

An impressionistic painting of the Big Ben clock tower and the Houses of Parliament in London at night. The scene is illuminated by warm orange and yellow lights from the buildings and street, contrasting with a cool blue and white sky. A red double-decker bus is visible on the street in the foreground, and other buildings line the riverbank.

EDITED BY

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≡ The Oxford Handbook of
**MODERN BRITISH
POLITICAL HISTORY,
1800-2000**

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF
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POLITICAL
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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First Edition published in 2018

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017959071

ISBN 978-0-19-871489-7

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ANY endeavour of this sort rests on the willingness of colleagues to craft a wide-ranging and ambitious essay in an era of increasing workloads and pressures. We would first and foremost like to acknowledge the skill, professionalism, and patience of the contributors to this book. An edited volume with more than 30 authors almost necessarily involves a near-geological timescale for publication and some of them have waited for a considerable time to see their essays in print. We hope we have done them justice.

The idea for this volume was germinated in the Lord John Russell pub near the British Library and the book itself was commissioned in the summer of 2013. Across the following years we have had the pleasure to work with a number of dedicated and professional editors. We would like to acknowledge the support of (in chronological order) Christopher Wheeler, Robert Faber, and Cathryn Steele and all of their colleagues at Oxford University Press.

Assembling a team of authors for the *Handbook* was itself a revealing insight into the place of political history within the modern academy. We were conscious at the outset that a volume comprising contributions only from those who had already reached the conventional heights of the academic profession might make a claim to be authoritative, but would lack diversity in personnel and approaches. We therefore initially invited a mixture of men and women and senior, early, and mid-career scholars working within different contexts (both inside and outside universities). We own that we were slightly disappointed as editors that our approaches did not yield a more diverse group of contributors, however pleased we were with the faultless credentials of those who did take the bait. The final roster of contributors is, at least, broadly representative of those currently researching and teaching modern British political history.

A final note on one would-be contributor. We approached Michael Roberts of Macquarie University early in the process to write a chapter on pressure groups and lobbies. He replied indicating his enthusiasm for the project, but also informing us that he had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and advising us to consider implementing 'an unsentimental contributor risk management system'! Given his expertise, we wanted to commission Michael and he worked on his chapter, sending us notes and a sketch on 1 July 2015, beyond which point he physically could not continue. Sadly, he passed away a week later on 8 July. We had hoped to publish a version of his chapter, but it was not in a sufficiently advanced state for this to be possible and we had no desire to put his name to anything which was below the exemplary standards of his published scholarship. We would, nonetheless, like to acknowledge his truly humbling example of commitment and professionalism and dedicate this volume to his memory.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

DAVID BROWN, ROBERT CROWCROFT,
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MODERN British political history (and, indeed, the discipline of political history as a whole) seems, to us at least, to be in a curious state. The field is wider and its contents more diverse than ever before. At the same time it lacks the coherence and, frequently, the self-confidence that other scholarly enterprises seem to possess (and which political history itself once enjoyed in abundance). This paradox seemed to us to offer a compelling rationale for a volume in the *Oxford Handbook* series.

When Geoffrey Elton published his *Political History: Principles and Practice* in 1970, it constituted a belated effort to codify, and justify, the primacy of a set of historical concerns which was already perceived as being under challenge within universities. As an addendum to his much better known *Practice of History* (1969), substantially the same enemies stalked its pages: 'the abstract vocabulary of the logician or the proliferating jargon of the sociologist'.¹

While it is possible to debate the reality and extent of a 'crisis' of political history, the sort of narrative laid out by Elton in 1970—of a well-established craft, with its own rules of procedure, under assault from interlopers from and fellow travellers of other disciplines—has never really gone away.² Elton's own defences became even more shrill into the 1980s, when some discussions within political history reflected even more glaringly wider debates about the form and function of the humanities as a whole.³

The answers to that hackneyed question as to whether there is and has been a crisis in political history can be caricatured as revolving around two poles. At one, practitioners bemoan the dethroning of 'serious' political history in favour of more modish approaches and, in more recent times, a seemingly endless and disorienting series

¹ G.R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (London, 1970), p. 57.

² For an elegant unpicking of Elton's focus on 'craft' and 'technique' see Q. Skinner, 'Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History', *TRHS*, 7 (1997), 301–16.

³ See G.R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge, 1991).

of 'turns'. Political history has lost any sense of common endeavour, let alone pre-eminence, and drowned in the interdisciplinary soup of contemporary academia. At the other pole, the prognosis is more cheerful. There is no crisis and, in fact, political history carries all before it. The dramatic expansion of prevailing definitions of 'power' has entailed a similar expansion of definitions of 'politics' and therefore of political history. Nowhere has this tendency been more marked than in the proliferation in recent decades of discussions of the 'political culture' rather than the 'politics' of modern Britain. All history is political history.

In practice, of course, historians tend to be less imperialistic in how they place themselves, more open-minded in acknowledging the creative impact of other disciplines, and more comfortable with the porous nature of disciplinary boundaries. Most would, we suspect, find Peter Clarke's formulation unobjectionable: 'I don't want to claim that what I pass off as political history is what all political historians ought to be doing. But I am reasonably confident that my own range of interests must be defined as political history, if only because none of the other conventional labels would fit.'⁴

Looking at the tables of contents of 'general' history journals is not an infallible guide to the state of any discipline, but does offer a useful illustration. While political history of various descriptions (with constitutional and diplomatic history pre-eminent) dominates the first hundred years of the *English Historical Review* (1886–1986), for example, modern British politics is scarcely a marginal concern thereafter. At the same time, as judged by source material and subject matter, 'political' history can be found in an ever wider range of journals, whatever their disciplinary slant. Our impression then is that interest in, engagement with, and research into Britain's 'political' past has never been in a more vibrant state of health. That is said with the obvious caveat that its relative primacy has vanished.⁵ The idea that political history represents the *only* kind of serious history is clearly unsustainable. No one, however—not even Elton—has attempted to sustain it.

Assessments that fret about the increasingly disparate nature of political history may be closer to the mark, but are perhaps guilty of imagining a golden age that never existed. Political history as practised from the second half of the twentieth century has always been 'a fractured field of intellectual inquiry'.⁶ There have certainly been crises within and challenges to especially dominant ways of understanding and narrating Britain's political past—as a heroic story of the unfolding of Britain's constitution, as an epic tale of class formation, struggle, and dissolution, or as a substantially closed and self-referential system—but these reflect the health of an area of inquiry whose suppositions, practices, and assumptions have been constantly questioned.

⁴ T.P. Wiseman, G.R. Elton, C. Russell, R. Hutton, R. Foster, J. Turner, K.O. Morgan, and P. Clarke, 'What Is Political History?', *History Today*, 35:1 (1985), 17.

⁵ A similar line was taken in S. Pedersen, 'What Is Political History Now?', in D. Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 36–56.

⁶ J. Lawrence, 'Political History', in S. Berger, H. Feldner, and K. Passmore, eds., *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London, 2003), p. 183.

That political history has *felt* or *appeared* more fractured than other areas of historical inquiry may be ascribed to a number of things. First is the unusually wide interpretation of which its central concerns are susceptible. For example, whatever else they might find objectionable, many historians would endorse one of Elton's opening statements: 'Power constitutes the essential theme of political history.'⁷ At the exact point that definitions of that slippery central category were required, of course, very real disagreements would begin and very divergent paths might be taken.

Second, any sense of insecurity might be laid at the feet of the idiosyncratic trajectory of political history within universities, one peculiarly marked in Britain but also apparent within many other 'national' historiographies. Dethroned as the pre-eminent concern of an entire discipline, it was not armed with the weaponry of insurgent sub-disciplines: dedicated journals and monograph series, annual conferences, professional associations, and all the attendant sense of identity and coherence (however fuzzy the boundaries of the subject or however hotly contested the methodologies) that these necessarily confer. On the whole, historians of modern British politics have had to look for professional homes elsewhere, and the outlooks of historians who find them in, for example, the Political Studies Association and the Social History Society are likely to be very different indeed.

Third, British political history has always had one eye on the contemporary politics of the real world. Many prominent historians have been vocal in their political views, whether of left, right, or centre. Arguably, it is usually not very difficult (and is an enjoyable academic parlour game) to infer the politics of the less voluble ones from their published work. An intermittent sense of 'crisis' in British political history thus maps broadly onto tectonic shifts within British political life itself.

The current volume, therefore, makes no grand claims either to chart (still less to resolve) a singular 'crisis' within modern British political history or to build an impermeable sub-disciplinary wall around it. It does, nevertheless, mark one opportunity to bring some of these questions into focus. It embodies more than thirty chapters, all of which fit the bill as 'modern British political history' in terms of their subject matter, but which demonstrate just how promiscuously historians of past politics in Britain have borrowed both from other disciplines and from other historical methodologies.

Before considering the shape and content of the volume, it might be useful to establish its rationale in terms of demand, supply, and timeliness. The political history of modern Britain is still widely taught, both within schools and at all levels within universities. Such efforts have an enormously rich and rapidly proliferating body of specialist scholarship, summary accounts, and collections of sources on which to proceed. Conversations with colleagues at conferences and strained efforts to produce our own reading (or, increasingly, 'resource') lists highlighted the absence of any volume which attempted either to survey the current state of the field, or even to locate the field itself. There are numerous useful essays by historians and volumes produced by

⁷ Elton, *Political History*, p. 4.

colleagues within Politics departments (many of which can be found in the footnotes of individual essays), but nothing that came close to the *Oxford Handbooks* in terms of usability and accessibility for teaching and research.

The volume's timeliness has, if anything, been augmented in the period between its conception and completion. It was discussed and then commissioned a few years after the financial crisis of 2007–8 and the series of scandals that rocked Britain's political establishment; as authors were approached and worked on their contributions, referendums on Scottish independence and membership of the European Union came and went; and we have witnessed a volatile and unpredictable series of elections both for Westminster and for other representative institutions in the UK. Across all of these developments, there has been a pervasive tendency among politicians and their publics to mobilize historical parallels (whether well informed or not) and an effort to understand the present and future in terms of the past. In asking contributors to provide snapshots of how historians have approached, and might consider in the future, key aspects of modern Britain's political past, this volume provides one means of grounding and informing those debates.

I

In developing the *Handbook*, we quite deliberately avoided being prescriptive in terms of how contributors should tackle their essays. Certainly, we hoped that the volume would synthesize and reflect on the state of political history, but we were also keen to encourage contributors to press at the limits of existing knowledge to set the agenda for future research. Imposing a uniformity of approach seemed likely to prove obstructive of that latter objective, so we gave authors a mandate to proceed as they themselves thought best. Rather than establishing a set structure and approach, the volume seemed likely to be more intellectually fruitful and provocative if contributors were empowered to strike out on their own.

We believe this diversity is a considerable asset. Not only has it avoided a tiresome rigidity across a book containing more than 30 essays, but it also meant that contributors have exceeded our expectations to produce stimulating essays and have frequently grasped the opportunity to be argumentative and bold. Taken together, the essays more than match the aims of producing fresh perspectives, rethinking prevailing conceptual frameworks and periodizations, and helping to highlight research agendas for the coming years.

Some of the pieces in the volume are broadly chronological explorations of their subjects. Others adopt a 'core sample' approach. Quite a few essays take the form of sustained historiographical discussions. Several are more akin to 'think-pieces'. The *Handbook* is also unquestionably a collection of its times, not only in being at the cutting edge of current scholarship, but also in that many of the essays are written with an eye on developments in the real world of twenty-first-century politics. Pertinent topics

are plentiful. The fortunes of society and the economy; the nature and trajectories of political parties; the machinery of state; issues of political communication; the strategic dilemmas confronting governors; and even the survival, as a political entity, of the United Kingdom itself are all here. As readers will see, that tangible connection between political history as a theme for research and writing and the tensions and challenges of contemporary political life—always a feature of the best work in the discipline—retains its vitality. That is a good thing.

Some of the topics covered in the *Handbook* were manifestly so important that their inclusion was a matter of necessity. Others were the subject of considerable discussion. Unfortunately, even a volume as large as this one cannot hope to encompass every possible topic or approach. This necessarily entailed regrettable omissions, though we hope that the number of gaps is relatively small and forgivable. The constraints of the volume necessitated similarly regrettable omissions of personnel. We were simply unable to invite quite a few eminent scholars and exciting younger historians to participate in what we hope will be an important text. This was very difficult. The fact that we were spoilt for choice in approaching contributors for most (if not all) chapters is, however, further testimony to the rude health of the volume's subject.

The volume is structured in five parts. The first part, 'Concepts and Historiographies', examines a number of the dominant preoccupations and conceptual problems that have shaped the discipline. These have generated major bodies of literature which demanded sustained scrutiny and reflection. The second, 'Institutions, Structures, and Machinery', revisits some of the major components of the British political system, both those within and those outside the apparatus of the state. That perhaps represents a more 'traditional' way of approaching political history. The subjects covered, the approaches adopted, and the suggestions for future research in fact highlight the gains to be made by viewing familiar topics through new lenses. The third part, 'Parties, Doctrines, and Leaders', represents another well-established set of historical concerns. In approaching what would appear to the layman or laywoman as the very essence of political history, these chapters mine seams which have produced rich bodies of scholarly literature, but themselves offer fresh takes and identify new problems. The fourth part of the *Handbook*, 'Elections and Popular Politics', considers the multiplicity of interactions between politicians and their publics. Such concerns have long captivated political historians, and indeed work in this vein has arguably dominated the field in recent decades, frequently collected under the awkward and problematic umbrella term 'new political history'. It is timely to take stock of these developments and a number of the chapters in this section showcase promising new avenues for research. The fifth part, 'Challenges', explores a number of broad policy areas that, after 1800, have posed (and in all cases continue to pose) consistent problems for the British state and for politicians. Finally, an epilogue to the volume reflects on the important work of writing 'contemporary' political history.

It goes without saying that this structure is not the only one that might have been adopted in shaping the *Handbook*. Others might well have been equally fruitful. Nonetheless, it is the one that we thought would offer the best chance of achieving the

initial goals for the volume and would, we hoped, give contributors a relatively free hand to proceed as they judged best.

