

Defining the Victorian nation

Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform

Act of 1867

Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12 pt in QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 57218 5 hardback
ISBN 0 521 57653 9 paperback

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1 Introduction

Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall

Historians and the Reform Act of 1867

The events of 1865–8

The Truth is that a vote is not a Right but a Trust. All the Nation cannot by possibility be brought together to vote and therefore a Selected few are appointed by law to perform this Function for the Rest. (Memorandum from Lord Palmerston to his secretary, 15 May 1864¹)

The nation is now in power. (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 7 November 1868²)

The third Viscount Palmerston first entered the House of Commons in 1807, long before the first Reform Act of 1832. As Liberal prime minister from 1859 to 1865, he viewed claims for a wider franchise with suspicion. His idea of the vote was that it was a ‘trust’, both a privilege and a responsibility, to be exercised by those who had a propertied stake in the country, on behalf of all others. He resisted any widening of the electorate beyond the limited one established in 1832, which had enfranchised only ‘a Selected few’, in England and Wales just under one-sixth of adult men in 1861.

Lord Palmerston died in October 1865. Three years later, by 1868, when the radical *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* claimed that ‘the nation is now in power’, the electorate had radically changed. In those three years the qualifications for the franchise and, by implication, for the citizenship of the nation had been widely explored, in political debate inside and outside the House of Commons. In such debates, and through the terms of the Reform Acts of 1867/8, the privileges of citizenship were extended far beyond the ‘Select few’ defended by Palmerston. Yet at the same time both the House of Commons, and those whom the *Newcastle Daily*

¹ Broadlands Papers, HMC, PM/A/16, cited in Jasper Ridley, *Lord Palmerston* (London: Constable, 1970), p. 565.

² ‘The Progress of Society’, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 7 November 1868, p. 2, cited in Eugenio Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 312.

Chronicle represented, drew their own boundaries for the British nation, boundaries which we explore in the chapters that follow.

Many textbooks have summarised the events of those three years. What follows in this section briefly draws upon such familiar narratives. In the new and much more urbanised social and economic climate of the 1850s and 1860s, the movement for a wider franchise gathered strength. The Reform Acts of 1832 had introduced a uniform franchise in the boroughs of England, Scotland and Wales, favouring the pre-industrial middling sort, including shopkeepers and skilled artisans as well as the professional and manufacturing middle classes. They had also extended the qualifications for voting in the counties of England and Wales beyond the limit of the old 40s freehold to better-off tenants, and introduced a new and uniform county franchise to Scotland. Though the Irish Act of 1832 made relatively little difference to Ireland, voting qualifications there were transformed by the Irish Franchise Act of 1850, which allowed county and borough voters to qualify as occupiers of premises rated for the Poor Law at £12 and £8 respectively. As figure 1 shows, county voters were in the majority in the electorate for the United Kingdom in 1866, though significantly so only in Wales and Ireland.³

By 1865, an increasing number of politicians from both the Conservative and the Liberal parties tended to favour an extension of the franchise which recognised the claims of the skilled manual workers of the towns and cities. Yet Lord Palmerston was reluctant to introduce any measure of parliamentary reform which would open the way for broader debates, and an expansion of the political nation. In July 1865 a general election returned his Liberal government with a slightly increased majority. Four months later, his death transformed the political scene and created new possibilities for the reform of Parliament.⁴

The new Liberal prime minister, Lord Russell, had been a key figure in the introduction of earlier Reform Bills, in 1852, 1854 and 1860. The Conservative leaders, the Earl of Derby and Benjamin Disraeli, in their

³ The population in 1861 was:

England	18,834,000
Ireland	5,800,000
Scotland	3,062,000
Wales	1,121,000
United Kingdom	28,817,000

(Figures from Eric Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783–1870* (2nd edn, London: Longman, 1996), p. 427.)

⁴ For full and detailed discussion of the narrative of events, on which this summary account draws, see: F. B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge University Press, 1966); Maurice Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1967). For brief, more recent accounts, see, for instance, Evans, *Forging of the Modern State*, ch. 40; K. T. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846–1886* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), chs. 7–8.

Figure 1. *The electorate of the United Kingdom, 1866*

Source: R. Dudley Baxter, *The Results of the General Election* (London, 1869), p. 17, cited in F. B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 236.

brief ministry of 1858–9, had also proposed a modest measure of enfranchisement.⁵ Outside the House of Commons, initiatives had been taken even before the general election of 1865, in the formation in Manchester in 1864 of the Reform Union, which appealed to middle-class opinion, and in the founding in February 1865 of the Reform League, which spoke for the skilled working class. Both the Reform Union and the Reform League had been influenced by W. E. Gladstone's opinion, given in the House of Commons in May 1864, that 'every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or of political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the constitution'.⁶ Gladstone became Chancellor of the Exchequer in Russell's government. On 12 March 1866 he introduced a Reform Bill which proposed to add to existing qualifications the relatively high rental qualifications of £14 in the counties and £7 in the boroughs. These relatively limited proposals were opposed by a powerful group of backbench Liberals, sometimes referred to as the 'Cave of Adullam', led by Robert Lowe.⁷ The Adullamite attack,

⁵ See the appendices, pp. 239–40, for full details of these and subsequent proposals for reform. ⁶ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., vol. 185, cols. 324–5, 11 May 1864.

