

## JEVONS' CHARGE OF "THE NOXIOUS INFLUENCE OF AUTHORITY": A NOTE

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In the last section of his Theory of Political Economy (TPE), W. Stanley Jevons wrote of "The Noxious Influence of Authority" in British political economy. He charged that a "despotic calm" had descended because the "admirers" of a particular author had allowed "deference" for his work "to check inquiry" in the subject (Jevons 1871, pp. 265-7). In TPE's second edition he wrote that the target of his complaint was "the orthodox Ricardian school", composed of Ricardo, the two Mills, Fawcett "and others" (Jevons 1970, p. 261). Because of that school's dominance, the work of Senior, Cairnes, Jennings, Hearn and the French exchange school (represented by Bastiat and Courcelle-Seneuil) had been "neglected" (Jevons 1871, p. 267). Subsequent examination of further statements by Jevons on this matter<sup>1</sup>, has shown that when he wrote of the "tyranny" of J.S. Mill's work, he was referring to Mill's influence on "logical and philosophical subjects" and not just to political economy. Jevons also claimed that "the Mill faction never scrupled at putting their lecturers and examiners where they could" (Black 1977c, pp. 80-81). The charge of "noxious influence" thus had much wider points of reference than the discussion in TPE suggests.

The purpose of this note is twofold: first, to show why, for Jevons, there was a close link between Mill's Principles of Political Economy and System of Logic; second, to suggest that when Jevons wrote of the Mill faction's "placing" of lecturers and examiners, he was referring, in part at least, to the selection of a philosophy professor rather than a teacher in political economy.

In a letter to J.E. Cairnes in January 1872, Jevons explained that Mill and Fawcett were his real targets in political economy because of the use made of their work in examinations, especially at University College, London. Just as importantly, he made clear his charge was not confined to political economy since it also referred to Mill's "tyranny" in "logical and philosophical subjects", Jevons' other principal teaching area (Black 1977a, pp. 245-6). That both

subject areas were somehow inseparable in Jevons' thinking was shown in a letter to H.S. Foxwell in February 1875. Referring to his 1874 Address, "The Progress Of The Mathematical Theory Of Political Economy"<sup>2</sup>, where he had again complained of having been forced, because of examination requirements, to teach on Mill's work<sup>3</sup>, Jevons explained to Foxwell that, appearances to the contrary, he was referring to Mill's Logic and not just to his Principles [Black 1977b, p. 101].

At first sight, Jevons' switching between the subject areas of political economy and philosophy is not only confusing to the reader; Jevons also appears to have been confused himself. However the two areas were closely connected for Jevons and not simply because of his teaching duties.

Jevons' opposition to aspects of Mill's philosophy is well known. The basis of the disagreement is sometimes hard to discern because, as Jevons acknowledged, his overall view of epistemology ("the scientific method") was remarkably similar to Mill's<sup>4</sup>, his criticisms are often directed at inconsistencies in Mill's exposition in the Logic rather than the basic arguments and Jevons' detailed attack in "John Stuart Mill's Philosophy Tested" contains a good deal of polemic which tries the reader's patience.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, one disagreement with Mill was of direct importance for Jevons' programme of using mathematics in political economy.

Jevons distinguished between "pure abstract thought" or reasoning and the probabilistic analysis of "concrete existence" (Adamson 1890, p. xiii). In TPE this distinction underlies Jevons' argument that, theoretically, political economy could express economic actions in precise functional (mathematical) terms because the subject dealt with "quantities ... which ... are subject to continuous variation" (Jevons 1871, p. 4). However, analysis of "concrete" cases (the behaviour of prices and quantities transacted for specific commodities, for example) could only be probabilistic; for there would never be an "exact" match between the theory's results and the data necessary to validate the theoretical analysis. In part this was because virtually any science faced the same problem: "there is no such thing as an exact science, except in a comparative sense" (ibid., p. 6). In part, it was because of the existing paucity of usable statistics: "it is chiefly a want of method and completeness in this vast mass of information (collected by a multitude of sources) which prevents our employing it in

the investigation of the natural laws of Political Economy" (ibid., p. 13). In the face of this difficulty, the role of mathematics was to enable theoretical reasoning to be made more precise and thus to indicate the type of statistics required. As Jevons concluded:

"I know not when we shall have a perfect system of statistics, but the want of it is the only insuperable obstacle in the way of making Political Economy an exact science" (ibid., p. 14).

