

Jeremy Bentham and Modern Thought: Marx to Mao and Beyond

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Two hundred years ago, in 1809, Bentham discovered the "self-preference" principle and with it grounded utilitarianism in a new and dynamic "psychological epistemology". It is the suggestion of this interpretation of Bentham's epistemological revolution in political and social thought that to view his impact simply from the standpoint of the standard liberal view is to miss his contribution to the development of important ideas and movements that have been instrumental in achieving the "radical" transformations that have occurred in what have traditionally been regarded as "non-liberal" regions of the world. It also misses essential features of his critique of pre- and non-utilitarian versions of liberalism that formed the foundation of modern radical and liberal-democratic movements in Western "liberal" regions of the world. Bentham's recognition that politics is a struggle -- and a struggle that is essentially material, ideological and systemic -- expanded the framework of legitimate political thought and action from an exclusive, national and class-based one to an inclusive, international and democratic one. His emphasis on "pleasure", "security" and "happiness", rather than "virtue", "liberty" and "property", contributed to a demystification of politics that encouraged popular awareness and participation by offering a critical and self-critical view of politics and political practice. His epistemological advance was taken over and incorporated into critical theory, implicitly and explicitly, from Marx to Mao and beyond. It is appropriate, after two centuries and at the end of the "end of history", that we recognize and celebrate the important moment of insight in Bentham's genesis and transition to "Benthamism".