⁷ This group was labelled by John Bright the 'Cave of Adullam' with reference to the verses in the Bible, I Samuel 22: 1–2, which described the 'Cave Adullam' where 'everyone that was in distress and every one that was discontented, gathered': *Hansard*, 3rd ser., vol. 182, col. 219, 13 March 1866.

supported by the Conservatives, brought down the Liberal government on 28 June 1866.

The Reform League responded to this defeat by further meetings and demonstrations. An attempt by the police to prevent the League holding a national demonstration in Hyde Park in July 1866 brought about what were to become, notoriously, the 'Hyde Park riots', in which part of the crowd broke down the railings and a few fought the police. Though these riots were not as violent as many electoral conflicts in Britain, they came to symbolise the threatening power of the working men's movement to Liberal and Conservative politicians alike. Their awareness of its potential led them to the view that the reform question had to be settled. Yet many historians would nevertheless argue that it was the parliamentary battle, rather than such external pressures, which determined the precise timing and shaped the provisions of the Reform Acts.

Derby and Disraeli believed that a limited measure of parliamentary reform would secure their government, and set limits on the electorate for the future. In February 1867 a Conservative Reform Bill was introduced, though its terms were hotly contested. One calculation suggests that there were ten significant changes in the terms of the bill between 9 February and 2 March. Disraeli had initially proposed a measure of household franchise, combined with a system of plural voting similar to that used for parish elections, and a further system of 'fancy franchises'.⁸ He was prepared if necessary, however, to fall back on the terms of the Liberal bill, with a £6 rental qualification in the boroughs and £14 in the counties. The majority of Conservative backbenchers were in favour of the household franchise, though they were also committed to safeguards against too wide an enfranchisement, such as a three-year residential qualification, and the personal payment of rates. The latter was a very significant limitation since it excluded all lodgers who 'compounded' for their rates.⁹

The Conservative bill placed before the House of Commons on 18 March 1867 had by then provoked three Conservative Cabinet ministers to resign. It appeared to embody household suffrage in the boroughs, protected by the principle that only those who paid their rates in person

⁸ Under the Sturges Bourne Act of 1818, which regulated voting in parish vestries, inhabitants rated at less than £50 had one vote, with those rated at more than £50 having one vote for every additional £25 up to a maximum of six votes. The same principle was embedded in the Poor Law Amendment Acts of 1834 and 1844: Brian Keith-Lucas, *The English Local Government Franchise: A Short History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), pp. 226–9. The Reform Bills of 1852, 1854 and 1859 had incorporated provisions for votes for those with a variety of educational or financial qualifications, known as 'fancy franchises'. These are listed in appendix C, pp. 239–40. Disraeli's original proposals combined these two principles.

⁹ 'Compounding' was a widespread and convenient practice by which lodgers included payment for rates within the rent paid to a landlord.

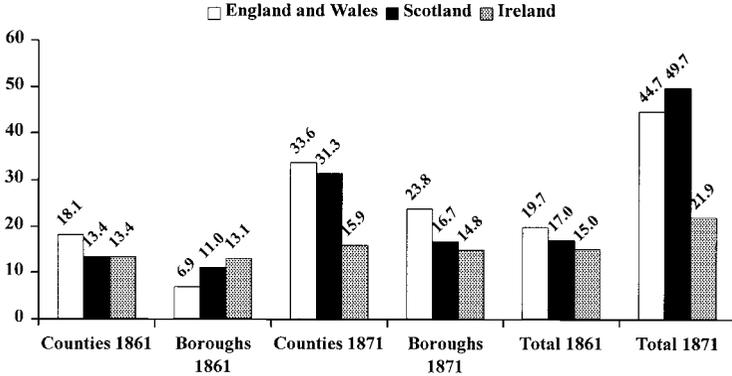
might qualify. In the important division of 12 April, a group of Liberals – some ex-Adullamites, some convinced reformers and radicals – had supported the Conservatives, in what was known as the Tearoom Revolt. As a result the government won a victory of 310 votes to 289. But in future divisions, as Disraeli strove to maintain his majority, with some Liberal support, he allowed the all-important safeguards to slip away. Plans for plural voting were soon discarded. The residence requirement was reduced from three years to one. Lodgers ‘of £10 annual value’ were allowed to vote. And most significantly of all, on 17 May a motion from Grosvenor Hodgkinson abolished the practice of ‘compounding’ rates altogether. All male occupiers were in future to pay their rates personally, and therefore theoretically could qualify for a vote. Disraeli had no option but to accept the abolition of these safeguards, although he was still not prepared seriously to consider the enfranchisement of women. He did not accept John Stuart Mill’s amendment to the bill of 20 May calling for the word ‘person’ to be substituted for ‘man’.

The Reform Act for England and Wales, which passed into law in June 1867, gave the vote in the boroughs to all ratepaying adult male occupiers and lodgers in lodgings worth at least £10 a year, and resident for at least twelve months. In the other clauses of the act Disraeli made fewer concessions, with more modest extensions of the county franchise, and twenty-five of the fifty-two seats redistributed going to English counties.

