

ONE QUEEN, TWO NATIONS

...Exploration of Disraeli's Critique on the Utilitarianism of Victorian Era from *Sybil*

Li Xin

Shanxi University, Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, 030006



ABSTRACT

Benjamin Disraeli is one of the most famous British prime ministers in the Victorian era and also regarded as the pioneer of the political novel. As many writers in the same period, Disraeli also showed his opposition on the prevailing utilitarianism of Victorian Era. In his political novel *Sybil*, based on his conservative political philosophy, Disraeli criticized utilitarianism of Victorian Era, and tried to find the political and spiritual approaches-the revival of aristocratic traditions and religious traditions-for the wealth polarization.

Keywords: Benjamin Disraeli; Utilitarianism; *Sybil*

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The word "Utilitarianism" was first used by British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* in 1781. His utilitarianism was based on three points: pain and happiness, utility, and consequentialism. Bentham believed that pain and pleasure of a certain behavior is the only criterion for judging good and evil. Pleasure means good, pain means evil; pursuing happiness and avoid suffering were human nature. Based on this, he proposed a principle for moral judging: "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong." (Bentham, 1776) He thought that "utility" of human behavior (happiness) can be calculated. Besides, Bentham evaluate a behavior according to the result and consequence rather than the motive, that is to say, as long as the behavior brings pleasure, it is ethical behavior. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) developed and perfected Bentham's utilitarian philosophy in two aspects: he made a qualitative distinction for "pleasure", classifying them as "higher level" and "lower level"; and secondly his theory contains a factor of altruism, stressing that "happiness" should not be narrowed as egoism.

Since 1837, the Great Britain had entered the Victorian Era, a time when Industrial development and overseas expansion reached its peak. As a result, interest and self-serving nature of utilitarianism became the mainstream of thought and culture. Bentham and Mill's utilitarianism degenerated to a trend of pursuing money and material, ignoring the moral concern of well-being and human's overall development. "The greatest happiness of the greatest number" had been shelved; "public welfare" was completely set aside; people became narrow utilitarian who only saw the "self-interest" part of utilitarianism. On the aspect of consequentialism, utilitarian philosophy advocated to evaluate a certain active from the perspective of result, which was in line with the psychology of rising capitalism-as long as beneficial to profit increase, motivation

and means can be neglected. (Zhou, 1991: 64) In addition, the calculation of “utility” led to a result that calculating was regarded as a necessary means to succeed in life. It is worthy to note that although the mercenary bourgeois utilitarianism was highly geared in the political and economic sphere, in the field of literature it had been questioned and resisted. Of the better known Victorian authors, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1st Baron Macaulay) was the only one who was regarded as a utilitarian. Most of Victorian writers, from Coleridge, Southey, Carlyle to Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, hold a counter view on utilitarianism. Coleridge referred to Bentham’s utilitarianism as “canting foppery” and Carlyle thought it a kind of “pig philosophy”. Coleridge opposed utilitarianism on every possible front, for example, in philosophy he was an idealist rather than an utilitarian materialist, and on political aspect he attacked Hobbes and Rousseau, and as for religious aspect he desired the church to assume a role in English social life comparable to that of states. He was conscious of the bad condition of people and blamed the callousness of utilitarianism: “but persons are not things”, “but man does not find his level.”(Coleridge, 1972:28) In his *Sator Resartus* (1833-1834), Carlyle pointed out that in England, there exist two groups of people—slave and playboy. The poor die of hunger and exhaustion, but the rich die of idle and satiation. (Carlyle, 1987: 216,176-177) In the *Colloquies* (1824); Southey expressed his worry about the social condition. Sir Thomas More and Montesinos made a comparison between the living standards of the poor in sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and drew a conclusion that the poor led a better life in the early sixteenth century than in the early nineteenth century. Mrs. Gaskell, in her *Mary Barton* (1848) tried to depict the bad living conditions of those cotton workers in Manchester; Dickens expressed his deepest sympathy to working class in his *Hard Time* (1854). Meanwhile, the Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli also carried a critique on utilitarianism in his political novels, especially in “Young England” trilogy, although his critique never likes “the light of rising dawn”. (Speare, 1924:61)

