The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Autumn 1995, Volume 16, Number 4
Pages 471–474
ISSN 0271–0137

The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte. Oscar A. Haac (Translator). Introduction by Angéle Kremer–Marietti. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1995, 403 + xxvi pages.

Reviewed by Robert C. Scharff, University of New Hampshire

The translation of the Comte–Mill correspondence is a welcome event, long overdue, and very likely to stimulate wide, multidisciplinary interest. It is fitting that it should have an Introduction by Kremer–Marietti, who in the past 20 years has probably done more substantial work on Comte, classical positivism, and its continuing relevance for contemporary history, sociology, and philosophy of science than anyone (e.g., Kremer–Marietti, 1982, 1983). By happy coincidence, the book appears close on the heels of a major new intellectual biography of Comte (Pickering, 1993) and in the same year as a full-length philosophical reconsideration of Comte's positivism (Scharff, 1995).

Though Comte's letters appeared alone in 1877, the whole correspondence, originally written in French by both Mill and Comte, was not published until 52 years after the last letter (Lévy–Bruhl, 1899). Perhaps for this reason, it has not figured in the literature about them as much as it deserves — certainly not at all to the extent of Mill's own deeply biased *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865/1961). It is, however, an illuminating and sustained (89-letter, 6-year) exchange between two remarkable 19th century figures, agreeing and disagreeing over the burning issues of their age, often with intense displays of personal and intellectual enthusiasm. Their correspondence still often speaks with contemporary relevance to diverse concerns from intellectual biography and history to political theory, feminist criticism, and the philosophy, history, and sociology of science. Not only do they touch on topics in these domains, but the terms of their exchange are often precisely the ones still inherited (albeit now mostly with discomfort) today.

Without much exaggeration, one could say that the whole correspondence takes place, so to speak, between two successive remarks made by Mill shortly after his reading of the sixth and final volume of Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42) — which is a 936 page overview of the historical rise of positivism, its rightful displacement of theology and metaphysics, together with summaries of its method, doctrine, and future prospects. Stirred with fresh appreciation of the positive philosophy by this "comprehensive formulation," Mill tells Comte that

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Robert C. Scharff, Ph.D., Department of Philosophy, Hamilton Smith Hall, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire 03824–3574.

> although I have long thought that *a fully rational mind could exist only under the complete guidance of positive philosophy*, I had never anticipated that there could already exist . . . as complete an expression of the eminent nature of the positive mind. *You scare me by the unity and completeness of your convictions*, which thus seem never to require confirmation by any other philosopher. (p. 119, my emphasis)

For the first year or so (1841–1842), the letters are focused on the subject of the first italicized remark, and Mill is generally deferential. The two savor their shared conviction that the positive "method" which already operates in the emerging natural sciences must now be made explicit so that it can come to fully exercise its rightful "guidance," first, over all intellectual and, second, over socio-political affairs. It is positive philosophers, of course, who must see to this.

In addition, therefore, to their expressed sense of being pioneers in epistemology, both also picture themselves as major players in an exciting era of "transition" from a prescientific to a scientific world. Both are anxious to hasten this transition — first, by extending the proven procedures of the new physical and biological sciences to the still theologico-metaphysically tainted studies of our own species, and second, by making substantive projections of the radical socio-political transformation which they feel a thoroughly scientific milieu is bound to make possible. At the start of their exchange and before their deep differences begin to emerge, they are elated about the way their own intellectual harmony seems to foreshadow in microcosm the future social harmony they envision. They even indulge the vanity that their having arrived at their conception of method and social regeneration independently is already some evidence of its truth.

Mill was right, however, to worry about Comte's display of self-possessed "convictions." Soon after sending him a copy of his new *System of Logic* (1843), Mill pointedly identifies where their disagreements lie, and Comte rapidly discovers that he has seriously misread Mill's initial deference as a sign of discipleship. I am convinced, says Mill, that we are unlikely to still discover any major disagreements on questions of method; but what is clearly lacking is "an equally perfect agreement with respect to social doctrines" (p. 165). Several interrelated "doctrinal" issues figure centrally in their subsequent exchange, and no agreement is ever reached.