This legislation for England and Wales was followed by the Reform Act for Scotland, introduced in May 1867 and finally passed in June 1868, with the same qualifications as the English bill, except that there was no lodger franchise because there lodgers were legally tenants. The delay was caused by a battle over the redistribution of seven seats gained for Scotland. The Irish bill, though expected in the late spring of 1867, was postponed indefinitely in June 1867, probably because of the opposition of influential Irish supporters of the Conservative leadership to further extension of the franchise. A year later, in June 1868, the Irish Reform Act reduced the borough qualification from £8 to £4, and maintained the county franchise at £12. There was no redistribution of seats.¹⁰

The Reform Acts did not ensure for Disraeli that security of tenure which he had hoped for after he succeeded Lord Derby as prime minister in February 1868. Gladstone’s commitment to Irish affairs, and especially to the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, won him a series of favourable votes in the House of Commons. He fought the general election at the end of 1868 on the issue of disestablishment, which had a

¹⁰ F. B. Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*, pp. 225–8. See the appendices for a summary of Reform Bills and Acts.

Figure 2. *Percentage of adult males over twenty-one enfranchised, 1861 and 1871*

Source: K. Theodore Hoppen, 'The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland, 1832-1885', *History* 70 (1985), 210, 215.

broad appeal to liberal, radical and nonconformist voters. Many aspects of the older system, such as the continuing importance of the smaller boroughs, remained unchanged. And the complexities of voter registration meant that the full impact of the Reform Acts was not experienced in the election of 1868. The Liberal party won a clear victory and Gladstone was able to embark upon the reforming programme of his first ministry.

Nevertheless, K. T. Hoppen has suggested that by 1871 the changes brought about by the Reform Acts, and their significance for the different parts of the United Kingdom, can be measured, as indicated in figure 2. Where the number of borough voters in England and Wales had more than doubled, county voters had increased by slightly less than half. The impact in Scotland was broadly similar, though the Irish Reform Act had relatively little effect.

The sketchy account given above does not, however, necessarily help us to understand what the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* meant by the claim that 'The nation is now in power.' Recent historical work already offers wider interpretations, which pay far greater attention to the nature of extra-parliamentary activity, and to the social and cultural context of political life. In the 1990s the expansion of women's and gender history, attention to national identity and citizenship, and perspectives arising from the legacy of empire have all prompted new questions about nineteenth-century British politics.

The essays brought together in this volume have arisen from such concerns, and in this introduction we attempt to map out such new

approaches. At the same time, we remain convinced that, for a full understanding of the events of 1865–8, recent and not-so-recent work in the field of ‘high politics’, work to which we are greatly indebted, must be fully recognised. So too must its relationship to a parallel strand of historiography, which since the 1960s has stressed the social and economic foundations of political life. In the following two sections, we examine these two approaches to nineteenth-century political history and, more specifically, to the events of 1865–8.

High politics and the Reform Act

The dominant interpretations of 1867, such as those by F. B. Smith and Maurice Cowling, all tend to stress the political origins of the Reform Acts and to see them as largely a consequence of events and processes ‘internal’ to high politics and the parliamentary domain. In particular, Smith’s study, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill*, is indispensable both for an understanding of the political processes involved and for the details it provides of the complex technicalities involved in the drafting of the legislation. External events, such as the pressures from the organised working class through the Reform League, have a place in such interpretations but of an essentially secondary kind. So the organisation of the narratives comes to be structured largely by how key individuals, especially Gladstone and Disraeli, respond to events and put into effect particular political interests. As Cowling put it, there may have been a context of public agitation, but the ‘centre of explanation’ lay in Parliament itself, for ‘parliament . . . was not *afraid* of public agitation: nor was its action determined by it’.¹¹

There are, of course, variations within the historical arguments about the political origins of reform. Interpretations of Gladstone’s conduct tend to be shaped by the weight given to two main elements. The first lies in Gladstone’s commitment to questions of moral principle and duty, and his ‘conversion’ by 1864 to the cause of enfranchising at least a section of the respectable working class, and the second in Liberal calculations of political expediency.¹² Some historians, like Jonathan Parry, argue that to see Gladstone and the Liberals as appreciating the ‘good moral sense of the respectable artisans’ or perceiving an identity of interests between middle- and working-class Liberals is simply ‘romantic’. The Reform Act was an accident but it was also a matter of hard-headed political calculation concerning the possible effects of the act on the Liberals’ electoral

¹¹ F. B. Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*; Cowling, *1867*, p. 3.

¹² Evans, *Forging of the Modern State*, p. 360, is representative of much of the conventional wisdom on Gladstone in this respect.

position in the constituencies, the possible impact of artisan votes on public expenditure, and the need to design a bill which would establish a clear identity to the parliamentary party.¹³

Disraeli and the Conservatives have similarly been seen as generally guided by such political calculations. In particular, they were driven firstly by the possibility of overturning the Liberals and Whigs – who had been overwhelmingly dominant in politics for twenty years – and, secondly, by the necessity of defending the counties, the core base of Tory politics, against urban encroachment. There are exceptions to this. Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued that, in pursuing reform, Disraeli was animated by the belief that the Tories were the national party and that there was a natural identity of interests between the aristocracy and the working class. Disraeli's enacting of a Reform Bill more radical than anything the Liberals had proposed is here not seen as an accident or the result of parliamentary tactics, as the majority of historians argue, so much as a more or less self-conscious enactment of a political strategy of building a Conservative nation, a 'Tory democracy'.¹⁴ And some recent work on the history of Conservatism is tending, once again, to stress the importance within Disraelian Conservatism of the themes of the nation, the importance of empire, and the enduring importance within Disraeli's own thought of the romanticism of 'young England'.¹⁵ But the conventional wisdom tends to eschew explanations of Conservative positions on reform except in terms of political tactics and calculation. Disraeli emerges as 'the man who rode the race, who took the time, who kept the time, and who did the trick', as they said at the Conservative Carlton Club on 12 April 1867.¹⁶