Benjamin Disraeli was a politician of British Conservative Party and during the Victorian Era he thrice served as finance minister (1852, 1858-1859, 1866-1868), and twice as prime minister (1868, 1874-1880). At the same time, he is also a novelist. Earlier than his political career, his literary career spanned nearly half a century and during his life, he wrote 11 novels, including “Young England” trilogy - *Coningsby; or, The New Generation* (1844), *Sybil; or, The Two Nations* (1845) and *Tancred; or, The New Crusade* (1847) – which is recognized as the highest achievement of his literary creation. Disraeli put his political ideas in his novels and meanwhile maintained the artistic feature of novels, which formed a new literary form - political fiction - in British literature history. (Speare, 1924: 2) *Sybil* was created in 1845 when “the Condition of England Questions” appeared. In the novel, young aristocrat Egmont whose pseudonym was Franklin came to the industrial town Mowbray and in the contact with the heroine Sybil and her father Gerrard he saw the real situation of the people and recognized that since the Reformation a major crisis existed in the British social and moral system. After a successful campaign for parliamentarian, he tried to speak for the people, sympathize with the Chartist movement, grew as a responsible aristocratic. Eventually, he inherited the title and property of Marney family and married Sybil. The heroine Sybil is beautiful and kind, his father Gerald is a charter movement leader. Sybil had noble lineage, but their ancestors lost the property and the title in the Reformation. After a series of setbacks, Sybil got back her nobility and married Egremont. In addition, the novel also presents a series images: four noble families, such as Marney and Mowbray, many politicians, working class, Chartist movement leaders and socialist reformers, depicting an political and social picture for the ailing Victorian Britain.

Taking his conservative political philosophy as a starting point, this article explores Disraeli’s critique on Victorian utilitarianism in *Sybil* and draws a conclusion that Disraeli tried to find political and spiritual approaches—the revival of aristocratic traditions and religious traditions—for the wealth polarization.

1. Disraeli’s Political Philosophy

Disraeli’s political philosophy “hangs like the light of a rising dawn” in his political novels. (Speare, 1924: 61) Disraeli emphasized the significance of coming back to tradition, which means that in his conservative political philosophy, the inherited past is the safest and the most truthful guiding principle. He ascribed the duration of the English Commonwealth to “reverent antiquity” and attacked the party history since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, considering it as a constant process of dropping “reverent antiquity”. (Speare, 1924: 51) Disraeli claimed that nation or state should be regarded as a continuous entity, which

consists of certain institutions and determined by peculiar populations, manners, and national temperament. (Speare, 1924: 52) Based on this, he further proposed his Tory philosophy, in which he conceived that national polity was made up of three elements: Nobility, People, and Church. (Speare, 1924: 57) Compared with the "natural right" of bourgeois, Disraeli put more emphasis on "natural duty". Nobility should not only regain or maintain their rights, but also recover a strong sense of duty to their fellowman. The loyalty of people would rise again if they have once again got strength from the leading of a generous aristocracy. People would be under the protection of aristocracy who undertakes his own duty. Besides, England aristocracy should combine with churches, which were systematically robbed and exploited; both nobility and church should work together for the interests of commonwealth.

"Young England movement" led by Benjamin Disraeli was deeply influenced by then European "Romantic Nationalism" and strongly opposed to the free spirit of Victorian utilitarianism. (Blake, 1974:171) Disraeli believed that there are three kinds of lies in world: lies, damned lies and statistics. (Disraeli, 1996) Thus, he greatly disgusted the utilitarian situation in which everything is ruled by data and calculation. In his *Vindication of the English Constitution*(1935), he had ever pointed out that: "this respect for precedent, this clinging to prescription, this reverence for antiquity which are so often ridiculed by conceited and superficial minds, and more the especial contempt of the gentlemen who admire abstract principles, appear to me to have their origin in a profound knowledge of human nature, and in a fine observation of public affairs, and satisfactorily to account for the permanent character of our liberties." (Disraeli, 1935:49) Here, "conceited and superficial minds" and "gentlemen who admire abstract principles" seemed to refer to utilitarian. Disraeli tried to use forces of convention to fight against the bourgeoisie "abstract philosophy". Regarding the evolution of society as a process which was closely tied with the past, he opposed against bourgeois political economy for their overlook of tradition and their profit-oriented mentality in transforming society. Disraeli's strong dissatisfaction and profound critique on bourgeois utilitarianism has also been embodied in its political novels, especially "Young England" trilogy. "Young England" trilogy reveal the harms utilitarianism caused and try to seek recipe for Victorian utilitarianism society from the political, social, and spiritual aspects: *Coningsby* condemns the British political drawbacks and the mediocre and utilitarian aristocracy. *Sybil* concentrates on people's condition and exposes the most direct consequence of utilitarianism---the wealth gap and social differentiation. *Tancred* discusses religious issues and tries to seek spiritual way for the faith crisis led by utilitarianism.