II

As Geoffrey Elton acknowledged, the ‘reaction against political history, though often ill-informed and sometimes silly, has its virtues,’ and not the least of these was ‘the stimulus given to political history to improve itself.’⁸ If social history was once the history of people with the politics left out, then political historians have responded by showing that the history of people is *necessarily* political; they just needed to unearth that history more effectively. While some ‘traditional’ political history was indeed written in a social and intellectual vacuum, this does not mean that a more universal or wide-ranging approach should be uncritically all-consuming. When John Turner judged that political history is ‘almost anything you can think of, and probably much that you can’t,’ he counselled colleagues to ‘write it at your peril.’⁹ Write it we should, and with some confidence.

As the contributions to this volume attest, political history is in rude health. It has navigated various ‘turns’ and, while the route is not linear and while political history continues to spread over a diverse terrain, it is asking new and important questions about the political past. We have moved a long way from A.J.P. Taylor’s dismissive attitude to the History of Parliament project, for example, which he damned with the judgement that all we needed to do was to consult *Hansard* for an account of parliamentary history, since that history could be found in ‘what members heard and said, in what they felt, not in what they were.’¹⁰ Yet what those members were is much more than an exercise in collective biography, and while it is useful to know what motivated a politician, we can ask more penetrating questions than Namier did. Politicians and political actors were not and are not autonomous beings, but simultaneously both the products and shapers of their political environment.

It was the conventional preoccupation of the political historian to deal almost exclusively with the people who exercised power, however, that led many critical friends to warn of the subject’s increasing irrelevance unless it recognized that it ‘depends for its vitality on a close involvement with its intellectual neighbours.’¹¹ As was recognized some time ago, by borrowing from ‘the very social sciences which had pushed it into the background,’ political history would ‘return to force,’ as a complement to other analytical frameworks (rather than as a competitor).¹² Many ‘newer’ forms of historical

⁸ Elton in Wiseman et al., ‘What Is Political History?’, 11.

⁹ Turner in Wiseman et al., ‘What Is Political History?’, 16.

¹⁰ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London, 1957), p. 40.

¹¹ J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (4th edn., Harlow, 2006), p. 124.

¹² E. Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, 1997), p. 190 (quoting J. Le Goff, ‘Is Politics Still the Backbone of History?’, in Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard, eds., *Historical Studies Today* (New York, 1972), p. 340).

enquiry might well continue to be accommodated within ‘conventional’ political history, or rather be taken as prompts to broaden its purview. To take but one example, as one recent definition suggests, environmental history’s concerns with understanding attempts to manage or control the environment are, at base, ‘a struggle among interests about power’—as good a definition of politics as six words can achieve.¹³

This volume has adopted a national perspective as one means of organizing the work of political historians. The choice was to present this history as ‘British’, a term which is, of course, both convenient and problematic. Broadly speaking, our intention was to invite contributors to take the fluctuating ‘union-state’ assembled in 1801 as the principal unit for analysis. A critical mass of shared institutions and personnel, issues and challenges, and political culture and practices for much of the period under review justified adopting the term. We did so, however, without any intention of suggesting any rigid or prolonged homogeneity between the political histories of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland.¹⁴ Still less did we wish to ascribe any sense of impermeability to the political life of ‘these islands’. Indeed, we hope the ways in which authors have dealt with these issues also invites a critical engagement with the meaning of a national (British) political history, and its relationships with other frameworks: local, ‘four nations’, international, or global.

One should bear in mind Susan Pedersen’s observation that British history, particularly when it focuses on political institutions, has tended to measure and analyse its subjects against their own pasts, rather than adopting a comparative perspective stretching across different political cultures and contexts.¹⁵ This may have led to self-referential accounts that inevitably play up and refurbish notions of exceptionalism. At the same time, a distinctive British political history still needs to be written alongside wider, globalized accounts to draw attention to that very distinctiveness.

As has been noted already, this volume has not attempted to provide anything approximating to a comprehensive analysis of British political history over two centuries. Nor has it attempted to provide an (immediately dated) snapshot of ‘current scholarship’. It does have elements of survey and assessment, but it also looks forward, anticipating, or proposing new directions in the field.

The political historian continues to be drawn to the written record, and sometimes uses that as a justification for focusing on the limited interests and activities of the (educated) elite,¹⁶ but just as the so-called linguistic turn drew attention more closely to the language of those sources, non-textual forms—visual, material, and indeed sonic—are increasingly analysed by historians who want to capture the dynamics of political

¹³ D. Hughes, *What Is Environmental History?* (London, 2006), p. 24.

¹⁴ Different ‘national’ treatments of politics across the same period can be found in other books in this series, especially T.M. Devine and J. Wormald, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History* (Oxford, 2012); A. Jackson, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History* (Oxford, 2014).

¹⁵ Pedersen, ‘What is Political History Now?’, p. 47.

¹⁶ See, for example, John Vincent, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to History* (rev. ed., London, 2001). Vincent’s argument that the history of pre- or illiterate societies is ‘unsound’ is dismissed by Richard Evans in his *In Defence of History* (London, 1997), p. 164.

culture in the widest sense.¹⁷ The desire to embrace the rich opportunities of these different sources, breaching, and perhaps also bridging, the gaps between high and low or official and unofficial history, has in recent years stimulated a number of innovative studies of space, place, environment, and mindsets as historians have looked to delineate political cultures and assess anew qualities of leadership and engagement.¹⁸ There is always scope to take this work further, but as chapters in this volume suggest, this should not be at the expense of an attention to the institutional frameworks and political structures which shaped that culture. But as those institutions are themselves challenged by shifts in society—not least the increasing demands for greater devolution and more political accountability, alongside forces of globalization—then the nation-state itself as a framework for analysis becomes itself a subject of investigation.

There is simply no point trying to write a (Whiggish) narrative of a ‘rise of democracy’ in modern Britain, which a couple of generations ago might have lent itself as a workable substructure for a volume on modern British political history. That linear, one-dimensional story of politics simply fails to capture the nuance, intricacy, and messiness of political developments over a couple of hundred years. Greater attention to the multiple meanings of political thoughts and actions inevitably leads to more diverse interpretations of the political past.

A genuine question raised by a project such as this one is: in what ways should British political history be defined and studied? (We take it as a given that it should). Writing across two centuries of political history in which the idea of who counted, and what constituted legitimacy—to say nothing of the shifting boundaries (geographical and political)—poses considerable challenges. It also underlines the value of efforts such as this one to canvas bird’s-eye views, however partial. Common prescriptions emerge from a number of chapters, whose authors urge historians to consider and test the exceptionalism of case studies against the validity of wider norms, to interrogate the similarities and differences between perceptions and realities, and to eschew neat simplifications in favour of embracing the tensions and inconsistencies in Britain’s political past.

It is important both to embrace but also to interrogate the label of *political* history. As our contributors make abundantly clear, it has meaning, but should not act as a

¹⁷ See, for example M. Nixon, G. Pentland, and M. Roberts, ‘The Material Culture of Scottish Reform Politics, c.1820–c.1884’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 32 (2012), 28–49; K. Bowan and P. Pickering, *Sounds of Liberty: Music, Radicalism and Reform in the Anglophone World, 1790–1914* (Manchester, 2017).

¹⁸ To cite a small, but influential, sample, J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); J. Vernon, ed., *Re-Reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England’s Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996); J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009); P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999); M. Bentley, *Lord Salisbury’s World: Conservative Environments in Late-Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2001). For a critical assessment of some of these works, see M. Bentley, ‘Victorian Politics and the Linguistic Turn’, *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 883–902.

constraint. The boundaries of political history are fluid ones, but it takes work to exploit that fluidity. Jon Lawrence has rightly noted that:

While high political histories often exaggerate this isolation from external [or popular] pressures, pretending that the world of elite politics is all but hermetically sealed from demotic influences, histories of popular politics too often make the opposite mistake—assuming that state power is of no matter, and that the discursive and legislative strategies of ‘elite’ politicians played little part in shaping plebeian political traditions.

To end with an old cliché, they are the twin dragons we must slay if political history is to overcome its schizophrenic mind-set—if it is to transcend the unhelpful dichotomies of ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ or ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ in favour of a systematic exploration of the interconnectedness of politics.¹⁹

Political history is thus both precise and ‘scientific’ (or quantifiable) but also woolly, amorphous, and subjective. It is the task of the modern political historian to embrace these differences; build on the diverse questions, methods, and preoccupations evident in this volume; and continue to ask new questions.

¹⁹ Lawrence, ‘Political History’, p. 199.

PART I

.....

CONCEPTS AND
HISTORIOGRAPHIES

.....

CHAPTER 2

POLITICAL IDEAS AND LANGUAGES

DAVID CRAIG

‘My objection to liberalism’, said Disraeli in 1848, ‘is this: that it is the introduction into the practical business of life of the highest kind—namely, politics—of philosophical ideas instead of political principles.’¹ The future Prime Minister was making a point about Palmerston’s foreign policy, but in doing so he encapsulated a central problem in modern political history. On the one hand, politics was routinely defined as a practical matter that was ill served when ‘theorists’ and ‘visionaries’—in this case, liberals—were in power, but on the other, those who ruled were still expected to have ‘principles.’² What, it may be asked, were ‘principles’ if they were not a form of ‘ideas’, albeit in some sense ‘unphilosophical’? Just as politicians have circled nervously around these issues, so too have historians over the course of the twentieth century. It is not simply that intellectual fashions have changed over this period—it is that the way the field of ‘politics’ has developed has shaped how historians have thought about ‘ideas’. First, we might notice the steady separation between the disciplines and departments of ‘History’ and ‘Politics’—often, but not exclusively, called ‘Political Science’—which has created barriers to cross-fertilization and interdisciplinary dialogue. As a consequence, second is the fact that the field of ‘history of political thought’ largely drifted towards ‘Politics’. There, it generated its own scholarly concerns which, although animated and important in their own right, have created problems when transplanted back into the field of ‘political history’. Third, the way that ‘political history’ itself has defined ‘politics’ has further shaped the role accorded to ‘ideas’. When defined as the pragmatic concerns of a narrow elite, the ‘ideas’ typically discussed by historians of political thought have often seemed rarefied and irrelevant to ‘politics’. The aim of this chapter is to sketch these trends, and

¹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5 June 1848, cols. 396–7.

² D. Craig, ‘Statesmanship’, in D. Craig and J. Thompson, eds., *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 44–67.

to indicate some of the ways in which it is possible to insist that politics is saturated with 'ideas' without abandoning a belief in its murky realism.

I

The 'history of political thought', as Stefan Collini has persuasively shown, is an 'ineliminably hybrid activity'.³ Since it has generated influential methodological debates, but also problematic intellectual practices, it is useful to consider its peculiar origins, and its subsequent disciplinary locations. As a field, it started to coalesce towards the end of the nineteenth century—the chief figures in Britain were Pollock, Carlyle, and Figgis. Collini sees four distinct impulses feeding into its early identity, although varying in different national contexts: the tradition of moral philosophy; theories of the state, especially as generated by engagement in jurisprudential theory and constitutional practice; a style of constitutional and political history that examined the ideas and attitudes of participants in significant moments in the past, for example during the Civil War in the 1640s; and finally, the history of earlier attempts to study politics. In effect, then, the 'history of political thought' was formed at the intersection of philosophy, law, history, and politics. Each of these concerns tended to generate their own particular core texts, and so to the standard classics of moral philosophy were added legal treatises and then works of writers thought to have had a major impact on the politics of their day—Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx, for instance. This 'hybridity' also proved troubling for its disciplinary location: it tilted towards philosophy in Oxford, and towards history in Cambridge, but in most universities over the twentieth century it found an uneasy home in Politics departments. There it attached itself to the study of 'political theory', which itself had to fight for recognition as the empirical and behavioural revolution took hold across the discipline. So, if 'political theory' could be justified normatively, then 'history of political thought' had ultimately to serve the same master—and in Politics departments the same people tended to teach both. This has meant that for much of the century the 'history of political thought' has had an ambiguous relationship to the discipline of history.

It might seem as if the historicist revolution in the subject resolved that ambiguity, but this is not the case. Certainly, the pioneers of the 'Cambridge School'—J.G.A. Pocock, John Dunn, and Quentin Skinner—all found the historical approach congenial, because they had been trained as historians, and exposed to 'political thought' in that disciplinary context. Dunn's argument was directed partly against a form of economic determinism which turned major thinkers into bearers of class interest (Plato as voice of aristocratic anti-democrats; Locke as the doyen of bourgeois individualists), but mainly against philosophers whose 'histories' were transparently anachronistic—asking

³ S. Collini, 'Postscript. Disciplines, Canons and Publics: The History of "the History of Political Thought" in Comparative Perspective', in D. Castiglione and I. Hampsher-Monk, eds., *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 295.

questions that their subjects could not possibly have intended to answer, finding levels of coherence that were unlikely to exist, and assuming that ‘great’ thinkers always spoke to the concerns of the present.⁴ In a series of articles, Skinner developed a rigorous methodology which drew on speech-act theory to argue that the recovery of the intentions of agents (not just what they said, but what they were doing in saying it) would produce a genuinely historical account of political thought which would also reveal how a diverse range of thinkers succeeded in altering the terms of political life.⁵ As Samuel Moyn has recently argued, these polemics were aimed at political philosophers, and much of the enormous literature thrown up by these debates was about how to study ‘texts’ and whether the historical method denuded them of all contemporary relevance. Much of this passed mainstream historians by, because it had long seemed eminently sensible to avoid anachronism and to read texts in context.⁶

It is also debatable how fully historical the ‘history of political thought’ has become when many of its practitioners remain attached to Politics departments. We can see this in the enduring appeal to ‘canonical’ thinkers. Even though the canon of ‘political thought’ is the contingent product of different disciplines and concerns—and so has produced a ‘collection of texts written at very different levels of abstraction from or immersion in’ political history and hence ‘can hardly be regarded as constituting a “tradition”, still less, as it has sometimes been grandly celebrated, “the tradition”’—it yet remains central to much scholarship in the subject.⁷ But the problems with treating such a range of writers and thinkers as part of a canon are important—this treatment encourages links and connections to be found between members that have no real historical basis, and it irons out the very real differences of genre and levels of abstraction in them. Moreover, despite all the pleas about context, the tendency to ignore seemingly less important figures and to treat the wider intellectual environment cursorily remain apparent. Indeed, as Collini observes, even those most associated with contextualism have recognized that professional aspirations are best fulfilled by working on thinkers—Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill—who are likely to be of concern to the widest range of fellow practitioners.⁸ This has meant, in practice, that the ‘canon’—with some jiggling at the margins—continues to hold the field, when there ought to be more historical awareness of the formation of that ‘canon’ in the first place.⁹ So in the case of Britain, there are a number of figures from the past couple of centuries who tend to make the cut, but whose presence is largely indicative of the intellectual preoccupations of

⁴ J. Dunn, ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’, in J. Dunn, *Political Obligation in Its Historical Context* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 13–28.