First and in general, Mill registers his solidarity with Comte over "social dynamics" (i.e., that the whole of humanity is necessarily developing past its earlier theological and metaphysical stages toward a final scientific one); but he accuses Comte's "social statics" of being composed of theories derived more from tradition, common sense, and personal conviction than from science. At the heart of the problem, asserts Mill, is Comte's lack of appreciation for psychological science (p. 366). Actually, there is in Mill's argument a deep confusion, insofar as he misperceives what Comte opposes (viz., primarily the rational/metaphysical sort of psychology espoused in their day especially by Cousin). Mill assumes it is his own introspective psychology that Comte is attacking (Scharff, 1995, pp. 19–44). In fact, however, it would have been sufficient to Mill's purpose if he had simply (and correctly) noted that Comte ignores the latter. For his point is that in placing no positive psychology between biology and sociology, Comte fails to fully appreciate the need for the scientific study of how individuals affect and are affected by both their anatomical/physiological and social conditions. Mill argues that lacking this appreciation, Comte has been moved by his prior convictions to first overestimate the effect of biological conditions and then appeal to present social organization to confirm the overestimation. Above all does Mill think this is true of Comte's biological and sociological arguments for the "natural inferiority" of women.

What is often missed, then, about this perhaps best-known dimension of the Comte–Mill correspondence is that its real significance lies philosophically deeper than at the level of merely differing opinions about sex and gender. On countless other differences of social opinion (e.g., property, marriage, "national character," the role of altruism in ethics), they agree to disagree — confident that their methodological unity and further scientific discovery will resolve the matter. Yet on this issue, each sees the other as guilty of insufficient positivism — i.e., of unscientific, or "retrograde," theorizing.

It is true, of course, that their exchanges on women are themselves often interesting, and sometimes even amusing. Among my favorites is one in which Mill dismisses Comte's boastful "observations of the female organism at close hand" — on the grounds that, since the milieu in France (in contrast to his own England) is so unfavorable to women that they must "live in a permanent state of pretence" toward men, Comte's "observations" are worthless (p. 190; pp. 199–200). Quite clearly Comte, whose conception of women is (to put it kindly) stereotypically 19th century European, neither had nor could have had a Harriet Taylor in his life. Yet the real issue here is not just Comte's galloping sexism. How much more was — and still is — at stake in this sort of quarrel is nicely, if unintentionally, framed by Comte's reply. For he confidently informs Mill that their disagreement is basically a function of the fact that the same "social conditions [which] seem to you so far unfavorable for feminine development . . . seem to me quite apt to cultivate the true qualities of women" (p. 209). Current sympathy is, of course, deservedly with Mill, both regarding his relatively greater open-mindedness and his actual opinions; but it is more interesting to note that neither of them ever asks how one would determine if any of their "observations" are "methodologically" sound — let alone whether scientific theories will ever be competent to make pronouncements on the "true qualities" of things.

Perhaps the second best known fact about the Comte–Mill correspondence is that the proximate cause of its unhappy ending was a disagreement over money. Comte, who was never able to secure a university position (or understand how much his own personality contributed to the problem), misread the financial assistance of Mill and several other English sympathizers as a sign of their agreement with his belief that the wealthy had a moral duty to support philosophers. His continuing demands led finally to Mill's pointed correction (pp. 350–354), after which there were only seven more letters, the last being Mill's lengthy complaint (supposedly just an objective report) about government charity and its ill effects on recipients (pp. 382–384)!