2. Disraeli's Critique on Utilitarianism in *Sybil*

In his *General Preface to the Novels* (1870), Benjamin Disraeli described his themes and purpose of his trilogy: origin and character of various political parties; people's condition resulted from political reasons and church as one of the major remedy of society. (MonyPenny, 1912:251) In *Sybil*, he explored the condition of people. In the first Book of *Sybil*, Disraeli cast his topic and expressed his worry on poor people through the utopian socialist Morley's words. When the young aristocracy Egremont said with a smile that "our queen reigns over the greatest nation that ever existed", Morley's short inquiry "which nation" made readers think. Then he explained further: "Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws." "THE RICH AND THE POOR". (Disraeli, 1845:64) In *Sybil*, highlighting the side of public and social welfare in his political philosophy, Disraeli made his efforts to describe the most serious Victorian social crisis influenced by bourgeois utilitarianism thought-the miserable of poor and the increasing gaps between poor and rich. As we have mentioned that Disraeli took People as one of the three elements of the polity, so the status of people has been an important part of his political ideas. As early as "Young England" movement, Disraeli put forward that government as the executive branch, should be focus on people's political and social rights. In the speech of 1872, Disraeli spoke out that another great object of the Tory was to improve the living standers of the public. (O'Gorman, 1986:150) However, the reflection on the "condition of people" is only an apparent content of the novel, its potential theme is to reveal the underlying root which causes social differentiation, to try to figure out a way to resolve the "one queen, two nations" condition.

Disraeli attributed this situation to the irresponsible nobility and the decay of religious spirit. In the parliamentary debate in 1839, Disraeli bluntly pointed out that in the past the old constitutionalism advocated a clear principle—the one who acquired a key position bore great responsibility, but now this principle had been lost. Political power was entrusted to a certain class by old Constitutionalism political, while this class took great public responsibility; on the country, in Victorian age, the new ruling class got the political power but did not bear the coexisting responsibility, that is to say, they did not connect themselves with the public welfare by undertaking their political power. (MonyPenny, 1968:480) As a member of the new ruling class, the aristocracy has not been able to fulfill their due obligations. In Disraeli's opinion, this situation was not unrelated to the influence of utilitarian businesses. The novel was created in 1940s' when Sir Robert Peel acted as prime minister. Although both Disraeli and Peel belonged to the Tory party, Disraeli attacked the liberalization of Peel's political views and showed his strong dissatisfaction to the aristocracies affected by utilitarianism in Tory party. In *Sybil* Disraeli made efforts to portray four noble families and without any exception they all equipped with utilitarian qualities—shrewdness and prudence, good at assessing situation, calculating and planning. Egremont's brother Earl of Marney is faithful follower of Helvetius. He told Egremont that "Everything in this world is calculation; there is no such thing as luck, depend upon it; and if you go on calculating with equal exactness, you must succeed in life." (Disraeli, 1845:66) Old aristocratic values have been replaced by Bourgeois utilitarian features: poachers got their permits to enter Marney territory easily as long as money had been paid; if enough compensation had been made, railroads and factories could traverse his territory. Such new aristocracy as Marney had lost the noble bearing the ancient aristocratic possessed and discarded pride and natural emotion on land and castles. Moreover, through various scenes such as Magnificent clubs, racetracks full of calculation and chaotic parliament, the novel depicts for the reader a luxury, calculating and philistine noble world. Meanwhile, with the growth of secularity and the success of utilitarianism and pragmatism in Victorian Era, those converts which gave real blessing and spiritual support to the poor in ancient times lost their dignity and position. In his essay "Signs of the Times", Carlyle noticed that in mechanical and industrial age, people concern material existence, namely, economic or actual situation, rather than such spiritual existence like moral or religious condition. (Carlyle, 2010:67) The novel fully demonstrated the links between miserable life of people and duty dereliction of Church. After describing the tragic life of the agricultural labors in the town of Marney, the author directly turned to the problem of religion: "The eyes of this unhappy race might have been raised to the solitary spire that sprang up in the midst of them, the bearer of present consolation, the harbinger of future equality; but Holy Church at Marney had forgotten her sacred mission." (Disraeli, 1845:53) The vicar of Marney district, a flatterer in Earl's Court, had completely forgotten his duties and "deemed he did his duty if he preached each week two sermons, and enforced humility on his congregation and gratitude for the blessing of his life." (Disraeli, 1845:53) Mowbray church, this former glory temple had become a "country church" with the change of time; the number of Christians in Mowbray was approaching zero even if the whole population had surged. Westminster Abbey's situation also fully demonstrated the decline of religion. When Egremont made his first visit to Westminster he "beheld the boards and the spikes with which he seemed to be environed as if the abbey were in a state of siege"; "Some noisy vergers sate like ticket-porters or babbled like tapsters" (Disraeli, 1845:226); the priest shut the public "lubber" out, and yet for this situation the British who was keen on the railway stocks readily accepted.