⁵ J. Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Cambridge, 1988); Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics, I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁶ S. Moyn, ‘History and Political Theory: A Difficult Reunion’, *Theory and Event*, 19 (2016), <<https://muse-jhu-edu.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/article/607285>>, 18 April 2016.

⁷ Collini, ‘Postscript’, p. 296.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁹ See S. Stuurman, ‘The Canon of the History of Political Thought: its Critique and a Proposed Alternative’, *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), 147–66.

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Whiggism, utilitarianism, and idealism have ensured that Burke, Bentham, Mill, and Green have always been prominent.¹⁰ In addition, the obsession with liberalism has kept up the stock of the latter three, and ensured other 'lesser' figures, such as Spencer at one end and Hobson and Hobhouse at the other, have attracted attention. The story for twentieth-century figures is altogether more muddled: there is no obvious figure who can be ushered into the international pantheon, but a range of nevertheless important writers that includes, perhaps, Laski on the left, Berlin in the centre, and Oakeshott on the right, are recognized objects of study.

Pocock's work, by contrast, has been explicitly committed to opening up the canon, and as a result has been of more interest to historians than to philosophers. In his various historical and methodological writings since the 1950s he has made the case for studying 'languages'. Any stable society, he argued, possessed concepts which it used to discuss its political arrangements—these tended to be ordered together with their own grammar, syntax, and associations, and so operated rather like a natural language. The task of the historian of political thought was to identify and reconstruct these languages by immersing themselves in the terms, concepts, and texts of the period being studied. There was some similarity to Kuhn's 'paradigms', and at times Pocock used that word in preference to 'languages': a language operated 'so as to structure thought and speech in certain ways and to preclude their being structured in others', meaning that 'the individuals of my story are paradigms rather than people'.¹¹ The focus on languages has therefore acted as a corrective to the concern with canonical thinkers—they encourage attention to a much wider range of texts, including even relatively ephemeral productions, and they can also appreciate the less conscious and even unintentional aspects of a written or spoken performance.¹² Indeed, it is these latter points which have appealed to some cultural historians, and have enabled them to draw out affinities between Pocock's 'languages' and Foucault's 'discourses'. These influences—coupled with the central impact of cultural anthropology—have, since the 1970s, helped to inspire growing interest in 'political culture', which was originally associated with historians of revolutionary France but has become influential in modern British history since the 1990s. Although some leading proponents have been critical of the 'history of ideas' in outlining their methodologies, it is worth recalling that the title of Foucault's chair at the Collège de France was 'The History of Systems of Thought'.¹³ Similar criticisms have been applied to Pocock as to Foucault—that an excessive focus on the structural properties of 'languages' risks making the agent who expresses them no more than a cipher. Skinner was

¹⁰ An early example is E. Barker, *Political Thought in England from Herbert Spencer to the Present Day* (London, 1915).

¹¹ J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Concept of a Language and the *Metier d'Historien*: Some Considerations on Practice' and 'Working on Ideas in Time', in Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 89, 29.

¹² The same can be said of Michael Freedman's work on ideologies in the late modern period: *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1998).

¹³ See J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 4.

alert to this problem, and argued that an exclusive focus on languages was insufficient. It was important to see what a speaker or writer was doing in making use of a language, otherwise the historian might miss cases where conventions were deliberately being manipulated—for instance, the conscious use of irony—or even fail to locate the agent in the correct tradition.¹⁴ So, while looking at languages helpfully moved away from ‘canonical’ authors, there was a danger that it might move away from authors altogether.

Even if historians can overcome the disciplinary ‘hybridity’ of the ‘history of political thought’ and write genuinely historical histories, there is still the question of what they are histories of. The chief concern seems to be thoughts and arguments and languages *about* politics: what historical actors have said politics was, is, or ought to be about, or the assumptions and prescriptions embedded in widely shared languages. Strictly speaking, it is possible for ‘political thought’ to contribute nothing to politics, and even for its authors to have little interest in doing so. It *may* be the case that some thinkers hoped to transform not just intellectual but also political life: Bentham is assumed to have done both, while Rawls has perhaps only succeeded in doing the former. Moreover, this may not even be the task of the ‘historian of political thought’. Pocock is clear on this point: ‘it is for the historian of action to investigate how ideas, beliefs and arguments help us to understand the actions of men in particular situations; for the historian of thought to study the activity of thinking, of conceptualizing, of abstracting ideas from particular situations and traditions.’¹⁵ In this sense Pocock writes about languages *of* politics, but not *in* politics. The same point can sometimes be applied to work on political culture: it succeeds in illuminating a wide range of attitudes and arguments that underpin practices, but it becomes hazy when it tries to show how this culture affected political action. It may be objected that these distinctions are artificial, and that the discourse of politics should be seen as a constituent element of the political realm. This is an important point, and Skinner has been particularly prominent in developing it—although he still tends to be understood as an intellectual historian, a central part of his argument was about how ideologies were used as forms of legitimation in political struggle.

II

If we turn now to the field of ‘political history’ proper, we can see how the role of ‘ideas’ has been approached rather differently as the subject developed. Throughout the nineteenth century, politics was assumed to be core to the subject of history, whether in the amateur narratives and popular biographies which the public enjoyed or in the increasingly professional stress on properly documented accounts. For J.R. Seeley, ‘politics and

¹⁴ Q. Skinner, ‘Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action’, in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, pp. 106–7. See also M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge, 1999).

¹⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, ‘The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry’, in *Political Thought and History*, p. 13.

history are only different aspects of the same study,' while E.A. Freeman made famous the claim that 'History is past politics, and politics present history'.¹⁶ No one could accuse the Whig historians of the nineteenth century of not taking ideas seriously—their error, rather, was treating them too naively. The classic Whig history was of the onwards and upwards march of liberty. In Linda Colley's words, 'it was both present-minded and intensely nationalistic, concerned to celebrate Victorian constitutionalism by stressing those episodes of England's past in which freedom seemed to triumph over oppression and injustice'.¹⁷ The ideas that mattered were those that had prevailed in the present, and the past was mined for anticipations of thinking about liberty and representation, democracy, and citizenship, creating an almost seamless continuity from Teutons to Gladstonians. That said, as Michael Bentley and John Burrow have recently shown, Whig history could be more sophisticated, and was not simply displaced by professionalization.¹⁸ Stubbs opposed romantic narratives and heroic deeds, and made great play of his use of original documents, but he still ultimately thought he was contributing to a story about freedom. Others went further: Seeley disliked accounts which stressed the doctrinal continuity between seventeenth- and nineteenth-century parliamentarians, and Tout was critical of the way constitutional history privileged the theory rather than the practice of administration.¹⁹ Yet they too admired national institutions and retained an interest in how political liberty and national character had developed. Hence, the success of inter-war histories by G.M. Trevelyan and Ernest Barker shows that Whig history was not quite as obsolete as is sometimes suggested.²⁰

Nor, on the other hand, did the arch anti-Whig Namier emerge onto a bare stage. In the two decades before *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* was published in 1929, various eighteenth-century historians had already raised doubts about how significant Cabinet really was, and how much coherence parties really had.²¹ Still, Namier's forthright commitment to modernism and realism meant he tried to root out sentimental nonsense—'flapdoodle'—wherever he found it. He succeeded in reshaping the way historians thought about the 1760s: the King did not have a plan to overthrow constitutional government, parties were not cohesive entities organized around clear political programmes, and the nature of 'corruption' had been radically misunderstood. He did this by reorienting interest away from traditional narrative and towards an intensely detailed focus on political 'structure' which revealed the dominance of local interests and personal relations in the behaviour of MPs. Although the 'Namier Revolution' did not carry everything before it, in its heyday between the 1930s and 1960s

¹⁶ J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883), p. 166; E.A. Freeman, *Lectures to American Audiences* (Philadelphia, 1882), pp. 207–8.

¹⁷ L. Colley, *Namier* (London, 1989), pp. 46–7.

¹⁸ M. Bentley, *Modernising England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005); J. Burrow, *A History of Histories* (London, 2007).

¹⁹ Colley, *Namier*, pp. 48–9.

²⁰ D. Cannadine, *G.M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (London, 1992); J. Stapleton, *Englishness and the Study of Politics: The Social and Political Thought of Ernest Barker* (Cambridge, 1994).

²¹ See Bentley, *Modernising England's Past*, ch. 6.

it reached beyond the confines of the eighteenth century, and had a lasting influence on the way political historians related to their subject.

There are two significant points which Namier made and linked, but which can readily be uncoupled. The first was that the personal papers of politicians represented the best insight into their minds and motives. His empirical haul was an unarguable achievement, and in ferreting out material mouldering in country houses, and in mining the copious Newcastle Papers, he helped to create a strong professional identity for political historians grounded on 'proper' sources rather than the sanitized 'lives and letters' relied upon by earlier generations. This type of material became the basis for Namier's other claim, which was that 'ideas' were of very small consequence in explaining political behaviour—they were not the 'offspring of pure reason', and so what really mattered was the 'underlying emotions, the music, to which ideas are a mere libretto'.²² He was already personally attracted to such a view, and found some sympathy with the economic determinism associated with Marx—which grounded political behaviour in an agent's social and economic circumstances—and certainly with the psychology of the unconscious pioneered by Freud. He was keenly interested in the emotions and actions of individuals, and his writings accordingly teem with character studies of some sophistication—his discussions of George III and Newcastle, in particular, have been singled out. In this sense, Namier's reduction of the role of ideas was designed to make space not so much for the self-interested intriguer of repute, but instead for complex, difficult, and rounded persons. Nevertheless, the downplaying of 'ideas' in politics was a frequent leitmotif of his work, and it found wider support in a period when 'ideology' was often seen as alien and dangerous: he wrote, as Colley puts it, 'non-epic history fit for Baldwin's England'.²³ If Namier claimed empirical confirmation in his source base—personal papers—others have rightly criticized his exclusive focus on such 'unlikely repositories for inspiring declarations of shared principles'.²⁴

From the 1960s onward, it seemed increasingly hard to take 'the mind out of history'²⁵—the emergence of various movements across the globe patently attached to 'ideologies' made such a view seem ridiculous. Nevertheless, whether it was outright rejection or subtle modification, Namier's shadow—not always recognized, and often misunderstood—loomed surprisingly large over the historiography of the later twentieth century. Some important lines of criticism had already been signalled by Butterfield. Though agreeing about the deficiencies of Whig history, he outlined his broader objections to Namier in *George III and the Historians*. 'Human beings are the carriers of ideas', he insisted, 'as well as the repositories of vested interests', and so there was a 'framework' of ideas which shaped the actions of George III and his politicians. Namierites, indeed, seemed oddly uninterested in 'the very things that governments

²² Cited in Colley, *Namier*, p. 26.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁴ J. Burrow, *A History of Histories* (London, 2007), p. 472.

²⁵ To paraphrase A.J.P. Taylor's infamous review of 'The Namier View of History', *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 Aug. 1953, xxiii.

and parliament exist to do’—the work of ministers, the nature of policy, the origins of decisions, the content of controversies, the attitudes of the public, and the debates of parliament. In their desire to avoid being ‘hoaxed’ by the Whig tendency to take ideology at face value, they had gone too far in the other direction. In draining the intellectual content out of politics, they not only misunderstood the commitments of participants, but also failed to appreciate ‘what men imagine the situation to be’—perceptions about the beliefs and motivations of others, whether true or false, were an integral ingredient of political behaviour.²⁶ This latter point was later developed with some sophistication by Skinner, who tried to bridge the divide between those who argued ideas really motivated behaviour and those who thought interest was the key.²⁷ His point was that ideas still mattered even if the politician espousing them didn’t really believe a word of them. So the puzzle of Bolingbroke—a Tory seemingly committed to radical Whig ideology—could be explained by saying that he deployed this language as a means of undermining the credibility of Walpole, whom his interest motivated him to topple. But, by using this form of legitimation, Bolingbroke publicly committed himself to a position which would affect what he could do and say in the future if he didn’t want to be accused of hypocrisy. In other words, Skinner showed that even if political motivation was often a grubby matter of power-seeking, ideas could not be whisked off as mere epiphenomena, because they were often deployed with purpose in the cut and thrust of public political argument.

One of the more controversial ‘schools’ of political history in the 1960s and 1970s was widely and inaccurately seen as an attempt to apply Namierism to nineteenth- and twentieth-century political history.²⁸ While Maurice Cowling and the ‘Peterhouse School’ shared Namier’s stress on the importance of using private papers, they were also increasingly interested in assessing the role that ideas played in the ebb and flow of political life. Cowling’s ‘high-politics’ trilogy, while seemingly about the intrigues and manoeuvrings of a wide range of ‘players’, also recognized that beliefs and policies were often affected by the tactical constraints and opportunities of a given political situation. Certainly, Cowling appreciated the importance of political language and rhetoric, and stressed its fundamentally instrumental role.²⁹ What these historians (particularly the second generation) wanted to stress was the *difficulty* of making claims about the influence of political ideologies and languages on events—in this sense they opposed both the naïve views of older Whig history, and also some of the easy assumptions made

²⁶ H. Butterfield, *George III and the Historians* (London, 1957), pp. 211, 208, 219.