Yet it is easy to make too much of this proximate cause. Comte and Mill had philosophical differences much greater than they initially recognized — even, it turns out, in epistemology. Mill's sense of method is much more formalistic — a point that is muted in the *Correspondence* but eminently clear by the time of *Auguste Comte*, when Mill accuses Comte of entirely failing to appreciate the need for an "organon of proof" (Mill, 1865/1961, pp. 54–56). In this regard, Mill is much closer to 20th century positivism than to Comte. Though he praises Mill's specific analysis of induction (pp. 154–156), Comte in fact opposes the creation of organons, complaining that they feed the old metaphysical love of abstraction, as well as a current tendency to exaggerate the role of mathematics in science, thereby discouraging the spirit of methodological innovation needed in practicing scientists. In point of fact, Comte could never have written a "*System* of Logic"; and if Mill is initially willing to say he accepts Comte's "condition . . . of drawing the method only from the doctrine

[i.e., from the results of actual scientific practice]" — and even to speak of the merely "temporary" value his *Logic* possesses because theirs is an age of transition (pp. 40–41) — this is a kind of dialogical politeness he finds impossible to sustain.

In current circumstances, the first positivist must seem more interesting here than the later one; for it is Comte's contextualized, pluralistic conception of scientific practice rather than Mill's zeal for organons that better catches the spirit of philosophy of science now that the heyday of logical empiricism is past. Yet perhaps the greater contemporary benefit comes from considering what Comte and Mill do not question. Can we still share, for example, their confidence that fundamental issues of social policy require "methodological" resolution? Can we still accept the easy way that both Comte and Mill relate their epistemologies to political theory? One might be tempted here to note simply how the mood of the *Correspondence* contrasts sharply with that of 20th century positivism. For is it not precisely this sort of old-fashioned confusion of logic and substance which later and more soberly analytical thinkers, embarrassed at such "ideological" excess, resolved to let die with classical positivism? In careful retrospect, however, it is evident that this excess merely went underground and survived to motivate the Vienna Circle positivists. For logical empiricism's promotion of "the scientific method" is a deeply political act, pervaded by strongly anti-religious, anti-traditional, and socially reformist convictions. These convictions come quickly into relief if we reread their "manifestos" today against the background of the *Correspondence* — with Comte's confident pronouncements about the coming "Religion of Humanity" — and Mill's striking picture — almost 30 years later in his *Autobiography*, in a passage that still specifically acknowledges his debt to Comte — of all the economic and political benefits we shall gain when "the moral and intellectual ascendancy once exercised by priests . . . pass[es] into the hands of philosophers" (Mill, 1873/1981, p. 615). How much scientism and modernist love of reason we ourselves continue to promote may well depend on how thoroughly we rethink our inheritance of such pronouncements as these.

Concerning the book itself, in addition to the introductions by Haac (mostly biographical) and Kremer–Marietti (more philosophical), there is a bibliography and a set of historical endnotes. Aside from some sloppy proofing in this ancillary material, my only quibble is that the *Correspondence* follows an unfortunate recent tendency to limit indexes to names — a practice that seems particularly inappropriate here, given the special incentive one has in so famous, philosophically substantial, and well-translated a collection of letters to trace recurrent themes.

References

Kremer–Marietti, A. (1982). *Entre le signe et l'histoire: l'anthropologie positiviste d'Auguste Comte*. Paris: Klincksieck.

Kremer–Marietti, A. (1983). *Le concept de science positive. Ses tenants et ses aboutissants dans les structures anthropologiques du positivisme*. Paris: Klincksieck.

Lévy–Bruhl, L. (1899). *Correspondance de John Stuart Mill et d'Auguste Comte*. Paris: Félix Alcan.

Mill, J.S. (1961). *Auguste Comte and positivism*. [Paperback photo reproduction of the third edition. London: Trübner, 1882]. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. (originally published 1865)

Mill, J.S. (1981). *Autobiography, collected works*, Volume 1. Toronto/London: University of Toronto Press/Routledge and Kegan Paul. (originally published 1873)

Pickering, M. (1993). *Auguste Comte: An intellectual biography*, Volume 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scharff, R.C. (1995). *Comte after positivism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.