Thus the narrative is pursued through the parliamentary goings-on of 1866–7: the defeat of the Russell–Gladstone bill of 1866, the revolt of the Cave of Adullam led by Lowe, the manoeuvres of Disraeli, and the acceptance of Hodgkinson's amendment and of household suffrage. The result is that the origins of the Reform Act of 1867 are seen as largely contingent

¹³ Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 207–17.

¹⁴ Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'Politics and Ideology: The Reform Act of 1867', in Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Intellectuals* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 333–92 (first published as 'The Politics of Democracy: The English Reform Act of 1867', *Journal of British Studies* 6 (1966), 97–138); see also F. B. Smith, 'The "Dependence of Licence upon Faith": Miss Gertrude Himmelfarb on the Second Reform Act', *Journal of British Studies* 7 (1967), 96–9, and Himmelfarb's reply, 100–4.

¹⁵ See among others, Paul Smith, *Disraeli: A Brief Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 13. See, for instance, Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation*, pp. 237–53.

¹⁶ W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1910–20), vol. IV, p. 533, cited in Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation*, p. 251.

upon the immediate political situation, its particular form a result of 'accident', its consequences unintended. As Parry has put it: here was 'the most unintentional revolution in the history of British politics'.¹⁷

Yet if the immediate origins of the act of 1867 have not been significantly reinterpreted, the history of nineteenth-century British politics, and thus the broader political context of 1867, have been. Indeed, there has been a considerable revival of political history in recent years. If the focus of much innovative historical work in the 1960s–80s was in social history, the focus of attention of many younger scholars in more recent years has shifted back to the political. Much of this work has built upon not only the rapid expansion and methodological innovations of social history but also upon the prior impact of political sociology upon the subject. As Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor have suggested in a recent survey, electoral sociology of the kind pioneered in both the United States and Britain from the 1950s had a considerable impact upon the development of historical studies, largely in the field of electoral behaviour.¹⁸ They emphasise the particular importance of four historians, H. J. Hanham, D. C. Moore, John Vincent and T. J. Nossiter.¹⁹ To these one might add the work of Norman Gash.²⁰

These historians differed considerably among themselves. Gash's studies of Parliament and the electorate in the 1830s and 1840s were pioneering in their detailed analyses of political structures after the 1832 Reform Act, and emphasised the essentially conservative character of both the Reform Act and its repercussions. Hanham's work was concerned with the impact of the Reform Act of 1867 on party organisation in the 1870s and 1880s. Moore attempted to demonstrate the limited

¹⁷ Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 216.

¹⁸ Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, 'Introduction: Electoral Sociology and the Historians', in Lawrence and Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain Since 1820* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), pp. 1–26.

¹⁹ H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London: Longmans Green, 1959); T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North East 1832–1874* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1975); D. C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1976); John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857–1868* (1966; 2nd edn, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), and his *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (Cambridge University Press, 1968). Local political studies include: R. W. Davis, *Political Change and Continuity 1760–1885: A Buckinghamshire Study* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972); R. J. Olney, *Lincolnshire Politics, 1832–1885* (Oxford University Press, 1973); Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980); John Garrard, *Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns, 1830–1880* (Manchester University Press, 1983).

²⁰ Norman Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel: A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830–1850* (London: Longmans Green, 1953; 2nd edn, Hassocks: Harvester, 1977); Gash, *Reaction and Reconstruction in English Politics, 1832–1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

impact of the 1832 Reform Act upon electoral politics and the persistence of 'deference' and aristocratic political authority within Victorian politics. Vincent's work on the Liberal party and on pollbooks stressed the 'pre-industrial' character of the electorate and the absence of class conflict – at least in the 'modern' sense – in political behaviour. Nossiter was concerned with the social basis of voting behaviour and the testing of alternative determinants of voting: 'influence', 'the market' and 'individualism'.

Whatever the differences between these historians, evident not only in their empirical concerns but also in their theoretical assumptions, the cumulative effect of their work suggests two main points of relevance here.²¹ First, these studies placed a considerable stress on the persistent importance until about 1880 of a 'traditional' politics in which local, aristocratic and religious influences remained paramount as against the importance of class in the subsequent era.²² Secondly, such work and the emphasis on the 'traditional' or 'conservative' character of politics and political change has been complemented by a great deal of work across the range of political history and, indeed, much recent social history. If there is a single theme that predominates, it is the persistence of aristocratic politics, evident, it is argued, not only in the limited consequences of formal electoral changes as in 1832 and 1867/8, but also in the reevaluation of the character of political groups and parties.²³ For example, recent studies of the Whigs and Liberalism have stressed the capacity of Whiggery to adapt to changing circumstances, the continuities between the Whigs of the 1830s and 1840s and the subsequent Liberal party, and also, partly consequentially, the continuing dominance of 'aristocratic government'.²⁴