²⁷ Skinner, ‘Some Problems’, pp. 107–18; Q. Skinner, ‘The Principles and Practice of Opposition: The Case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole’, in N. McKendrick, ed., *Historical Perspectives: Essays in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (London, 1974), pp. 93–128.

²⁸ D. Craig, “High Politics” and the “New Political History”, *Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), 453–76; P. Williamson, ‘Maurice Cowling and Modern British Political History’, in R. Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green, and R.C. Whiting, eds., *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism* (London, 2010), pp. 108–52; R. Crowcroft, ‘Maurice Cowling and the Writing of British Political History’, *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), 279–86.

²⁹ See, for example, M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–1924* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 1–12.

about the influence of political thought on action. It was in fact hard to show how far and in what ways a movement of thought actually directly intervened in politics, but that did not mean the task was impossible—it required both a careful analysis of the ideas of a substantial range of politicians and intellectuals and a precise account of exactly how they were mediated in the febrile politics of any given moment.³⁰ This might make it possible to assess, for instance, how far classical liberal economics shaped Conservative policy in the 1820s and 1840s, or whether idealism and organicism influenced Liberal social policy in the 1900s. Unfortunately, some of the insights of this ‘school’ were lost in the heightened partisan invective of the 1970s and 1980s, and also because of its separate claims about the primacy of ‘high politics.’ There was no a priori reason why these arguments about ideas and their role in political behaviour could not be applied to popular politics more broadly.

Since the 1970s, renewed and careful attention to the intellectual component of politics has helped transform historical understanding. In the case of Namier’s own century—the eighteenth—the change has been dramatic, fuelled in part by the attentions of intellectual historians. Pocock’s work exposed a powerful strain of ‘civic humanism’ which ran through the political argument of the century, and which—following Bernard Bailyn—could be seen in the ‘ideological’ origins of the American Revolution.³¹ The history of the Scottish Enlightenment has also become a major theme, and from the 1980s the link between theological and political debate has also been stressed. Although these works are primarily written by historians of ideas, they have fed back into a reorientation of political history. A significant change of direction was signalled by John Brewer—the title of his first book indicates a direct challenge to Namierism. In *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Brewer opened up the 1760s in two ways.³² First, he took seriously the insistence of Butterfield and Skinner that the language of politics mattered, and accordingly paid close attention to the enormous range of pamphlets and polemics that the period threw up, and which Namier had so disdained. In doing so he showed that ideas really did matter, and that it was possible to investigate the ‘ideology’ of Pitt as well as the arguments of Burke. Second, Brewer also wanted to affirm the importance of popular politics and to show the origins of the reform movement. Here, too, ideology was significant, and he showed how ‘country party’ language was deployed by radicals against the ‘corruption’ of the government, and against parliament more broadly. Brewer went further, and drew on recent anthropological writing to investigate the symbolic meanings of the rituals employed by the Wilkite crowd. This would prove increasingly important to subsequent writing

³⁰ See especially M. Bentley, ‘Party, Doctrine and Thought’, in M. Bentley and J. Stevenson, eds., *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain: Ten Studies* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 123–53, and also J.P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986).

³¹ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975); B. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967).

³² J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976).

on political culture, which sometimes found more inspiration in cultural anthropology than intellectual history.³³

If we turn to the nineteenth century, while the direct impact of Namier was less keenly felt, there was nevertheless a desire to play down the intellectual aspects of politics. It had been a virtual article of faith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Benthamite utilitarianism and Ricardian economics were responsible for the liberal transformation of the state between the 1820s and 1860s. By the middle of the twentieth century a reaction had set in. Some political historians—such as Norman Gash—stressed the unideological pragmatism of leading politicians such as Peel, while others launched more direct assaults on the utilitarian paradigm.³⁴ In 1958 Oliver MacDonagh argued that the ‘revolution in government’ between the 1830s and 1860s was not caused by Benthamism, which he claimed had no real influence over either public opinion or civil servants, but instead arose as a result of unintended consequences: a social evil was exposed; an outcry ensued; a measure was introduced, and later refined and extended, and thereby created precedents for further reforms. It required no presiding intellectual agenda.³⁵ As references to Namier and Oakeshott suggest, this argument owed at least something to the anti-ideological mood of the 1950s, and one critic even described it as a ‘tory interpretation of history’. Another critic was simply puzzled: ‘Why should anyone seek to eliminate Benthamism as a factor of importance in nineteenth-century history?’³⁶

And yet, a generation later, most historians would endorse just such an elimination. However, it was not the case that these older ideologies were toppled to make way for a sort of nineteenth-century Namierism. Boyd Hilton’s work is instructive. In *Corn, Cash and Commerce* he successfully showed that Ricardianism played virtually no role in the economic reforms of the 1820s, and argued that the measures were largely pragmatic. But, in the conclusion to that book, and much more fully in later work, he suggested historians had been looking in the wrong place—the real ideological drive of economic and social policy was not *secular* but *evangelical* utilitarianism. This offered a rather different ‘liberalism’ to that of earlier textbooks fixated on the Bentham–Mill tradition, and instead made the case for a gloomier and retributive worldview found in Malthus and Chalmers. Hilton was interested not only in recovering a neglected strand of thought, but also in showing how it affected fundamental policies on the currency and banking, the Poor Laws, and the Corn Laws. The political actions of Peel and Gladstone, it was argued, had to be understood by reference to their intellectual habits

³³ See, for example, W.H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980).

³⁴ N. Gash, *Sir Robert Peel: The Life of Sir Robert Peel after 1830* (London, 1972).

³⁵ O. MacDonagh, ‘The Nineteenth Century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal’, *Historical Journal*, 1 (1958), 52–67.

³⁶ J. Hart, ‘Nineteenth Century Social Reform: A Tory Interpretation of History’, *Past and Present*, 31 (1965), 39–61; H. Parris, ‘The Nineteenth Century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal Reappraised’, *Historical Journal*, 3 (1960), 33.

and sympathies.³⁷ Other historians restored intellectual purpose to Whig-Liberals as well. Peter Mandler argued that a revival of Foxite paternalism in the 1830s and 1840s—rather than Benthamism—could help explain the seemingly puzzling intrusion of the state in a period otherwise committed to laissez-faire.³⁸ Alternatively, Jonathan Parry argued that constitutional and religious reform was the real key to Whig-Liberals and their core commitment was to ensuring that diverse opinions and interests could be represented locally and nationally, and that as a result policy decisions were the result of deliberation and consensus. In arguing this, Parry was particularly alert to the difficulties of tracking how intellectual traditions shaped political decisions, but he did not deny their influence.³⁹

Since the 1970s, considerable attention has been devoted to the ‘new liberalism’ of the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Here, it is sometimes suggested, is a clear case of an intellectual movement not only shaping a new language of social reform among politicians but also constituting a factor in the electoral resurgence of liberalism after 1906. Among intellectual historians, T.H. Green had always attracted some interest, but a range of other thinkers—in particular L.T. Hobhouse and J.A. Hobson—have benefited from attention in recent years. The primary interest has been the way these writers enabled a shift away from classical liberalism, with its seeming commitment to negative liberty, and towards a more enhanced role for the state, which at the very least ought to ensure a minimum standard of living for its citizens. This vein of scholarship is rich and vibrant, and has focused on questions such as the relative influences of idealism, organicism, and evolution on ‘new liberal’ thought and the extent to which this school of thought marked a clear departure from earlier forms of liberalism.⁴⁰ In terms of its political impact, a case can be made. In 1893 the Rainbow Circle was formed to develop a programme of progressivism, and its members included not just intellectuals such as Hobson and Hobhouse, but also politicians such as Haldane, Trevelyan, and Samuel. In addition, it has been frequently noted that Asquith was tutored by Green as a young scholar at Balliol. There is broader evidence of interest in and activism about these new ideas, and this made itself felt at the municipal level and in particular regions. But, some have argued, the case can be pressed too far. The Liberals struggled after 1895 to find an agenda on which they could all agree, and it was opposition to tariff reform which galvanized them and led to the election victory in 1906—social reform was only a

³⁷ B. Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments 1815–1830* (Oxford, 1977); idem., ‘Peel: A Reappraisal’, *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), 585–614; idem., *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford, 1988).

³⁸ P. Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–52* (Oxford, 1990).

³⁹ J.P. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London, 1993).

⁴⁰ M. Freedman, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford, 1978); P.F. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978); S. Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1979). For a recent survey see J. Thompson, ‘Modern Liberty Redefined’, in G. Claeys and G. Stedman Jones, eds., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 720–47.

comparatively minor issue at that election. Reforms did come after 1906—old age pensions, unemployment and health insurance, and progressive taxation—but the positive drive largely came from Lloyd George and Churchill, while the rest of the Cabinet tended to view progressivism with some suspicion.⁴¹ That said, if we think in terms of a looser party ‘doctrine’ rather than political ‘theory’, then we can better see the purchase new liberalism had. As defined by Bentley, doctrine is a ‘network of assumptions and associations’ which form a party’s identity: it is ‘what is left of “ideas” and “theories” when parties have assimilated the bits they can cope with and turned them into a slogan, a boxful of phrases, two paragraphs for the current “speakers guide”’.⁴² After 1906 it seemed that such slogans and attitudes commanded more respect than they had previously, and provided an ‘atmosphere’ out of which policies might be developed, even if the direct influence of particular theorists was relatively attenuated.

This tension between formal ideology and informal doctrine could be exploited by critics. After the First World War, progressives and socialists increasingly found themselves charged with holding dangerous and alien ideologies which constituted an assault on the propertied and constitutional order. Such claims were invariably fanciful—and radically misconstrued the aims of mainstream Labour politicians—but they carried electoral bite from the 1920s.⁴³ In pioneering these arguments, the Conservatives became beneficiaries of a conjuring trick: in casting their opponents as ideologues, they could take up the mantle of pragmatism, and argue that conservatism was not an ideology but instead the embodiment of the nation, the transmitter of tradition. This has had a lasting effect on historiography: until the 1980s it was typically argued that ‘conservative philosophy’ was a contradiction in terms, and that the history of the party was guided more by common sense than by committed ideas. Thatcherism, however, precipitated an interest in conservative ideology. E.H.H. Green showed how an intellectual commitment at the turn of the twentieth century—protectionism—was held intensely despite the lack of evidence of its electoral appeal. In a subsequent study, he explored how collectivist strands among the party elite helped shape the move towards ‘consensus’ in the post-war period, and how the ‘new right’ had deep roots among the party faithful who were never really sold on accommodations with socialism. Rather than being marginal, the ‘battle of ideas’ clearly mattered to those who founded the Conservative Research Department in 1929 and the Conservative Political Centre in 1945.⁴⁴ Baldwin, meanwhile, pioneered a ‘doctrine’ which enabled the normalization of inter-war conservatism by linking it to patriotism and localism, with a dash, perhaps, of pastoralism and nostalgia.⁴⁵ In other words, the anti-ideological veneer of conservatism

⁴¹ M. Bentley, *The Climax of Liberal Politics: British Liberalism in Theory and Practice 1868–1918* (London, 1987), pp. 110, 144–45.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 96–7, and Bentley, ‘Party, Doctrine and Thought’ more generally.

⁴³ R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010).

⁴⁴ E.H.H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the Conservative Party, 1880–1914* (London, 1995); Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴⁵ P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999).

was very consciously achieved, and even found nourishment in the philosophical writings of Oakeshott. Arguably, it also spilled over into the practice of political historians working in the first half of the century.

Hopefully, these brief examples demonstrate the false dichotomy of thinking in terms either of ideology or pragmatism. In practice, policy formation and decision-making will be affected by the personal and electoral ambitions of significant participants, but it would be an exaggeration to stress only the 'love of the game' in politics. Similarly, the ideas of intellectuals, theorists, and especially 'experts' will obviously be crucial factors in shaping the priorities of departments and drafting the specifics of legislation. This may work in much subtler and quieter ways than announced influences—one only has to think of Tony Blair's 'third way' or David Cameron's 'Big Society' to recognize that the ideological allegiances which politicians proclaim may not bear much relation to the actual intellectual legwork behind specific policies. Namier's mistake was to have a 'purist' view of ideas—if they were makeshift or flawed he tended to dismiss them, rather than realizing that, whether good or bad, ideas are the lifeblood of politics.⁴⁶ If, as Butterfield stressed, governments exist to do things, they need to have ideas about what things to do, about how to achieve them, and why. 'Politics', as Green argues, 'is about argument, and arguments are about ideas'.⁴⁷ The chains of connection between the place where such ideas originate and that where they are executed may be very long—both spatially and temporally—but they are nevertheless real, and one of the tasks of the historian is to identify them. This does not mean a politician believes what she or he says—ministers often defend policies they oppose, or support them on grounds other than those stated, or, just as likely, are quite indifferent either way. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the utterances that make up parliamentary debates, media interviews, and election speeches, as well as the private memos, personal calls, and moments of indiscretion, all form part of the language of politics.

III

Up to this point, this chapter has been considering the role that ideas played in shaping the commitments and pronouncements of political actors in the major organizations of national life. This tends to define 'politics' in a traditional sense as the centralized institutions of the nation-state: government, parliament, and bureaucracy, an arena increasingly referred to as 'high politics' in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, some historians have argued that this *should* be the primary focus of enquiry, since the elites of these institutions held disproportionate power which meant they were largely insulated from popular pressure. The contrast between 'high' and 'popular' politics (or

⁴⁶ Colley, *Namier*, p. 65.

⁴⁷ Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism*, p. 14.

