Correspondence with Comte forms a kind of bridge between the two works. Following this structure, the book concludes with a study of *The subjection of women* (1869) (chap. 13), which is characterized as "a work on liberty and despotism", rather than as a study of the problem that gave a name to the book.

From these three central works and not forgetting or putting aside Mill's other works, John Stuart Mill's thought can be rebuilt in a more coherent and consistent way, than from the order and priority usually followed. Thus, the mature works (chronologically) are not, which explain the "first Mill", or Mill as a whole, but the "first Mill" what allows us to understand all his thought and mainly its internal evolution.

Besides that, the second fundamental assumption of Rosen's method, and the one which generates precisely, what could be my main point of contention, is Rosen's attempt to consolidate what we might call "the true Mill" against "the historic Mill".

If the historic Mill, that is, the Mill read by different readers (ordinary) and interpreters (scholars), who has influenced society and has informed some of our values, disappears, in order to give way, by mere replacement, to the actual and true Mill, produced by Rosen's method, I think we will have lost something along the way.

On one hand, this means that, for example, the idea of Mill as a public intellectual, dissolved in the logical-philosophical one by Fred Rosen, exists and has its own entity even if Mill did not see himself as such. On the other, the same might occur with Mill as a Socialist: he has been read in a socialist mood even if his hypothetical socialism was denominated by Mill himself as “qualified” and we cannot expect from him or from his philosophical project a compromise as direct and unambiguous as some would want; I must say that, in parallel, the same thing happens to those who wish to see on Mill a supporter of some kinds of contemporary liberalism, especially economic one.

So my disagreement with Fred Rosen is just practical, applied. We do not know how future men and women are going to read Mill’s work; most likely, they will move away from the “true Mill” conceived by Mill himself, so well and rationally explained by Fred Rosen, but, surely, they will continue reading and using him for their problems and concerns; they will continue “doing things with Mill” because Mill is a classic in the literal sense: it touches fully our common humanity.

Notwithstanding this comment, I have no doubt that Frederick Rosen’s book on Mill is going to be a classical work on this topic due to its scope and the quality of its method of approaching so vast a subject as the work of Mill is. Rosen’s Mill shows the proper way to defend the value of Mill as a true philosophical classic, what has not always been recognized. Fred Rosen achieved, in my opinion, more than to produce what Borges once called “the penultimate version of reality”; in this case, the Millian reality. Fred Rosen manages to build, which is undoubtedly an enduring merit, a method to extract from the work of Mill a philosophical, theoretical, proposal much more coherent, articulated and solid than what is usual to read. It’s a scheme or method to produce a true “new Mill”, more than a mere new window to see inside it.

In short words, *a masterful piece of scholarship.*