Now, Mill's position on the epistemological status of abstract propositions, as in mathematics including geometry, was quite different. For Mill, such propositions "were only abstractions from ... concrete particulars" (Adamson 1890, pp. xiii-xiv). As Jevons' friend and editor, Robert Adamson (the English "discoverer" of Gossen) explained, Mill's position meant that mathematics had "no superior generality" as compared with any other form of analysis which had to be "disentangled from concrete details" (ibid., p. xiv). That position would, of course, undermine Jevons' claims for the privileged role of mathematical analysis in TPE. Jevons' determination to "reach and explode Mill's logical magazines" becomes more understandable in this context as does his apparent conflation of the subject areas of political economy and philosophy in his charge of "The Noxious Influence of Authority".<sup>6</sup>

### III.

In his 1874 paper on "The Progress Of The Mathematical Theory of Political Economy", Jevons wrote that Mill's writings were composed "to a large extent of ingenious sophisms" (Black 1981, p. 77). H.S. Foxwell expressed some alarm at the outspoken form of Jevons' attack and his concern was not assuaged when Jevons informed him that he had also been referring to Mill's Logic (a "maze of self contradictions" (Black 1977b, p. 101)). Jevons, however, was not deterred by Foxwell's criticism.<sup>7</sup>

It was during some further correspondence with Foxwell in 1879 that Jevons claimed the "Mill faction never scrupled at putting their lecturers and examiners where they could". Jevons did refer to Mill's Principles in that letter (he was using Mill's text "in my own classes still") and his claim, understandably, has been interpreted as referring to the

subject area of political economy (De Marchi, 1973). Nevertheless, there are grounds to think that he was referring to a particular appointment in philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

When Jevons wrote to Foxwell in 1879, it was during marking of philosophy examination papers for University College, London ("my head [is] full of Mill, and De Morgan's Logic" (Black 1977c, p. 80)). The philosophy professor at the College was G.C. Robertson who had been the editor of Mind since its foundation in 1875. But Robertson had been appointed to the philosophy chair nine years before in "the most controversial episode" in the College's history (Clarke 1962, p. 154).

On the retirement of the Rev. John Hoppus in 1866, there were two professorial candidates - Robertson (age 24) and the Rev. James Martineau (age 61). The brother of Harriet Martineau, James was the professor of philosophy at the (Unitarian) Manchester New College, housed near University College. Jevons had attended some of his lectures while at University College in the early 1860s. Both Martineau and Augustus De Morgan, the professor of mathematics at University College, were important influences on Jevons during that period (cf. Black 1972).

After much controversy at the College Council and in the press, Robertson was appointed. That was not, however, the end of the matter.<sup>9</sup> The Unitarian De Morgan was so indignant over the appointment that he resigned his chair in protest and subsequently refused to allow a portrait or bust of himself to be placed in the College (Morgan 1882, pp. 360-1). Moreover, there was continued resentment particularly since it was known that Martineau partly blamed J.S. Mill for the result, accusing him of being "hand in hand" with the Archbishop of York on the matter, thereby displaying a "sectarian motive" (Drummond and Upton 1902, p. 409). George Grote, Treasurer of the College and the prime mover in rejecting Martineau, also complained to Mill of opposition to his (Grote's) position from "the younger generation - even those trained in University College and the University of London" (Clarke 1962 p. 158). The Unitarian W.S. Jevons was, of course, a member of that "younger generation" and in the mid-1860s at Manchester "tended to mix principally with what we may call the University College London - Unitarian group" (Chaloner 1972, p. 76). Moreover, he had used a testimonial from Martineau in his successful application for the chair of political economy and moral and mental philosophy at Owens

College, Manchester, some months before (Black 1977a, p. 111).

In 1879, when Jevons, who was hardly unaware of the importance of contacts in arranging "posts"<sup>10</sup>, wrote to Foxwell about the influence of the "Mill faction", he was marking papers set by Robertson who had recently criticised Jevons for his attack on Mill's Logic. Robertson had specifically denied Jevons' charge about the tyranny of Mill's Logic for examination purposes.<sup>11</sup> Nor was that the first time the editor of Mind had used the journal to criticise Jevons' work.<sup>12</sup> In this context and given the extensive publicity over the 1866 decision, as well as Jevons' contacts within the Unitarian intellectual network<sup>13</sup>, it seems quite possible that he had the Martineau episode in mind when he wrote to Foxwell.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV.

Given the omnibus nature of Jevons' charge about the noxious influence of authority and his failure to cite specific instances, it is not possible to unequivocally identify its bases. It may, for instance, have partially reflected Jevons' view of his treatment by Professor Jacob Waley as a student at University College (De Marchi 1973, pp. 179n-180n), although Waley provided Jevons with a testimonial which was used in the 1866 chair application. It may also have been influenced by the "indifference" with which Jevons' first public presentations of his marginalist theory (1862, 1866) were received although there is no direct textual evidence for this.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, two suggestions can be made to clarify Jevons' charge. The first is that Jevons' linking of the subject areas of political economy and philosophy in relation to the "tyranny" of Mill's work was not confused since Mill's position on the nature of "abstract" categories undermined Jevons' claims for the role of mathematics in political economy. The second suggestion is that Jevons' claims about the Mill faction "placing" lecturers and examiners may have been a reference not to political economy but rather to a controversial episode during the mid-1860s in the area of philosophy.