'low politics' in one account)⁴⁸ was an important area of contention between the 1970s and 1990s, and remains relatively well entrenched in the sympathies of political historians. Nevertheless, over this period, understanding of popular politics has increased enormously. A major area of attention has been the practice of electoral politics, which has moved away from narrow studies of voter choice to embrace the wider political culture of which it was a part.⁴⁹ There has also been serious attention to protest and pressure groups—anti-slavery, free trade, and suffrage movements have perhaps been the most extensively explored, and recent work has increasingly insisted on how they can illuminate political sentiments and attachments beyond the elite.⁵⁰ Even if the *direct* influence of these groups and movements over 'high' politics requires documenting, there seems little doubt of their *indirect* influence through shaping discussion and nudging priorities—certainly, politicians increasingly tailored their messages to appeal to such constituencies.⁵¹

There is, however, a nagging sense that the conceptualization of a distinction between 'high' and 'popular' politics is inadequate. Even if we allow for Lawrence Goldman's argument that we should also think of a 'middle' layer of politics—the groups, organizations, and lobbies that are the lifeblood of civil society and which mediate between the ordinary citizen and the elite politician—there remains the sense that 'politics' conceived in such blocs lacks fluidity and flexibility.⁵² While there is an attraction to the idea that institutions are resistant to popular pressure, this is true not just of 'high politics', but of institutions in general—trade unions and even protest groups necessarily have some organizational structure which constrains their openness. The problem with the high-middle-low metaphor is not so much that it is hierarchical as that it implies homogeneity. Even within 'high politics' there will be all manner of criss-crossing networks of affiliation and antagonism between and within institutions—only an extremely exclusive and cohesive elite would be completely impervious to outside influence, and this was not true even of the relatively aristocratic world of nineteenth-century 'high' politics. It may be more helpful to abandon the tripartite model of politics in favour of something both more complex and more malleable.

Since the 1970s, activists and theorists have argued that the concept of politics needs to be opened up. The philosopher James Tully has argued that for the past two centuries,

⁴⁸ See Bentley and Stevenson, *High and Low Politics*.

⁴⁹ J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, eds., *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain Since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997).

⁵⁰ See, for example, F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008) and H. McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c. 1918–1945* (Manchester, 2011).

⁵¹ J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998); L. Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

⁵² L. Goldman, *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian Britain: The Social Science Association 1857–1886* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 7–11; J. Lawrence, 'Political History', in S. Berger, H. Feldner, and K. Passmore, eds., *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London, 2010), pp. 213–31.

political studies has been about 'the basic languages, structures, and public institutions of the self-contained, representative, democratic, constitutional nation-states and federations of free and equal citizens, political parties and social movements in an international system of states.'⁵³ This has also largely been true of the field of 'political history'. There have, however, been numerous challenges to this approach coming from, *inter alia*, social democrats, feminists, environmentalists, multiculturalists, cosmopolitans, and postmodernists. Tully—drawing on Foucault—argues that the agenda is now moving back to early modern conceptions of 'governance', which were not just about the narrow practice of the democratic nation-state, but about the overlapping ways in which individuals and groups govern themselves and each other, and the way that both governance and freedom are always related to one another.⁵⁴ This does not mean ignoring the considerable power that traditional institutions retain. The philosopher Roberto Unger conveys this well when he distinguishes between two concepts of politics: 'Politics means conflict over the mastery and use of governmental power. But it also means struggle over the resources and arrangements that set the basic terms of our practical and passionate relations. Preeminent among these arrangements is the formative institutional and imaginative context of social life. Politics in the former sense represents a special case of politics in the latter sense: governmental power is often the single most important tool for the stabilization or remaking of a formative context.'⁵⁵ In the fullest sense, then, politics—which includes the power of government in its traditional sense—is the struggle over 'the reproduction and reinvention of society in every aspect of social life'.⁵⁶

Thinking in these terms has important consequences for the historian. It means recognizing that the ideological and institutional fabric of modern life is not fixed, but the result of the contingencies of history—it could have developed differently in the past, and it might be altered in the future. This approach enables us to see a further way in which 'ideas and languages' matter in political history. It is not just modern political *ideologies* which rest on the deep-rooted attitudes, assumptions, and arguments that have evolved over time, but the political *institutions* too. This is one of the reasons why so much history of political thought concerns the early modern period, because it was here that the conceptual underpinnings of modern institutions and practices were formulated. Skinner's *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* is very deliberately titled—it explores the origins of the modern state and of forms of representation and resistance.⁵⁷ The point is not just how ideas and arguments developed, but that they came to be entrenched and naturalized, even operating as 'limits' to what ordinary citizens think is possible. Tully rightly draws parallels between this and Foucault's histories of the

⁵³ J. Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, I: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–5, 154–9.

⁵⁵ R. Unger, *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 145–6.

⁵⁶ R. Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 44.

⁵⁷ Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1978).

present—and sees behind both Nietzsche's genealogical method, showing 'that what we take to be necessary and foundational politically is the unplanned product of contingent controversies and struggles'.⁵⁸ To understand modern ideologies, the political historian may need to have a good grasp of their earlier ancestry and how they have affected thought and argument more recently. But the point can be pressed further—as Alsadair Macintyre argued long ago, it is a 'truism' that 'institutions and practices are always ... constituted by what certain people think and feel about them'.⁵⁹ This means that institutions can be understood in terms of the ideologies that instantiate them—just like ideologies they have complex histories, and just like ideologies they are capable of change. In practice, however, they often seem more 'sticky' than this, and are frequently felt by citizens to be a natural part of the political landscape. They are part of what Unger calls 'frozen politics'—the routines and rituals of social life which *could* be resisted, reformed, and even revolutionized, but which are presumed to be beyond the scope of political change. The historical point, however, is that institutions are the products of contingent evolution just as ideologies are, and there is no reason in either case to naturalize them. Yet, whereas ideological morphology has been a major area of interest in recent years, what might be called institutional morphology has tended to attract less interest.

The institutional landscape of Britain has evolved over time—something understood by Whig historians, with their stress on the unwritten constitution and customary law, even if they did relapse into teleology and so fail to explain why it endured or changed. Indeed, there has been variation in the extent to which institutional reform has been explicitly embraced over the past couple of hundred years.⁶⁰ In the nineteenth century, although 'the constitution' was a shibboleth, in practice its many elements were the subject of contestation and struggle—the electoral system was constantly being rethought at the level of ideology and often also at the level of practice: there was, for example, growing interest in forms of proportional representation by the time of the First World War. In addition, there were numerous reforms of local government and of the central state, the Church and the Lords were subjects of keen discussion, and the issue of imperial devolution ultimately proved explosive. This was a period of comparative vigour in questioning political institutions, but the same cannot be said of economic institutions. Here a lack of experimentation was encouraged by the belief that economics was a science whose operations should not be tainted by the 'unnatural' intrusion of politics. This story was reversed in the twentieth century—there was recognition among many thinkers that economic forms were historical creations, and some interest in experimenting

⁵⁸ J. Tully, 'The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics', in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, p. 19. See also Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge, 1995); R. Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2 (1994), 274–92.

⁵⁹ A. Macintyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London, 1971), p. 263.

⁶⁰ See J.P. Parry, 'The Decline of Institutional Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in D. Feldman and J. Lawrence, eds., *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 164–86.

with different concepts of property and ways of managing the economy. If this was rarely as bold in practice as some progressives and many socialists hoped, there was still little doubt that economic institutions could be reformed.⁶¹ But, oddly, the earlier stress on political experimentation was lost. After the First World War, constitutional reform virtually dried up, with Labour assuming that achievement of universal suffrage was sufficient, and its leaders somewhat awestruck by the traditional trappings of the state. The Conservatives, meanwhile, had much less interest in constitutional reform, and, as we have seen, were able from the 1920s successfully to present any tampering with the supposedly traditional fabric of national life as dangerously ideological, thereby virtually naturalizing institutions. For Ross McKibbin, this lack of interest in serious institutional reform was a disaster which stymied any chance of establishing social democracy.⁶² Ironically, from the 1970s, the turn to neo-liberalism ensured that economic institutions were increasingly put beyond the scope of political control and restored to their supposedly 'natural' domain, while there was only a faltering return to constitutional reform, and then largely outside England. Many of the core institutions of the state had in fact changed, but the outer shell of the constitution was unreformed: the centralized system of politics with its entrenched parties endured, but arguably at the cost of a more energetic democracy, and with the growing estrangement of the populace.

IV

It is apparent, then, that 'languages' play a crucial role in political history: they undergird our ideologies and institutions, and thereby shape the fabric of political life by the forms of power and corresponding freedoms and goods—or lack of them—that they inscribe. They affect what politicians and citizens say and do, but they are not determining. Since the replication of everyday routine politics requires a constant re-enactment of rules, roles, and practices, there is always scope for revision and resistance. Indeed, no institution or ideology can survive without a measure of adaptability, and even those which at first sight appear most resistant to change will, on closer inspection, prove to have been adept at evolution—the modern monarchy being a case in point. Two further points may be stressed. First, the scope of 'politics' is literally as large as can be, and thinking in terms of distinct and isolated realms—'high politics' versus 'popular politics', the 'political' versus the 'social'—misses the interconnections between and across ideologies and institutions, such that minor changes in one area may have major consequences elsewhere, just like vibrations in a web or ripples in a pool. Second, political historians should oppose the Whiggish tendency to see resistance and reform as the sole preserve of 'progressives': conservatives should not be taken at face value, and the

⁶¹ B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900–64* (Manchester, 2007).

⁶² McKibbin, *Parties and People*, pp. 159–64, 175–6, 199–202.

revision of ideologies and institutions can take place on the right as well as the left. Since the 1980s both the radical and populist right in Britain have dramatically redefined the scope of political life. It might also be added that the right has generally been better at appreciating the instrumental nature of political language, whether in exploiting the slogan of 'freedom' against the welfare state in the 1980s or the aspiration to 'democracy' against the European Union in the 2010s.

Having said all this, there are perhaps two risks to focusing on 'languages' in politics. The first is the danger of intellectualism. Namier may well have been wrong to attach little importance to ideas in politics, but he did appreciate that character and personality counted for much. In reacting against Namier, political historians must be careful not to overstate the role of ideas. Often employed as rationalizations and legitimations, the expression of ideas needs still to be matched—where possible—to the underlying motivations for speech and action. But even here we may need to be cautious in presuming coherence and rationality to the self. In contrast to the belief–desire model of agency preferred by many philosophers, Bernard Williams instead proposes that we should see the agent 'awash with many images, many excitements, merging fears and fantasies that dissolve into one another'.⁶³ Geoffrey Hawthorn draws much the same lesson from a study of Thucydides—that while politicians may have purposes and plans, 'they are subject to the limits of mind and body, the fallibilities of character and agency, the force of habit, the unforeseen and unforeseeable, and other people'.⁶⁴ The recent turn to the history of emotions might assist political historians in reconstructing not just the culture of politics, but its irredeemably human qualities—the hopes and frustrations, the friendships and hatreds that run through it and make it what it is.

The second concern with 'languages' is that they need to take account of asymmetries of power. While it is true that ideologies and institutions are the contingent products of historical processes, and so can *theoretically* be remoulded in the future, *in practice* they are extremely varied in their levels of malleability. The danger with some current work on 'political culture' is that while it can sensitively reconstruct the enormous variety of beliefs and practices of hitherto unheard actors, it does not necessarily explain why some preferences get enacted and others get marginalized. It must be recognized, as Dunn once put it—and with apologies for his gendered language—that 'Not only do men make their own history; but some men make far more than their fair share of the history of others'.⁶⁵ The history of political languages must contribute to broader political history by seeking to understand the realities of power and the effects of political structures. In doing this it may well turn out that an uplifting celebration of the potentially diverse and open-ended nature of history may need to be pulled sharply down to earth by the constraining realism of Weber's 'iron cage'.⁶⁶

⁶³ B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), p. 195.

⁶⁴ G. Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 238.

⁶⁵ J. Dunn, 'Practising History and Social Science on "Realist" Assumptions', in Dunn, *Political Obligation*, p. 94.

⁶⁶ See the work of John Dunn, e.g. *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (London, 2000). A commentary relevant to the concerns of this chapter is D. Craig, 'Political Ideas and Real Politics', in N. Turnbull, ed., *Interpreting Governance, High Politics and Public Policy: Essays Commemorating Interpreting British Governance* (New York, 2016), pp. 97–114.

FURTHER READING

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- D. Craig, “High Politics” and the “New Political History”, *Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), 453–76.
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CHAPTER 3

HIGH POLITICS

STEVEN FIELDING

How Britain elects its governments has undergone considerable change since the first Reform Act of 1832. The number of those able to vote has expanded from a few thousand to include virtually every adult. Political parties have been transformed in terms of organization, doctrine, and personnel. Elections are now fought on very different issues and conducted through social media and television rather than small face-to-face meetings. At the same time, the size and shape of government has undergone a huge transformation: it now touches the lives of everyone.

Yet, there have also been significant continuities, which mean that Britain is a democracy only in a certain sense. In particular, while the monarch's formal power has almost disappeared, and notwithstanding recent referenda, the electorate is not sovereign: Britain remains a *parliamentary* democracy. It was the people who adapted to the Westminster system more than the other way around. The century-long expansion of the franchise helped facilitate this outcome: if the process began in 1832, 1950 was the first general election decided purely on the basis of one-person-one-vote. Moreover, in 2015 the same first-past-the-post system was employed to return MPs to the House of Commons as had been used in the eighteenth century. And if most hereditary peers were expunged in 1999, members of the House of Lords, whose influence over legislation can be decisive, remain unelected.

Despite some momentous changes, therefore, Britain has always had a political system in which the accurate representation of the electorate's voice was ultimately subordinated to the creation of effective government.¹ Britain never had anything more than what Kevin Jefferys described as an 'anaemic' political culture, one in which direct and active popular participation was discouraged and remained low.² Even when the Labour and Conservative parties were at their zenith during the 1950s, their members

¹ This brutal truth is rarely expressed as directly, but see C.S. Emden, *The People and the Constitution* (Oxford, 1933), pp. 138–40, at 306–7.