This stress ties in with recent developments in social history. There is currently in train an effective reinterpretation of the social history of modern Britain, not only in method (to which we return below, in our discussion of the cultural history of nineteenth-century politics), but also in content. While the results of this are by no means settled, among the dominating themes that have emerged are those which emphasise the relatively slow, evolutionary and in many respects conservative development

²¹ See Lawrence and Taylor, 'Introduction', for an interesting analysis of the relationship of this work to the development and assumptions of political sociology. ²² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²³ A good brief introduction to the 1832 act, and to historians' changing views of it, is Eric J. Evans, *The Great Reform Act of 1832* (2nd edn, London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁴ See among others: Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion and Reform 1830–1841* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals 1830–1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Ian Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform, 1830–1841: The Politics of Government* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*.

of society and politics since the eighteenth century. The slow pace of industrialisation and the growth of 'gentlemanly capitalism', the persistent importance of the landed aristocracy in political and social institutions and cultural forms, the relative stability of British society as compared with societies elsewhere in Europe (and also the United States) and the absence of sharp discontinuities are all themes which have been prominent in the work of many social historians.

This focus entails a rejection of many of the dominant interpretations of the social history of the 1960s and 1970s, which still have very considerable influence in schools and universities and among general readers. At the centre of such work was the transforming character of the industrial revolution, effecting massive changes in society and culture as much as in economic structures.²⁵ Those stressing the significance of such social changes were generally agreed that there was an effective 'break' in British society and politics around 1848, as class relations came to stabilise around the hegemony of the urban, commercial and industrial middle class.

Much work in political history effectively rejects such interpretations, as do studies of the history of radicalism and the construction of the Liberal party in the 1850s–70s. Much of this work has been profoundly shaped by the work of John Vincent and of H. C. G. Matthew. John Vincent's *Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857–1868* has been immensely influential. This was partly because the book was located within a historical sociology of politics in which the formation of the party was seen as a binding together of elements of different social classes (elements of the working and middle classes and the Whig aristocracy), and political and religious factions and pressure groups (bourgeois or working-class radicals like John Bright or the Reform League, nonconformist organisations like the temperance United Kingdom Alliance, and so on). The context of this formation, and the subject of other work by Vincent, was an electoral structure which was essentially 'pre-industrial'.²⁶ In analysing this social formation Vincent departed from political histories which focused simply on the creation of a parliamentary vehicle of liberalism from 1859 onwards and the role of key individuals (Palmerston, Russell, Gladstone) in the transition from Whiggery to liberalism. But if the sociological basis of the party was subject to close examination and was of major importance in Vincent's account, the essential *explanation* of the formation of the Liberal party relied less upon the social or sociological than on the role of

²⁵ Such works range, for instance, from E. J. Hobsbawm's *Industry and Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), the single most influential Marxist interpretation of British society as a whole since industrialisation, to Harold Perkin's *Origins of Modern English Society 1780–1880* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

²⁶ Vincent, *Pollbooks*.

'charismatic leadership'. Here it was Gladstone who was central to this analysis, and who held the potentially rather fragile alliance of Liberalism together. At the same time, while Vincent suggested that what was created was a community of sentiment of liberalism, liberal ideas received rather less attention than they had done in earlier work, for Vincent did not see liberalism as the creation of a coherent ideology so much as a confluence of interests.

Matthew's analysis of Gladstone is crucial to an understanding of the development of liberalism.²⁷ He places Gladstone, and Gladstonian liberalism, firmly in relation to the Pitt–Peel tradition of Conservatism in the service of government, whilst recognising the departure of Gladstone from this tradition in his 'politicization of the chancellorship' as Matthew calls it.²⁸ Matthew's account focuses in particular on the political economy of Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, both in the general sense of examining Gladstone's conception of the economic functions of the state and in the more particular sense of his taxation policies. For Matthew, Gladstonian fiscal strategy, exercised in particular through his budgets of 1852 and 1860, was central to what he calls 'the social contract of the mid-Victorian state'. Gladstone was quite successful in redressing the balance between indirect taxation (which weighed disproportionately on the working class) and direct taxation (mainly income tax). One of the reasons, and by no means the least important, why working-class radicals came to look increasingly favourably upon Gladstone was the lessening of the burden of indirect taxation. At the same time the middle classes benefited from a more palatable income tax and the incentive to save which Gladstone, 'with spectacular political finesse', incorporated into his 1853 budget.²⁹

This emphasis upon the fiscal question and its political implications is an important extension of our understanding of liberalism, because it helps put into place one of the precise mechanisms which allowed the formation of popular liberalism, and the coming together of differing political and economic groups into the Liberal party as described by Vincent. The arguments of Vincent and Matthew have both been heavily used in the recent work on radicalism from historians such as Eugenio Biagini. And much new work on the cultural history of politics shares an emphasis

²⁷ H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); see esp. ch. 5, which incorporates material from Matthew's important and influential article, 'Disraeli, Gladstone and the Politics of Mid-Victorian Budgets', *Historical Journal* 22 (1979), 615–43.