#### NOTES

1. De Marchi 1973. See also Checkland 1951, Coats 1964.
2. Reprinted in Black 1981, pp. 75-85.

3. Ibid., p. 77.
4. Jevons 1870, p. vii.
5. Jevons' vigorous attack on Mill's "logical reputation" ("His magazines must be reached and exploded; he must be hoist, like the engineer, on his own petard" (Jevons 1890, p.202)) was initially published in four articles by the Contemporary Review between December 1877 and November 1879. The articles were reprinted in Jevons 1890.
6. In his discussion of Jevons' differences with Mill on the status of "abstract" propositions, Adamson noted a problem with Jevons' exposition. A number of consequences of the argument were not formally stated although these were "the precise ground of his emphatic dissent from Mill ..." (Adamson 1890, p. viii). (But cf. Jevons' expressed irritation over Mill's view of "Geometrical and Mathematical Induction" in Jevons 1870, p. 227).
7. Jevons to Foxwell 23/5/ 1875: "I have heard several other men connected with the London University speak like you as if the recognition of the Moral Sciences hung by a thread, so that they might be thrown over altogether in consequence of the least indiscretion. But I trust that the authorities of the universities are not quite so narrow minded" (Black 1977b, p. 116).
8. De Marchi [1973 p. 179, n.2] does note that Jevons' comments to Foxwell should be placed in the context of logic and philosophy, but suggests that Jevons "did not mean to limit himself" to those areas. In his examination of whether "the Millians" attempted to ensure selection of their candidates, De Marchi considers elections to political economy chairs "which were contested also by a candidate or candidates known to hold uncongenial views" (ibid., p. 180). It is possible of course, as De Marchi acknowledges (ibid., p. 183, n.4), that such elections may not indicate the extent of a particular group's influence, which could manifest itself in an uncontested election if the result was considered to be a forgone conclusion. An example of this occurred during the 1837 election for the Oxford Drummond chair. F.D. Maurice was approached but eventually did not stand, following a dispute with the Tractarians on baptism. The latter withdrew their initial support for Maurice, leaving Herman Merivale unopposed. See Maurice 1884, pp. 210, 213-4, 221-2; Brose 1871, pp. 122, 128-9.

9. For discussion of the Robertson appointment and its aftermath, see Morgan 1882, pp. 336-63; Bellot 1929, pp. 339-43.
10. Jevons obtained his position as Assayer to the Sydney Mint in 1853 "largely through the good offices of Thomas Graham, then the Professor of Chemistry at University College" (Black 1972, p. 120). And his first teaching position at Owens College was "secured" through the "good offices" of his cousin, Henry Roscoe, the professor of Chemistry at Owens College (Ward 1917, p. 812).
11. See the exchange between Robertson and Jevons in Mind, Vol. 3, 1878, pp. 141-4, 284-9. Robertson wrote that, "whatever Mill's philosophic sins may be, he does not wield anything like the kind of despotic sway that alone could excuse this violence of attack; and Prof. Jevons ought to know it." He also referred to Jevons' "war-dance over the prostrate form of Mill" (*ibid.*, pp. 288, 144).
12. See Robertson's critical review of Jevons' Principles of Science (Mind, Vol. 1, 1876, pp. 206-22) and review of the second edition of Cairnes' Character And Logical Method Of Political Economy (*ibid.*, pp. 131-2) where Robertson seems to support Cairnes' criticisms of TPE.
13. There had been a period of difficulty between the Jevons and Martineau families in 1859, when Jevons' sister, Lucy, broke off her engagement to Russell Martineau (James' son). Writing to his brother, Jevons concluded it was a "good thing" because Russell "appears to have acted very unwisely and unpleasantly in taking no refusal and pressing himself upon Lucy until he almost overcame her better judgement ... We shall perhaps have to live rather quietly in London [in] order that Lucy may not meet the Martineaus too much" (Black 1973, p. 392).
14. There is an interesting link to Jevons' University College student period in the "Brief Account" of his marginalist theory, first published in extenso at the beginning of the controversy over Robertson's appointment (Jevons 1866). The Account mentions only four economists by name and of the first three - Anderson, Ricardo and J.S. Mill - the latter two were criticised. The fourth economist was F.W. Newman, whose treatment of "capital" in his Lectures on Political Economy (cf. Newman 1851, pp. 135, 145), was cited approvingly. Newman, Professor of Latin at

University College between 1846-63, was a friend and colleague of Martineau's in both Manchester and London and supported Martineau in his 1866 chair application (cf. Robbins 1966, pp. 67, 95, 111). While Jevons approvingly cited Newman on "capital" and criticised J.S. Mill on the same topic (Jevons 1866, p. 286), Mill had produced a generally caustic review of Newman's Lectures, characterising him as an "apologist for the existing social system" (Mill 1967, p. 442). There is no mention of Newman in TPE's treatment of "capital" although Jevons did refer to Newman's Lectures during his 1875/6 lectures of Owens College (Black 1977d, pp. 15-16).

15. It has been asserted "Jevons complained ... that the Millian establishment refused to publish his 1862 paper" (Georgescu-Roegen 1983, p. cxxix). However, in the 1874 letter cited to substantiate this, Jevons simply wrote: "I feel it is impossible to criticise Mr Mill's writings without incurring the danger of arousing animosity" (H.A. Jevons 1886, p. 329). No mention is made of the 1862 paper.

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