² K. Jefferys, *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy since 1918* (London, 2007).

accounted for less than 10 per cent of adults.³ Most of these members simply paid their subscriptions, if that; some joined merely to access cheap beer or other leisure facilities. But the few who sought to influence policy-making were invariably frustrated, the parties having structures that helped insulate their Westminster leaders from such impudence. This was, moreover, a situation leading academic experts considered right and proper.⁴ As a consequence, and perhaps more than for any other of its West European counterparts, Britain's democracy was characterized by 'the rule of the politician' rather than of the people themselves.⁵

I

It is therefore explicable that it was once taken for granted that the most significant subject of British political history should be the country's national leadership: those who held a prominent position in Parliament or Whitehall or who helped, hindered, or otherwise influenced such figures. Political historians consequently, and almost unthinkingly, kept within narrow, institutional bounds, writing histories that largely ignored the majority outside this magic circle. There was however a strong normative element to the resulting historiography: its authors described not only how it *was*, but also how it *should* be. This was what is now referred to as 'high-political' history, or sometimes 'traditional' or 'elite' history—but once it was simply regarded as 'history'. Such history was taught at universities whose few students mostly consisted of future governors of the empire hoping the past would impart lessons in statecraft. For those educated within this climate, focusing on the elite and seeing history as the story of their struggles for dominance appeared completely natural: that *was* 'politics'. Writing in 1970, the Tudor historian Geoffrey Elton accordingly argued:

The history of public affairs ... [is] the history of 'great men', of the leading few. Whether it concerns itself with kings and popes, or with political parties and polit-bureaus, it chronicles the specialized existence of special people; and the charge that it confines itself to a very limited part of the human experience must therefore be admitted to be essentially true.⁶

That Elton, a deeply conservative historian, felt obliged to defend the 'great men' approach was a sign it was under attack. In 1957 the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm described parliamentary and governmental politics as 'the superstructure of the

³ This is an estimate, as the parties did not consider membership a sufficiently important issue about which to keep accurate records: Library of the House of Commons, 'Membership of UK Political Parties' (June 2012).

⁴ As argued in R. McKenzie, *British Political Parties* (London, 1955).

⁵ J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York, 1950), p. 285.

⁶ G.R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (London, 1970), p. 61.

subject', for the actual 'basis' of political history lay in 'the movements of public opinion and party loyalties and similar phenomena'.⁷ Partly thanks to his work and that of social historians, most notably Edward Thompson, during the 1960s and 1970s this view gained greater ground. And as social history supplanted political history within the historical discipline, adherents of the former argued with greater confidence for the importance of popular pressure—and in particular that of the labour movement—on forcing political change. If political history was ever seriously defined as a few 'great men' climbing the 'greasy pole', at the top of which was a seat at the Cabinet table, by the end of the 1970s that idea was held up to ridicule. In 1979 Tony Judt summarized the new conventional wisdom about 'traditional political history'. This, he claimed, was confined to:

describing in detail the behaviour of ruling classes and the transformations which took place within them. Divorced from social history, this remains, as ever, a form of historical writing adapted to the preservation of the status quo; it concerns itself with activities peculiar to the ruling group, activities of an apparently rational and self-justifying nature.⁸

Since then, criticisms of the limitations of the high-political approach have only proliferated. Some of this was conceptual in nature. Not only were high-political historians accused of focusing on an elite much less influential than they imagined, but feminists and postmodernists upbraided them for holding to a restricted and mistakenly unitary notion of what constituted 'the political'. Such censure often had its origin, like Judt's critique, in politics itself. The post-war expansion of higher education saw a transformation in the kinds of students studying the past and in those employed to teach them. As a result, historians started to identify with the governed, not the governors, and saw high-political history as promoting a reactionary notion of who should—and should not—exercise power. So far as such progressive historians were concerned, the purpose of writing about the past was no longer to supply lessons to an elite so it might better rule, but rather to celebrate those moments when the people challenged authority so as to encourage contemporaries to emulate them. A new set of normative assumptions about how power should be exercised, and by whom, now prevailed.

Whatever the cause, by the start of the twenty-first century, high-political history had lost whatever intellectual respectability it had once possessed. By the 1990s an interest in parliamentary leadership was something for which ambitious historians felt obliged to apologize.⁹ Not only was it considered methodologically obsolete, but it was also thought ethically dubious. In what looked very much like a final judgement, in 2002 Alex Windscheffel claimed it was innocent of 'languages, ideas and cultures'; consisted

⁷ E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Twentieth-Century British Politics', *Past and Present*, 11 (1957), 100–8, at 107–8.

⁸ T. Judt, 'A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians', *History Workshop Journal*, 7 (1979), 66–94, at 87.

⁹ See for example, M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847–1860* (Oxford, 1995), p. 12.

only of narrative; viewed parties as strictly institutional organizations; and thought 'politics' reducible to 'conversations held within the hermetic corridors of Westminster'.¹⁰

Certainly, few serious historians now adhere to that which Elton would have recognized as the 'great man' approach, although biographies remain one of the most popular means through which the public continue to understand political history. Instead, many political historians currently follow what James Vernon described as the 'cultural history of politics'. As Vernon defined it, this is the very mirror image of the high politics written by those he called 'Tory historians', who believed power resided only in 'orthodox political institutions and their representative systems'.¹¹ Adherents of the cultural history of politics, moreover, identify with 'the poor, the disenfranchised, and others dispossessed', that is, those excluded from formal political power. They consequently disavow 'traditional sources of political history', such as 'organisations, personnel or policies of the national institutions of politics', and instead embrace 'ballads, banners, cartoons, handbills, statues ... and the rich vein of ceremonial and iconographic forms'. In return, remaining exponents of high politics, notably Michael Bentley, have dismissed such an interest in language, representation, identity, and discourse as irrelevant to their analysis.¹²

II

This Manichean approach to political history has obscured the extent to which high and cultural approaches can be reconciled so as to develop a more holistic approach to the study of power, one that rescues a concern for leadership from the degraded position into which it has now fallen. As Susan Pedersen suggested, at least some high and cultural political historians share some of the same concerns, notably a belief in the creative and autonomous role of politics.¹³ The high-political historians to whom Pedersen referred were members of the 'Peterhouse School', especially its principal figure Maurice Cowling, who between 1967 and 1975 produced five monographs covering the period 1867–1940.¹⁴ Indeed, of Cowling, who wrote the three most important of these, it has

¹⁰ A. Windscheffel, 'Men or Measures? Conservative Politics, 1815–1951', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 937–51, at 938.

¹¹ J. Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 2–3, 6–7, 336.

¹² M. Bentley, 'Victorian Politics and the Linguistic Turn', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 883–902, at 894.

¹³ S. Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?', in D. Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (New York, 2002), pp. 40–4.

¹⁴ M. Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution. The Passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967) and *The Impact of Labour, 1920–24* (Cambridge, 1971); A. Jones, *The Politics of Reform 1884* (Cambridge, 1972); A.B. Cooke and J. Vincent, *The Governing Passion. Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain, 1885–86* (Brighton, 1974); and M. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler. British Politics and British Policy 1933–1940* (Cambridge, 1975). For background on the 'School', see M. Cowling, 'The Peterhouse School', *New York Review of Books*, 10 Apr. 1986.

been said that his ‘most noted and notorious contribution to political history was precisely “high politics”’.¹⁵ Yet, if many see Cowling’s work as exemplifying the ‘greasy pole’ view, his approach—if not that of all the other members of Peterhouse—was much more sophisticated. Indeed, while differing on how to explain it, and having very different normative assumptions about its merits, Cowling shared with later cultural historians the same basic aim: to explain how the Westminster elite retained its pre-eminent role within Britain’s changing political system.¹⁶

Attacked at the time and later ridiculed when not gratuitously ignored, Cowling’s work contains clues as to how high and cultural political historians can speak to each other. Such a synthesis could enable all historians to establish a more measured appreciation of the role of political leadership within Britain’s past. For even such a materialist critic of high politics’ explanatory limitations as Hobsbawm conceded of Britain’s ruling class during the first half of the twentieth century: ‘All in all, theirs has been a success story.’ Their achievement in limiting the impact of popular political pressure was, he admitted, at least partly due to the skills of leaders such as Bonar Law, David Lloyd George, and Stanley Baldwin.¹⁷ Similarly, Jon Parry, whose work has explored in some depth the character of the nineteenth-century political elite, argued that an exclusive focus on leadership can be no substitute for analysis that draws together all the ‘members of the political nation in one picture’, so as ‘to arrive at a better idea of the nature and effectiveness of the channels—organizational and ideological—which linked them’.¹⁸ Indeed, even Geoffrey Elton criticized the kind of ‘pure political history’ that just focused on organizations or leaders and so was ‘self-contained and remote from the realities of the historical experience’.¹⁹

It is one thing to suggest that political leadership needs to be integrated into broader accounts of the past. But it is quite another to identify what precisely was its place—that is, how much agency it enjoyed—in shaping the development of Britain’s partial democracy, and so the level of importance historians should grant to the high-politics approach. For, if *all* historians are bad at just *one* thing, it is explaining the dynamics of change. The main weaknesses of high politics is that its adherents often simply assumed that their subjects enjoyed a pre-eminent role in shaping events; a significant drawback of cultural politics is that those who reconstruct the wider context of formal politics usually fail to establish its impact. A chapter such as this can therefore go only so far in suggesting how this tricky but critical question might best be answered.

¹⁵ P. Williamson, ‘Maurice Cowling and Modern British Political History’, in R. Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green, and R. Whiting, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism* (London, 2010), p. 131.

¹⁶ See for example, C. Hall, K. McClelland, and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁷ Hobsbawm, ‘British Politics’, p. 101.

¹⁸ J.P. Parry, ‘High and Low Politics in Modern Britain’, *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), 753–70, at 757.

¹⁹ Elton, *Political History*, p. 6.

III

During the 1960s and 1970s, 'Peterhouse' appeared similar to a rearguard action against the inevitable advance of a social history that stressed the supreme importance of class to politics. Some social historians were so confident that their 'history from below' held the key to historical explanation that they found it hard to take Peterhouse seriously. In his review of Cowling's *The Impact of Labour*, James Hinton even snarkily confessed to needing 'a conscientious suspension of disbelief to read the book at all'.²⁰ This high-handed attitude 'Peterhouse' returned with enthusiasm: Andrew Jones disparagingly rejected social historians' concern for 'the inarticulate in their unknown graves'.²¹ Underpinning such juvenile posturing was political antagonism and normative belief. 'Peterhouse' was strongly associated with the Conservative party: A.B. Cooke even became a leading party official and peer while Cowling stood for election under its colours, and held fast to a religiously informed Toryism that inclined him towards a nascent Thatcherism. 'Peterhouse' admired the leadership it studied.²² Most social historians, like Hinton, in contrast identified with the radical wing of the Labour party or organizations much further to the left, such as the Communist party. Many wanted to overturn the status quo, at the heart of which was the Westminster system, through extra-parliamentary action.

Described by Jose Harris as the 'demon king of British political history', Cowling's combative personality, if nothing else, meant he was disinclined to seek a consensus with critics.²³ There were also basic philosophical reasons why Cowling's work then appeared irreconcilable with more radical currents. A devotee of inter-war and post-war conservative historians—particularly Herbert Butterfield—who admired a British 'tradition' in which change apparently only occurred in harmony with precedent, Cowling was similarly critical of progressives who believed in change based on abstract principles.²⁴ Thinking liberalism's essentialist understanding of reason meant it could not comprehend the necessary complexity of political action, he set out his perspective in *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (1963), which leant heavily on the work of the conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott.²⁵ It argued that while Westminster leaders were an important element in the political process, 'over very large areas [they were],

²⁰ J. Hinton, 'The Beginning of Modern British Politics', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 24 (1972), 64.

²¹ Jones, *Politics of Reform*, p. 236.

²² P. Ghosh, 'Towards the Verdict of History: Mr Cowling's Doctrine', in M. Bentley, ed., *Public and Private Doctrine. Essays in British History presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 174–5.

²³ J. Harris, 'High Table' [book reviews], *History Today*, 45 (Feb. 1995), 61.

²⁴ C.T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, CT, 2004), pp. 122–3; M. Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), 155–76, at 159–60.

²⁵ References in this paragraph come from M. Cowling, *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 119, 178–9, 181, 184, 198, 206–7, 211.

in the grip of, dependent on, and in one sense determined by, conditions over which they have no means of exercising conscious control'. Therefore, to achieve their ends, politicians worked within the 'political structure', a result of 'the arbitrary exercise of power and an arbitrary conjunction of circumstances' and which had 'accumulate[d] around itself a covering of conventional habits, reasonable laws, acceptable customs and well-understood liberties which are then taken to have a validity of their own'. This was, in effect, Cowling's version of 'tradition': one in which Westminster—rightly, in his view—was the main stage.

It was to validate his normative view of political change that Cowling turned to the past. He aspired to apply a 'total' or 'organic' approach, terms he took from Butterfield, who had bemoaned the extent to which political history had been 'wrenched out of an immense sociological totality', resulting in a partial and 'insulated constitutional history'.²⁶ By reintegrating politics back into this totality, Cowling claimed, historians would then see 'what happens to intentions, ideals, doctrines and advice once they have taken their chance in a vast and unpredictable world'. It would thereby throw light on the complexity of political action.²⁷

Cowling believed that the proper function of the elite—which, according to him, comprised party leaders, prominent civil servants, newspaper barons, and their editors—was to ensure politics maintained its essentially pre-democratic character, one in accordance with the traditional 'structure'. Significantly, Cowling's conception of the elite firmly rejected the individualism favoured by other high-political historians. He considered biographies—the form employed by most exponents up to that point—to be of little value given how they abstracted their subjects from the Westminster system, the heart of the political structure, in which they were largely constituted.²⁸ Politicians and their parties had to be seen 'in relation to all the rest', while 'the politics of continuous tension' was vital to any understanding of decision-making. Only this, Cowling claimed, explained why, for example, MPs embraced extensive franchise reform in the Second Reform Act of 1867. Had they been able to free their 'actions, and their votes, from all considerations of party interest, duty, situation and advantage', most parliamentarians would have settled for something much less radical.²⁹

More generally, Cowling claimed, individual members of the elite 'cannot usefully be said themselves to have wanted, desired, or believed anything except what was wanted by all other participants in the system'. For by the time anyone had become part of the elite they had 'adopted a way of thinking and acting whose function [was] the playing of a role which their positions as repositories of the hopes and ambitions of their followers, force[d] them to respect'. This meant that even the most apparently powerful of statesmen 'reflected as much as they created the climate in which they worked'.³⁰

²⁶ M. Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, I (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 221, 231.