²⁸ Matthew, *Gladstone*, pp. 112–20. Matthew's work meshes in with the effective revaluation of Peel, above all by Boyd Hilton, as the 'progenitor of Gladstonian liberalism': Hilton, 'Peel: A Reappraisal', *Historical Journal* 22 (1979), 585–614 (quote, 614).

²⁹ Matthew, *Gladstone*, p. 122.

on the relatively conservative character of the post-1832 electorate and political system and, more specifically, on the continuities between pre-1848 radicalism, particularly Chartism, and mid-Victorian popular liberalism.³⁰ Such themes are partly directed against Marxist interpretations, but are also influenced by the stress upon aristocratic and patrician government and politics. Hence it is argued that radicalism continues to have as its central focus for criticism the ill-reformed political system of Old Corruption and its political and cultural legacy.

Empirically, then, 1867 is placed in these accounts less as the product of a *class*-oriented radicalism than as the consequence of the persistence of a language and politics that was aristocratic, patrician and exclusive of the people. Such reinterpretation of radicalism poses the evolution of politics itself as the essential explanatory mechanism, in a variety of ways. Miles Taylor places rather less emphasis upon political languages and discourses than on government and its functions, including the strengthened role of the executive since 1832 and the changing scope for action of 'independent' MPs. That is, politics is seen primarily as a set of institutions that determine what is politically possible, inside and outside the House of Commons.³¹ On the other hand Eugenio Biagini emphasises the 'languages' of radicalism and the continuities of the discourse with pre-1848 radicalism.³² Such work is innovative in that it breaks down the concept of liberalism as a political monolith and takes seriously the world of politics itself, rather than seeing it as merely reflecting or being the expression of other formations, above all, social and economic class relations. These concerns have been central to new approaches to the cultural history of politics, discussed below (pp. 20–9).

However, to understand the impact of such work fully, it is important also to examine interpretations of nineteenth-century society and politics which have their roots in Marxist approaches, for Marxism has been the oppositional spectre haunting a great deal of work in social and political history.

Marxist explanations

Much nineteenth-century British social and political history has been dominated by the concept of class formation, with class providing the

³⁰ The argument has also been extended to reinterpret late nineteenth-century labour and socialist politics: see, for example, the essays in Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³¹ Miles Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism 1847–1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). ³² Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*.

'master category' of political narratives. Such narratives can be found in periods of class conflict and disruption, as in the history of the Chartist movement in the 1830s and 1840s, or in the exploration of the temporarily stable politics of class coexistence, as in the 1850s and 1860s. The legacy of the work of Karl Marx, which took its shape from the British experiences of industrialisation, has here been immensely powerful. Both Marx and his intellectual and political collaborator, Friedrich Engels, were, of course, themselves close observers of the events of the British reform crisis of 1865–8.³³

Marxism, both as a body of theoretical work and in its applications by historians, does not constitute a single stream of thought but has contained many currents, some of which have been, from time to time, strongly opposed to each other. But all have, by definition, a common point of theoretical origin in the writings of either Marx or Engels.³⁴ Most critically for our purposes both Marx and Engels thought that political institutions and conflicts – and indeed the history of British politics – were determined by social and economic developments.

In his 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)³⁵ Marx argued that at the base of any social formation (or 'society' in the usual phrase) lay what he referred to as the economic structure or 'real foundation' composed of two elements, the relations of production, or property relations between groups such as capitalists and wage-labourers, and the material forces of production, or means of production.³⁶ The 'real foundation' was held by Marx to 'determine' two other levels of the

³³ Chimen Abramsky and Henry Collins, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement: Years of the First International* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1965).

³⁴ Useful introductions to Marx for historians include Iain Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Political Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), ch. 10; Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pt I; Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1982), ch. 3; E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Marx and History', *New Left Review* 143 (1984), 39–50, repr. in Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), pp. 157–70, and his 'Karl Marx's Contribution to Historiography', in Robin Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1972), pp. 265–83; S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History: A Critical Introduction* (Manchester University Press, 1987). T. B. Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), is an extremely helpful work of reference.

³⁵ References here are to the edition edited with an introduction by Maurice Dobb, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

³⁶ These include raw materials, technologies, technical and scientific knowledge used in production, and labour itself, which occupied a unique position within Marx's schema of being both a force of production and a constituent part of the relations of production. Most – but not all – commentators would agree that, for Marx, the relations of production have dominance over the forces of production. But see, for example, G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), for a powerful and influential, though contentious, view that Marx attributed explanatory primacy to the productive forces.

social formation, the legal and political superstructure and 'definite forms' of social consciousness. By the superstructure Marx meant not only the government executive but also the other institutions of the state such as the bureaucratic machinery (state servants and the like), law and legal institutions, and the military and other policing forces; it was essentially produced by the foundation. Although Marx did not include forms of social consciousness within the superstructure in the terms outlined in the 1859 Preface, he evidently regarded such forms as being, like legal and political institutions, essentially secondary to the 'real foundation': 'consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life'.³⁷

But what produced change in history? Marx located the dynamics of change not in politics or in cultural or ideological change but in the foundation itself. At particular moments, it was the conflict between the forces and relations of production that produced an era of 'social revolution', by which he meant not so much particular events like the French revolution of 1789–99 as longer-term changes such as those occurring in early modern western Europe. His rich empirical narratives, such as those on the French revolution of 1848, provide the most detailed workings through of the abstractions he formulated in other writing.³⁸