While seeing the root of the problem, Disraeli also managed to look for a solution. He hoped aristocracy, especially the landed aristocracy, got rid of the influence of utilitarianism, regained their social responsibility to people, and revived the sacred authority of religion--- to united all classes and levels and to restore the traditions of king and church under the leadership of enlightened, merciful and distinguished nobility, and then people would regain their vitality. (O'Gorman, 1984:30) The hero and the heroine of this novel—awakening nobility Egremont and holy nun Sybil—were bringers carry good wishes. In Parliament, he undertook the public duties like a real nobility and "declared the social happiness of the millions should be the first object of a state man and that if that were not achieved, thrones and dominions, the pomp and power of courts and empires, were alike worthless." (Disraeli, 1845:288) Egmont's manifesto was just the same as Disraeli's Toryism aristocratic ideals. Sybil's image was used as a religious metaphor, which represented some

kind of divinity beyond the utility. The holy and pure beauty of Sybil can never be “calculated” by reason and planning. Her twice appearances were both set in holy places and both gave Egmont tremendous mental shock; she was generous in poor relief, so in the eyes of the poor she was “the Angel delegated by God”. At the same time, the image of Sybil was of another symbolic significance---Queen Victoria loomed out of her image. At the beginning of the novel, Disraeli depicts a scene of Queen Victoria’s accession, which is very similar to the scene of Sybil’s first appearance; and when Sybil made her visit to Mr. Trafford factories the children there shouted at her “The Queen, the Queen.” The marriage between Sybil (who represents the holy religion and the divine right of queen) and Egremont (who is on behalf of the duty of aristocracy) implies Disraeli’s political ideal: to restore the rightful place or status of monarchy, aristocracy and religion, to restructure the society divided by utilitarianism.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that in his political novel *Sybil*, Disraeli criticized bourgeoisie Utilitarianism and proposed his own ways to solve “one queen, two nations” problem from the perspective of his Tory political philosophy. Although Disraeli strongly criticized utilitarianism, his critique was mostly against the “interests” understanding by bourgeois. In contrast, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” advocated by utilitarianism is precisely in line with Disraeli’s concerning on the public welfare in his political ideas. At the same time, we should notice that even if Disraeli had found a conservative way for the evil consequence of bourgeois utilitarianism (to restore aristocratic traditions and religious traditions), his assertions were not simply returning to the feudal system, but filled the new wine of democracy in the old bottles of Toryism. Therefore, whether for the critique of utilitarianism or for the returning to tradition, Disraeli’s assertions were of clear-cut standpoint, and yet at the same time calm and objective.

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