²⁷ Cowling, *Political Science*, pp. 45, 52, 123.

²⁸ Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, p. 5.

²⁹ Cowling, *Reform Bill*, p. 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 311–12.

Unlike his Peterhouse colleagues, Cowling did not therefore consider the elite fully in command of events or regard their actions as solely determined by personal ambition. If they were guilty of advancing a 'greasy pole' view, he was not.³¹ Cowling however chose not to draw attention to the differences of emphasis he had with those closest to him. Instead he enthusiastically denigrated social historians who, he asserted, believed in a 'simple, one-way relationship' between economic and political change—for political decisions were, he stated, *not* 'derivative offshoots of pre-existing social conditions' and working-class demands. Even if only because they were advanced through the established political structure, such demands were 'transformed in order to be made tolerable to ruling opinion'.³² On that basis, Cowling came to blows with Royden Harrison over responsibility for the 1867 Reform Act, firmly rebutting Harrison's proposition that the Act was the product of proletarian pressure. Instead, he claimed Disraeli supported dramatically extending the franchise because that suited his immediate parliamentary purposes. It was, Cowling argued, Disraeli's 'position in the political system'—not popular force—which meant he favoured reform.³³

The extra-parliamentary pressure undoubtedly evident in 1867 was in any case a rare feature of Britain's modern political history. It did not detract from Cowling's belief that, for the most part, the elite was able to persuade the newly enfranchised into accepting their subordination within the Westminster system. In accounting for this success, Cowling did not however rely on social influences such as 'deference', which was how some explained the incorporation of the working class.³⁴ Instead, he saw it as primarily due to the deployment of the politicians' arts, principally rhetoric, maintaining that it was the 'language they used, the images they formed, the myths they left' that enabled leaders to shape what the people thought. 'High politics was', he stated, 'primarily a matter of rhetoric and manoeuvre', with the former used to 'provide new landmarks for the electorate' and the latter to ensure 'the right people provided them'.³⁵

For Cowling, 'public opinion' stood in a dependent relationship to the elite and existed to be moulded into a shape of the latter's choosing. Politicians, even with the arrival of a fully democratic franchise, remained 'constructive' and tried 'not merely to say what electors wanted to hear but to make electors want them to say what they wanted to say in the first place'.³⁶ For Cowling, the elite's ability to manipulate the people into enjoying a 'vicarious satisfaction at the leadership of the politicians who operated the system', rather than demanding a direct say for themselves, was the basis for Westminster's supremacy.³⁷ He nonetheless conceded that this rhetoric had its social limits, describing Labour after its 1931 general election rout as possessing an irreducible core of 'die-hard

³¹ Cooke and Vincent, *Governing Passion*, pp. 20–1, 22; Jones, *Politics of Reform*, pp. 11–12.

³² Cowling, *Reform Bill*, pp. 1, 3, 315–16, 339.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

³⁴ For example, R. McKenzie and A. Silver, *Angels in Marble: Working Class Conservatives in Urban England* (Chicago, 1968).

³⁵ Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, pp. 4–5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

support' within the working class—one which guaranteed it the kind of 'social indestructability' the Liberals, most notably, had lacked.³⁸

IV

Despite announcing his intention to produce a general survey of the years 1850–1940 and write monographs on the inter-war and post-war periods, Cowling abandoned mainstream political history during the mid-1970s.³⁹ Had he pursued these projects, Cowling's version of high politics might have been harder to ignore or less easy to disparage: it might also have become more consistent. In that regard Cowling was unfortunate in his followers, a small and eclectic group, as few of them saw any purpose in doing more than preserving his memory, as opposed to creatively engaging with those cultural currents that subsequently engulfed political history.⁴⁰

Yet, Cowling's work contained within it the potential for helping the development of a measured appreciation of the role of leadership consistent with important aspects of the cultural history of politics. It would however be wrong to claim that Cowling's approach, now four decades old, does not require some judicious revision. Even those few historians who sympathize with it concede Cowling's work was uneven and incomplete. Robert Crowcroft considered that his lack of regard for political parties meant Cowling's understanding of the organizational context in which the elite operated was 'simplistic'.⁴¹ Parry also suggested that the Cowlingite emphasis on the importance of immediate calculation meant it had little to say about the long-term development of policy.⁴² There are, undoubtedly, other areas that need recalibration to take account of advances in the historiography.

So far as this chapter is concerned, the most significant aspect of Cowling's approach to high politics is his understanding of the relationship between the elite and society. Despite his reputation, Cowling was interested in the world outside Westminster, making forceful claims for the elite's ability to constitute popular political subjectivities. That he did not spend much time substantiating them does not mean Cowling thought the relationship inconsequential. As he wrote in *The Impact of Labour*: '[a] study of the impact of politicians on British public opinion would be an important extension of this book, while an understanding of the Labour and Conservative parties 'as aspects of total social history' would be similarly 'desirable'. Cowling nonetheless considered analysis of

³⁸ Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, p. 22.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴⁰ For an uncompromising extension of Cowling's high politics to the 1940s Labour party, see R. Crowcroft, *Attlee's War: World War II and the Making of a Labour Leader* (London, 2011).

⁴¹ R. Crowcroft, 'Maurice Cowling and the Writing of British Political History', *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), 279–86, at 284–5.

⁴² Parry, 'High and Low', 755.

the character of the elite to be an 'essential preliminary' to properly assessing that impact and analysing those parties.⁴³

Most historians who responded to *The Impact of Labour* when it was published in 1971 believed, like the social historian Peter Stead, that had Cowling extended his frame of analysis to include the extra-parliamentary domain, he would have been disappointed to discover that class 'experience' had immunized workers against elite rhetoric.⁴⁴ The political historian Kenneth Morgan was similarly confident that high politics became 'out of date' after the 1918 Reform Act gave all working-class men and most women the vote. After that point, he claimed, Labour and the Conservatives 'flourished on the partisanship and sectarianism of a [class] divided society', to which it was their function to give voice.⁴⁵

Few are now so certain. In a 1983 essay on Chartism, Gareth Stedman Jones, whose work had hitherto emphasized the importance of class to politics, altered tack to argue that social changes 'are not bearers of essential political meaning in themselves. They are only endowed with particular political meanings so far as they are effectively articulated through specific forms of political discourse and practice.'⁴⁶ Building on this insight, Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor later argued that political interests and identities are not 'predetermined and self-evident, only requiring recognition and expression by the parties'. They were, instead, just 'signposts for political behaviour in so far as language allows them to be described and articulated.'⁴⁷ That workers' social experience ineluctably led them towards a consciousness of class that could be translated into clear-cut political loyalties is a belief now possessed by few historians. In particular, most current students of the Labour party doubt its leaders merely tapped into fully formed class identities; some even argue the party tried to impose its own vision on workers, albeit with varying degrees of success.⁴⁸

V

It was historians from outside the high-politics tradition—renegade social historians influenced by postmodernism, such as Stedman Jones in the first instance—who conducted such innovative work. Few Cowlingites explored in any detail relations between

⁴³ Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ P. Stead, '1922 and All That', *Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), 201–8, at 207–8.

⁴⁵ K.O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity. The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918–1922* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 351–3, 355–6, 373; see also Morgan's letter in the *Guardian*, 8 Sept. 2005.

⁴⁶ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 242.

⁴⁷ J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, 'Introduction', in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, eds., *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 18.

⁴⁸ See for example, L. Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain 1951–64* (Basingstoke, 2003); S. Fielding, P. Thompson, and N. Tiratsoo, *'England Arise!' The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995); and J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

parliamentary leaders and those they aspired to lead. In 1983 Michael Bentley did however analyse the extent to which party 'doctrine' structured elite thinking, rather than the other way round.⁴⁹ This was a development of his earlier account of how the 'Liberal cosmology' prevented its leading adherents from adequately responding to the dramatic changes initiated by the First World War.⁵⁰ These were modest but significant extensions of the high-politics frame of reference.

It was, however, not until Philip Williamson's 1999 study of Stanley Baldwin that the first sustained Cowlingite—indeed, given its originality, it might be better described as neo-Cowlingite—analysis of the relationship between elite and people was attempted.⁵¹ Measured through electoral support and popular regard, Baldwin was by far the most successful member of the inter-war elite. Williamson's explanation of this achievement led him to elaborate on Cowling's assertions about leadership rhetoric. Williamson argued that Baldwin accomplished his pre-eminence largely through public speech. But Williamson did not claim Baldwin crudely imposed his words on a passive public, instead contending that he relied on an ability to appear to reflect—while actually constructing—attitudes. Perhaps even more significant than his dialectical view of public speech, Williamson expanded the concept of rhetoric to include the Conservative leader's presentation of his public persona, involving such apparently minor matters as employing his pipe at suitable moments to project a reassuring, statesmanlike image. This persona, Williamson argued, was a product of Baldwin's conscious intention as well as of wider cultural forces, including the press, radio, and the cinema, over which he had little control.

Williamson's attempt to specify the dynamics of elite rhetoric, and to expand understandings of how leaders promulgated their message, did not occur in a historiographical vacuum. It nonetheless represented a significant moment in the development of high politics, marking a crucial bridge between it and cultural politics. For, if Cowling had gestured towards its importance, it was not until the later 1980s that modern British political historians started taking rhetoric seriously.⁵² By the 1990s elite rhetoric had, moreover, become a subject in which cultural historians, most conspicuously Bill Schwarz, had a particular interest, seeing it, as had Cowling, as an important means through which leaders shaped popular opinion.⁵³ If much of this work focused on words, some did as Williamson and took a more generous view, to embrace film or the

⁴⁹ M. Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', in M. Bentley and J. Stevenson, eds., *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain: Ten Studies* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 123–53.

⁵⁰ M. Bentley, *The Liberal Mind 1914–1929* (Cambridge, 1977).

⁵¹ P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 12–16, 79–87, 338.

⁵² The first significant evidence of this interest being H.C.G. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and Politics in Britain, 1860–1950', in P.J. Waller, ed., *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 34–58. See also Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York, 2001).

⁵³ B. Schwarz, 'Politics and Rhetoric in the Age of Mass Culture', *History Workshop Journal*, 46 (1998), 129–59.

very person of the politician themselves.⁵⁴ Schwarz included 'the whole paraphernalia of invented rituals and to the myriad ways in which a national political culture came to be organised'.⁵⁵ Highlighting Lord Curzon's role in this process, Schwarz's emphasis on the rhetoric of ritual brought into view work on elite-invented ceremonials which, in Britain's case, proliferated at the same time as the franchise expanded, and one of whose purposes was to popularize adherence to patriotism, hierarchy, and continuity.⁵⁶ As Williamson also recognized, the monarchy and the rituals to which it gave rise were useful and popular means for the promulgation of establishment values.⁵⁷

These developments brought the concerns of high and cultural politics closer together. But they did not address the efficacy of elite rhetoric, however it was conceived. Nor did they clarify the extent to which the predominance of Westminster leaders, something so important to the high-political view, came from their own efforts, as Cowling intimated, or if this was rather the consequence of a fortuitous conjuncture. For Cowling focused on a very particular period—the 1860s to the 1930s—one in which, he claimed, leading politicians' public role was an amalgam of 'corporate monarch, witch-doctor and bard', in which they acted as 'entertainers ... crusaders or philosophers ... the unacknowledged poets of the time'.⁵⁸ This was however a period in which, according to John Vincent—writing of the 1860s—the central place of politics in national life was unique, comparable as it was with what drama, sport, and liturgy became in later times.⁵⁹ Peter Clarke suggests this regard continued into the Edwardian period, with contemporaries looking upon even the most obscure MPs as celebrities.⁶⁰ Yet how likely was it that such a position owed anything much to the agency of leaders? Were they instead merely beneficiaries of cultural processes in which aspiration and deference combined to invest political activity with special significance and endowed its participants with considerable prestige?⁶¹

During this period, the elite benefited from how their words and persons were presented to the nation. As H.C.G. Matthew emphasizes, by the 1880s, press agencies and telegraph services could rapidly transmit leading politicians' words to newspaper

⁵⁴ J. Ramsden, 'Baldwin and Film', in N. Pronay and D.W. Spring, eds., *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918–45* (London, 1982), pp. 126–43; M. Francis, 'The Labour Party: Modernisation and the Politics of Restraint', in B. Conekin, F. Mort, and C. Waters, eds., *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London, 1999), pp. 152–70.

⁵⁵ Schwarz, 'Rhetoric', 150–1.

⁵⁶ D. Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c. 1820–1977', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 101–64.

⁵⁷ P. Williamson, 'The Monarchy and Public Values, 1900–1953', in A. Olechnowicz, ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge 2007), pp. 223–57.

⁵⁸ Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, pp. 8–9, 10.

⁵⁹ J. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party* (New York, 1966), p. xv.

⁶⁰ P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971).

⁶¹ As argued in T.R. Tholfsen, 'The Origins of the Birmingham Caucus', *Historical Journal*, 11 (1959), 161–84, and J. Cornford, 'The Transformation of Conservatism in the Late Nineteenth Century', *Victorian Studies*, 7 (1963), 35–66.

readers. Matthew Roberts further emphasizes the importance of the late Victorian local and regional press in shaping political identities, but he also notes that that this was a brief moment when ‘profit and politics’ were in harmony. As Matthew argues, the contraction of the provincial press, which began before 1914, and the reluctance of popular national titles to directly report speeches was a significant factor in the demise of at least a particular form of rhetoric.⁶² The parties had earlier shown an impressive facility to adapt to changes in popular forms of communication, notably turning the advertising industry’s poster to good effect in the late Victorian period.⁶³ And, according to Jon Lawrence, the inter-war period was still one in which they exerted significant influence over the shape of popular politics.⁶⁴ According to Schwarz, however, by the 1930s, party leaders believed Britain’s ‘Americanized’ popular culture—one in which politics was increasingly mediated by a press, cinema, and radio unwilling to report their words at length, if at all—meant they were losing contact with the people.⁶⁵

If most now recognize that the elite’s aptitude to beguile the public with their rhetoric was increasingly circumscribed as the twentieth century progressed, few political historians have spent time closely analysing the nature of that ability. Cowling was hardly alone in appearing to assume that a message sent from Westminster was one the people uncritically consumed.⁶⁶ However, as a variety of historians now appreciate, studies of rhetoric—or any kind of discourse—which assess how it was conceived and presented to the exclusion of its reception are incomplete. For the nature of its dispatch—be it in person; from the platform; on the printed page or cinema screen; through radio, television, or Facebook—influences the impact of any message, while the character and location of the inevitably disaggregated audience also structures how the message is understood.⁶⁷

It is, however, extremely difficult for students of the past to establish with much precision the extent to which politicians turned audiences’ heads. Williamson attempted to provide some kind of answer by suggesting that the content of Baldwin’s speeches itself implied their effectiveness. That the Conservative leader reiterated the same themes, and over a prolonged period—Williamson surmised—meant they must have met with a popular response. For had they not, he presumed, Baldwin would not have repeated

⁶² Matthew, ‘Rhetoric’, pp. 39, 54–6; M. Roberts, ‘Constructing a Tory World-View: Popular Politics and the Conservative Press in Late-Victorian Leeds’, *Historical Research*, 79 (2006), 115–43, at 142.