However, the problem of what Marx meant by 'determination' remains a controversial and difficult one. In arguing that the economic structure 'determines' the superstructure or forms of social consciousness, what did he mean? At times he appears to refer to something like a homology, or 'close fit', between the different levels of social formation, as when he writes that forms of social consciousness 'correspond with' or are determined by the social relations of production. The term 'correspond with' suggests a match between the relations of production and ideological forms. It could be said, for instance, that there was a correspondence between the development of an industrial and commercial middle class and the growth of political economy as a body of doctrine. This does not, however, offer an explanation of that relationship. The notion of determination, by contrast, does offer such an explanation, in suggesting that forms of consciousness or political superstructure are dependent on certain kinds of economic and social relationships. This problem has produced some of the most inventive and stimulating developments in Marxism after Marx.

³⁷ 'Preface', *Contribution* (1859), p. 21.

³⁸ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France: 1848–1850* (1850), and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), both available in, among other places, *Karl Marx: Political Writings, vol. II, Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 13–142 and 143–249 respectively. For a very helpful discussion of these texts see, among others, Gwyn Williams, '18 Brumaire: Karl Marx and Defeat', in Betty Matthews (ed.), *Marx: 100 Years on* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), pp. 11–37.

Few Marxist historians have been prepared, at least in recent decades, to countenance an account of determination that simply takes changes in the social relations of production as a sufficient explanation of the ideological, cultural or political spheres. And, whatever the differences between them, what they all have in common is the rejection of the notion that determination entails unavoidable compulsion. The general tendency has been to allow that 'determination' includes both the notion that there are pressures of circumstances (or structures) on groups or individuals which limit and shape what they can be and do, and the notion that those groups and individuals can, in varying degrees, be agents of change. In Marx's phrase: 'Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.'³⁹ However, the weight to be given to each of the terms here – circumstances and 'making history', or structure and agency – has been a source of intense controversy.⁴⁰ Furthermore, all would argue that different levels within the whole social formation each have their own specific characteristics and particular effects. For example, the domain of the political – the state and other political institutions – has its own structures, rules and personnel but clearly has effects, of historically variable kinds, on the other levels of the social order.⁴¹

There is nothing uniquely Marxist about the notion that there are differentiated levels within a society. What makes Marxism distinctive in this regard is the recourse to the 'economic base' as ultimately determinant. And it is here that the concept of class is of central importance to understanding Marxist historiography. One may define two main axes in the definition of class within Marxist historiography, indicated by a celebrated passage by Marx himself in the course of his discussion of the French peasantry of 1848:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of the other classes and bring them into conflict with those classes, they form a class. In so far as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organization, they do not form a class.⁴²

³⁹ Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 146.

⁴⁰ The issues discussed here can be indicated only briefly, and are helpfully discussed in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 83–9. The problem of structure and agency has been central not only to Marxism but also to social theory more generally. See, for example, Abrams, *Historical Sociology*.

⁴¹ For a succinct statement of the problem, see, for example, Frederic Jameson, 'The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation', *New Left Review* 228 (1998), 27. ⁴² Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 239.

The first emphasis here, upon the purely objective economic situation of a class, tends to produce explanations of the struggle between classes – central to Marxist analyses of actual historical developments, as in Marx’s account of France in 1848–52 – as being formed primarily by economic interests given in the relations of production. Political developments and conflicts are then explained as reflecting, or being primarily and overwhelmingly determined by, those interests.

The second emphasis, on the formation of class consciousness and modes of class association, has been much more evident among Marxist historians in Britain. The most important and influential attempt to explore the actual historical formation of a class and the ways in which ‘a feeling of community, national links, or a political organization’ developed has been E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*.⁴³ His account abandoned explanations of class and of class struggle in terms simply of the economic formation of class and the expression, in politics, of its interests. Instead, he located the formation of class in terms of the elaboration of class as a whole way of life. He rejected a notion of base and superstructure in favour of a dialectic, or interchange, between social being and social consciousness in which experience mediated between the two terms. How English workers responded to the industrial revolution and the social and economic transformations it wrought was not simply a consequence of the economic events and experiences affecting them. Rather, those changes were ‘handled’ through the cultural resources both already available and newly created by working people.⁴⁴

Thompson’s work emerged out of a period, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, of great richness in the production of British Marxist and related thought.⁴⁵ This body of work opened up the study of culture – the formation of identities and their embodiment in particular institutions and forms of social organisation, especially those of class – in wholly new ways. Thompson’s book in particular offered an empirically rich and detailed account of the social, cultural and political life of the English working class. At the same time he proposed a powerful and influential argument about what happened in the period 1790–1832: that

⁴³ First published London: Victor Gollancz, 1963; 3rd edn with a new preface, London: Gollancz, 1980. For discussions of Thompson’s work, including *The Making of the English Working Class*, see among others, Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980); H. J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994), is useful but tends to the hagiographic.

⁴⁴ E. P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ See among others Dennis L. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

a class was formed and formed itself as a group conscious of its own identity as a class and antagonistic to other classes, and that class relations were the most important shaping force in British political and social life thereafter.

