



**Elie Halevy.** *La Formation du Radicalisme Philosophique.* London: Alcan, 1904. xix + 554 pp.

**Reviewed by** Stuart Jones (Department of History, University of Manchester, UK)

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## A Philosophic Historian in the Twentieth Century

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Elie Halevy's study of Benthamism and its intellectual genealogy was his first major work, and it formed a bridge that carried the young French philosopher from his early interests in abstract philosophy towards his life's work, a general history of England in the nineteenth century. The impact of *La formation du radicalisme philosophique* was not immediate: in fact, it was first translated into English a quarter of a century after its French publication, when his general history had established Halevy's reputation in Britain. In some ways, however, it has outlived its successor, and in the English-speaking world it is probably now the work most commonly associated with Halevy's name. But why should we still read it?

One reason is that Halevy was an archetypal example of one type of intellectual historian—one whose importance lay chiefly in his philosophical intelligence. He was a philosophic historian, to be read, perhaps, alongside such contemporaries as Collingwood and Croce. No one can doubt his industry as an archival researcher. He had the patience, as none had had before him, to plough through the voluminous Bentham manuscripts in University College, London, and in the British Museum. His work always rested on exhaustive research.[1] But the research was worn lightly, and never intruded more than necessary on Halevy's trademark as a historian of ideas: the exposition of a body of ideas, resting on a profound

philosophical engagement with the problems those ideas were intended to resolve. No one has ever made Bentham's thought quite so pellucid. And in doing so he did not over-simplify philosophic radicalism by finding more coherence than it possessed. Instead, his method of exposition was antinomical: in expounding a body of ideas he would typically identify an underlying tension between two sides of a doctrine, and his exposition would develop that contradiction and tease out its consequences. The fundamental antinomy he detected in philosophic radicalism was between the doctrine of the natural harmony of interests, which he found in Adam Smith and which drew the utilitarians towards *laissez-faire*, and the doctrine of the artificial identification of interests through the action of the state, which was present in Hobbes and Helvetius and which underpinned Bentham's writings on legal and penal reform, but not his economic thought. Halevy found this a fruitful tension, and it was the victory of the first over the second strand that ultimately weakened the philosophical radicals' practical effectiveness. Halevy was the first to see this basic antinomy in Benthamism, just as he was the first to see the ascetic as opposed to hedonistic strand in utilitarianism.

The stature of the work may be gauged by comparing it with two works that appeared more or less contemporaneously with it. Sir Leslie Stephen, by then the doyen of English historians of ideas, wrote a three-volume study of

*The English Utilitarians* in 1900; and Stephen's cousin, the jurist A.V. Dicey, gave a famous set of lectures at Harvard in 1898, which were published seven years later as *Lectures on the Relation between Law and Public Opinion in England during the Nineteenth Century* (1905). Stephen's approach was biographical where Halevy's was analytical, and the contrast highlights the importance of the greater philosophical sympathy that Halevy brought to his work. No utilitarian himself, he was convinced that ideas mattered and convinced that philosophical problems mattered. Dicey argued that the teachings of Bentham and his school transformed English law and policy in the period 1825-70. This was a point of view with which Halevy would have sympathized: indeed, he was first drawn to the study of Bentham by disenchantment with the study of philosophers whose ideas lacked practical bite. But Dicey's identification of this period of utilitarian influence as "the period of Benthamism or Individualism" skirted round the fundamental antinomy that Halevy detected at the heart of the utilitarian system. He knew that liberty was not fundamental to utilitarianism and saw its collectivist potential. Later students of the nineteenth-century "revolution in government" have been inclined to see this same period as a period of government growth as well as of the triumph of *laissez-faire*, and have found Halevy's account more plausible and more sophisticated than Dicey's.[2]

Halevy's book has had many critics, but significantly their criticisms have come from a bewildering variety of points of view. Most have challenged the idea that there was an underlying tension in Benthamism. But whereas some of Halevy's critics have held that he underestimated the utilitarians' individualism, others have suggested that he underestimated the "constructionist" potential of their thought. Some classical liberal economists, such as Jacob Viner have disputed the assertion that Bentham, or any other classical economist, believed in the natural identity of interests: all recognized that the market mechanism depended crucially upon the existence of a legal framework which enforced contracts and upheld public order.[3] For these critics, Halevy was wrong to see a radical disjunction between Bentham's legal and political thought and his economic thought. Other classical liberals, such as Hayek, have seen Benthamite utilitarianism as a heresy precisely because it highlighted the artificial identification of interests; they thus align themselves with a collectivist or 'constructionist' reading of Bentham. But Bentham's modern admirers, such as the director of the Bentham Project, Frederick Rosen, have (rightly) depicted Halevy as a French liberal in the

tradition of Montesquieu and Tocqueville and have argued (more contentiously) that he was intellectually programmed to find the roots of liberty in constitutional complexity and, therefore, exaggerated the illiberal side to Bentham, that quintessential simplifier.[4]

Most of these critics have seen Halevy as unsympathetic to Bentham, although this animus is not easily scented either in the book itself, or in his published correspondence. Three important points have to be made. The first point is that the antinomial method was fundamental to the way in which Halevy thought and wrote about history, and can be found in his interpretation of European socialism as well as of utilitarianism. It was rooted in his understanding of how ideas worked themselves out in history, and had little to do with any attempt to trip up past thinkers by detecting contradictions in their thought. Secondly, Halevy was chiefly concerned not with Bentham alone, but with philosophic radicalism, which he recognized was much broader than Benthamism; and while he saw contradictions in Bentham's thought, he was primarily concerned with the tensions between Benthamite jurisprudence and classical political economy. Thirdly, the antinomy Halevy saw at the heart of philosophic radicalism in fact ran through the whole of the Enlightenment. The issue is still debated today. Was Enlightenment social thought fundamentally about the intellectual discovery of 'society' as the product of neither human nor divine will, but a spontaneous order generated from the unintended consequences of innumerable individual human actions? Or was it about the reshaping of human beings—body, mind, and soul—through conscious and collective human agency? In short, which was more typical of the Enlightenment: the invisible hand or the Panopticon? Halevy scented this ambiguity at the heart of philosophic radicalism, but, instead of trying to fit it into one model or the other, he read it as a creative tension that gave the system much of its practical bite.

#### Notes

[1]. Readers familiar only with an English edition should cast their eyes over the original French edition, which contained lengthy end-notes as well as four appendices reprinting material from the manuscripts. These were largely omitted from the translation in order to compress three volumes into one. A new edition of the three-volume, French text has recently been published under the general editorship of Monique Canto-Sperber, Paris: PUF, 1995.

[2]. Stephen Conway, 'Bentham and the nineteenth-

century revolution in government', in Richard Bellamy (ed), *Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth-Century Political Thought and Practice* (1990), pp. 71-90.

[3]. Jacob Viner, 'Bentham and J.S. Mill: the utilitarian background', *American Economic Review* xxxix (1949), pp. 360-82.

[4]. Frederick Rosen, 'The origin of liberal utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham and liberty', in Bellamy (ed), *Victorian Liberalism*, pp. 64-6.

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