⁶³ J. Thompson, ‘“Pictorial Lies”?—Posters and Politics in Britain c. 1880–1914’, *Past and Present*, 197 (2007), 177–210.

⁶⁴ J. Lawrence, ‘The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War’, *Past and Present*, 190 (2006), 185–216, at 204–6.

⁶⁵ Schwarz, ‘Rhetoric’.

⁶⁶ For example, I. McLean claimed Margaret Thatcher to have been a brilliant rhetorician but declined to show how: see his *Rational Choice and British Politics* (Oxford, 2001), p. 205.

⁶⁷ D. Tanner, ‘Constructing the Constructors: Institutional Cultures, Associational Life and Their Impact on Inter-War Politics’, paper presented to the 31st annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Conference on British Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 26–28 March 2004; G. Stedman Jones, ‘The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s’, *History Workshop Journal*, 42 (1996), 19–35, at 30–1.

them, given that the basic purpose of all public speech is to persuade.⁶⁸ While holding some danger of becoming a tautology, this is nonetheless a plausible methodology, and one that might be employed to further explore the effectiveness of rhetoric.⁶⁹ But to help them better establish the effect of elite rhetoric, or merely to better contextualize it, high-political historians might be advised to also employ sources associated with cultural history. For example, in dramatizing Britain's political history on the big screen during the 1930s, filmmakers consistently told stories of selfless statesmen advancing the national interest, presenting their elite protagonists as wise, paternalistic, and humane. At the same time they diminished belief in the political agency of ordinary people by presenting them as a fickle, often violent mob. These popular depictions suggest the largely working-class cinema-going public looked on such representations of leadership in positive terms.⁷⁰ These benign dramatic depictions of the political class were, however, transformed during the decades that followed 1945.⁷¹

VI

It is understandable why so many today consider antediluvian an approach to political history that focuses on its representative institutions and leading figures. Since the 1970s, power has apparently drained from Westminster thanks to the European Union, devolution, and global capitalism. Leaders of parties that aspire to hold national office have become increasingly unpopular and periodically denounced for 'sleaze'. Political parties are empty shells, whose members account for just 1 per cent of the electorate.⁷² So diminished was their influence and so powerful had the media in comparison become, Jon Lawrence concluded in 2009, that the future of British democracy lay in the hands of broadcasters, not politicians.⁷³ Historians are creatures of the context in which they write, so it is no wonder they now find it more satisfying, intellectually and personally, to focus on identities crafted within the private sphere—an arena which postmodernism and neo-liberalism stipulate is the most significant site for the generation and exercise of 'power'.

⁶⁸ Williamson, *Baldwin*, pp. 12–18.

⁶⁹ Students of film genre similarly suggest that when a series of movies rework the same storylines it is because such narratives evoke a positive response among audiences: T. Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York, 1981) and S. Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (2000).

⁷⁰ S. Fielding, 'British Politics and Cinema's Historical Dramas, 1929–38', *Historical Journal*, 56 (2013), 487–511.

⁷¹ S. Fielding, 'A Mirror for England? Cinematic Representations of Politicians and Party Politics, ca. 1944–64', *Journal of British Studies*, 47 (2008), 107–28.

⁷² Library of the House of Commons, 'Membership of UK Political Parties' (August 2015).

⁷³ J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), p. 254.

If this is an explicable perspective, there is still much wrong with it. Prime ministers can still go to war despite millions of citizens taking to the streets to demonstrate their opposition. Governments remain responsible for spending more than one-third of Britain's gross domestic product and, through legislation, shape everyday behaviour. The general election campaign is still one of those moments that help define who the British are, and who they are not. The death of representative politics—the rule of the politician—and so the unimportance of leadership within the widely derided 'Westminster bubble' has been greatly exaggerated. For no other reason than that, political leadership continues to be a relevant historical subject.

But that does not mean high-political historians should not reconsider their approach. For, just like those men and sometimes women who are their subjects, high-political historians need to take account of new ways of thinking. This chapter devoted so much attention to Maurice Cowling because his work suggests high-political history contains within it seeds that can be developed to allow it to engage with newer forms of historical explanation without losing its unique emphasis. High politics, at least under the neo-Cowlingite flag outlined here, can save itself from its current irrelevance by casting a new eye on its own traditions and practitioners. As suggested, Philip Williamson's work indicates a way forward. Williamson showed the willingness to explore—in a way Cowling did not—the nature and efficacy of the elite's relationship with the people. He recognized that leadership was manifested in more than words expressed in Westminster and Whitehall, that it depended on varying cultural forms to express itself, and that this entailed that its meaning and impact could only partly be determined by leaders themselves.

Williamson consciously developed some of Cowling's insights, but was also sensitive to some of the interests of cultural political history. There is every reason for this process to go further and for students of leadership to start tackling more inconvenient topics. Cowling focused only on those moments in which the elite succeeded in imposing themselves on events—taking command of franchise reform in 1867, accommodating the emergent Labour party within the Westminster system. Even Williamson studied one of the most successful politicians of the twentieth century. But what of later extensions of the franchise, when the elite felt change had been forced upon them? What of those leaders who failed to evoke a positive popular response? In the late 1930s, Mass Observation claimed its research showed Britons did not 'feel sufficiently strongly that they are able to speak through Parliament', that many had resigned themselves to being voiceless and regarded politics as 'just another of the forces which exploit them and of which they know little or nothing'.⁷⁴ Since then such attitudes have become more extensive. Indeed, the current 'anti-politics' temper is one reason why Cowling's concerns now seem so antiquarian to so many historians. A high-political history that continues to dodge explanation of the origins of this contemporary phenomenon will remain—and deserve to remain—irrelevant.

⁷⁴ Mass-Observation, *Britain* (1939), pp. 9, 12–13.

FURTHER READING

- S. Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?', in D. Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (New York, 2002), pp. 36–56.
- B. Schwarz, 'Politics and Rhetoric in the Age of Mass Culture', *History Workshop Journal*, 46 (1998), 129–59.
- P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999).
- P. Williamson, 'Maurice Cowling and Modern British Political History', in R. Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green, and R. Whiting, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism* (2010), pp. 105–52.

CHAPTER 4

POPULAR POLITICS

MALCOLM CHASE

THOUGH part of what might be termed historians' 'mental furniture', *popular politics* is an elastic term that evades close definition. For medieval and early modern historians it generally denotes 'ordinary', non-elite subjects as audiences for, or interlocutors with, elite political actions. Modern historians often prefer it to the term 'working-class politics', signalling authorial discomfort with the connotations of class and/or a recognition that, outwith the establishment realm, political ideas were often trans-class. And for the nineteenth century, popular politics has typically served as a synonym for radicalism, an umbrella term for a succession of movements which, from the 1770s, emphasized the sovereignty of a people largely excluded from formal exercise of political power.

No usage is entirely satisfactory, especially given incremental extensions to the franchise in 1832, 1867, 1884, 1918, and 1928. The 'modernization' of British political life from the nineteenth century is typically held to include the triumph of party and the taming of the 'popular'. Yet petitioning, collective assembly, and the occupation of public space remained integral to the politics of those who regarded themselves as excluded from power. From the Tichborne campaign (bracketing, and some might argue overshadowing, the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts), British politics has also been punctuated by causes unbound by party-political fetters. Examples include the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century campaigns for women's suffrage; the far right in the inter-war period; the development of 'green', feminist, and gay politics after the Second World War; and, at the end of our period, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP, founded in 1993). All asserted that they were popular, in the sense of being rooted in the views of—and giving voice to—those outside organized politics.

The discussion that follows suggests some defining principles and characteristics of popular political activity; it then takes a broadly chronological form, identifying in the first half of the nineteenth century a diminishing resort to violence and the growing importance of memory and commemoration (notably in Scotland and Wales, less so in England). The most momentous of all modern British political mobilizations, Chartism, was a hinge on which much turned and, no less critically, failed to turn. This is seen in the rise of popular liberalism and in the more 'masculine' reform organization of the

1860s, the decade that also saw the emergence of a concerted movement for female suffrage. Throughout our period a sense of political and economic exclusion was a consistently animating force in popular politics, but there often ran alongside it a burgeoning imperial nationalism that softened the boundaries of class. The tensions of the 1930s, played out at the polar ends of popular politics by fascism and the unemployed workers' movement, gave way from 1945 to the maturing of universal suffrage within the context of an organized two-party system, suggesting that popular politics had at last been tamed. The revival of 'third party' alternatives from the 1970s, however, revealed that this was not so, and the forms taken by popular politics at the turn of the millennium are suggestive of a widespread rejection of organized politics and even a regression to the grumbling endemic in pre-industrial societies.

I

The defining principle of popular politics has seldom been one of simple contestation. Many causes have loudly asserted their loyalty to what they conceive as a deeper and more enduring entity than the political establishment, be it nation, monarch, religion, heritage, 'the rights of man' or, most recently, intergenerational justice. In addition, the roots of many political pressure and interest groups have been popular, in that they largely found their supporters beyond the social strata that supplied the political establishment. As the journalist Douglas Jerrold observed of an 1879 meeting of London's Patriotic Club (an offshoot of the Land and Labour League, formed by followers of the Chartist Bronterre O'Brien): 'Every tone, every aspect, every sentiment impressed upon you the fact that this was no gathering of tribunes, but a homely meeting of ordinary British artisans', expressing the 'prosaic discontent of the toiler who finds times hard and the hearts of the rulers harder'.¹ For a twentieth-century example of the same phenomenon one might point to the 'John Hampden New Freedom Party', named after the seventeenth-century parliamentarian and founded on a perception that English sovereignty was undemocratically subordinated to the Westminster Parliament. It was retitled the English National Party (ENP) in 1974, in imitation of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party, and two years later it could claim 5,000 members. However, it is now only remembered—if at all—for by-election campaigners dressed in Beefeater costumes and as the last political refuge of a disgraced ex-Labour minister, John Stonehouse.²

The ENP has a place in the rich history of Britain's fringe political parties, but few serious scholars would locate it other than beyond the pale of serious politics. Yet in their

¹ *Weekly Dispatch*, 6 July 1879, cited in A. Whitehead, 'Dan Chatterton and his "Atheistic Communistic Scorchers"', *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (1988), 87.

² D. Boothroyd, *Politico's Guide to the History of British Political Parties* (London, 2001), pp. 87–8; 'A New Haven for Stonehouse', *The Guardian*, 15 Apr. 1976, 26.

different ways, the Patriotic Club in the 1870s and the ENP a century later alert us to one of the great but unfathomable truths of popular politics: it exists at its most basic and pervasive level in the realm of grumbling, a universal human activity but one that largely evades the attention of serious historians. Fringe political groups typically articulate otherwise submerged currents of opinion within the politics of the everyday, articulations that often resurface, later and less eccentrically, in more organized and purposeful forms. Thus the Patriotic Club prefigured late Victorian socialism, especially the Social Democratic Federation, and the ENP prefigured many of the preoccupations of UKIP (despite the UK of its title, essentially an English organization).

Mirroring the typology (suggested by the anthropologist James Scott) of the background noise of political discontent that characterizes agrarian societies, we can conceptualize a spectrum of behaviours: grumbling, swearing, slander and character assassination, dissimulation, and false compliance. All are constitutive of popular politics but each falls short of organization in the form either of collective resistance, a protest movement, or a political party.³ Subsequent activities such as appeals, petitions, demonstrations, and the occupation of public space may constitute stages towards either a protest movement or formal political organization. The use of violence—mirroring other ‘everyday’ strategies of resistance in pre-industrial societies, such as threatening letters and acts of sabotage—largely receded after the 1840s, until their adoption in the decade before the First World War by the Women’s Social and Political Union (founded in 1903).

During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the repertoire of British popular politics was both broader and not infrequently more combative. In the 1790s, elements of popular support for revolutionary France evolved—in the face of British government repression—into an underground movement that was fully prepared to countenance revolution. Members of the so-called United Britons and United Englishmen (named in imitation of the more sophisticated and numerous United Irishmen) included many that previously had belonged to constitutional agitations such as the London Corresponding Society. The subsequently much celebrated ‘Scottish Martyrs’ (six men transported to New South Wales and a seventh hanged and beheaded for treason in October 1794) had similarly belonged to the Society of Friends of the People or the Dundee Friends of Liberty.⁴ In the early nineteenth century this same Jacobin conspiratorial tradition surfaced in the so-called Despard Conspiracy (1802) and, in 1820, in a Scottish rising and the Cato Street Conspiracy to assassinate the Cabinet.

The commemoration of certain forceful mobilizations against the establishment has been an explicit phenomenon at subsequent periods of popular political tension. Thus the 1840s saw the erection of several Scottish memorials to the 1820 insurgency. The latter was also a point of reference during the reform crisis of 1830–2 and for the

³ J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1985), pp. 29, 284.

⁴ R.A.E. Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience, 1795–1803* (Gloucester, 1983); E.V. Macleod, ‘Scottish Martyrs (act. 1792–1798)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online edn, January 2008.