Yet if Thompson wished, as a matter of theory, to reject a model of determination by the economic, and to replace it with a model of apparent parity between social being and social consciousness, in practice the account he gave of the formation of the English working class was constantly pulled back to explanations of cultural and political formation in which social being had a privileged place over consciousness.⁴⁶ If Thompson ascribed a key role in the creation of working-class consciousness to the formation of particular movements, institutional forms and popular intellectuals, the languages and ideas deployed by them found a constant point of reference in the social experiences of the working class.⁴⁷ Later critics of Thompson, especially Gareth Stedman Jones, were to take off from this point.⁴⁸

Thompson offered a compelling account of class formation in the industrial revolution and a non-reductionist way of thinking about that history. But historians of a later period were faced by a different set of problems. If the working class was 'made' by 1832 and in the Chartist years of 1838–48, the struggles of those years seemed largely to dissolve after 1848. Between then and the 1870s the working class appeared to have entered a new phase of internal divisions, cultural fragmentation and a relative acceptance of the boundaries and limits of the social, economic and political framework of 'mid-Victorian' Britain.⁴⁹

What focused this discussion within Marxist historiography was the notion that there emerged a 'labour aristocracy', a stratum of workers who were in E. J. Hobsbawm's definition 'better paid, better treated and generally regarded as more "respectable" and politically moderate than the mass of the proletariat'. Hobsbawm's work on the subject has been the fundamental starting point for all subsequent discussions and critiques of the phenomenon.⁵⁰ He argued that from the 1840s differences

⁴⁶ For the difficulties in Thompson's account of experience, consciousness and determination, see among others William H. Sewell jun., 'How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation', in Kaye and McClelland, *E. P. Thompson*, pp. 50–77.

⁴⁷ See, for example, the discussion of William Cobbett and the role of his *Weekly Political Register*, in E. P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 820–37, or, more generally, ch. 16, 'Class Consciousness'.

⁴⁸ See the following section, pp. 22–4, for discussion of this.

⁴⁹ This mid-century transition is not a theme confined to Marxist interpretations. See, for instance, W. L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964); Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society*; Evans, *Forging of the Modern State*.

⁵⁰ E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. 272.

of income, status and attitudes within the working class, already evident before then, were accentuated as the labour aristocracy became more sharply differentiated economically from the rest of the working class and socially more homogeneous and visible. There was a growing differential between those earning the highest and most regular wages and those below them. Underlying this was a structural recomposition of the working class, with the growth of a higher-paid male labour force in industries like engineering and shipbuilding.⁵¹

The concept of the labour aristocracy and the suggestion that its existence could explain the nature of popular and working-class politics in the 1850s–70s (to say nothing of the period 1870–1914) engendered much discussion.⁵² Subsequent work among labour historians broadly sympathetic to Hobsbawm's analysis developed the account in two major directions. Particularly important here was the work of Royden Harrison, whose important collection of essays, *Before the Socialists* (1965), was the most detailed study of political conflict between 1850 and 1870 from this perspective. Harrison argued that the emergence of a labour aristocracy was reflected in the politics of the Reform League: 'the story of working-class politics in the third quarter of the nineteenth century is largely about the activities and aspirations of this stratum'.⁵³

It underlay the emergence of 'Lib-Labism' or the alliance between the Labour leadership and the Liberal party. For Harrison, writing in 1965 and again in his second edition of 1994, the politics of class were central to both the form and the timing of the Second Reform Act.⁵⁴ Later, Robert Q. Gray and Geoffrey Crossick extended the cultural analysis of the labour aristocracy and its 'styles of life' in order to argue that the stratum had a distinctive existence not only as an economic group but also as a cultural one. Here, and particularly in Gray's work, the influence not only of E. P. Thompson but also of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theorist of 'hegemony' and 'civil society', was strongly felt in an analysis which, ultimately, sought to explain not only the formation of a

Hobsbawm has revisited the notion on several subsequent occasions. See esp. 'Debating the Labour Aristocracy', 'The Aristocracy of Labour Reconsidered' and 'Artisans and Labour Aristocrats', in his *Worlds of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), pp. 214–26, 227–51, and 252–72, and for a summary treatment, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), pp. 223–9.

⁵¹ For further discussion of this point, see Keith McClelland's chapter below (ch. 2).

⁵² For introductions to this debate, see Mike Savage and Andrew Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. chs. 2–3; Robert Q. Gray, *The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), which, though dated in some respects, remains of considerable value.

⁵³ Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics 1861–1881* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; 2nd edn, Aldershot, Gregg Revivals, 1994), p. 5.

⁵⁴ Royden Harrison's 'Introduction to the Second Edition', in his *Before the Socialists* (1994), offers a detailed survey of the debates surrounding his earlier work, with his response to them.

particular stratum within the working class but the 'stabilisation' of the whole social and political order in the period between 1848 and 1880.⁵⁵ Although the notion of the labour aristocracy has had some currency among non-Marxist historians, critical discussion of the labour aristocracy in the literature on popular politics has identified this as primarily a category of Marxist historiography.⁵⁶ There are very significant differences of emphasis in the works of the historians discussed here in the weighting they would give to 'economic determination', but all wish to foreground questions of class in the analysis of politics.

New approaches to political history

In the 1980s and 1990s, both intellectual and political developments have taken historians into new paths. These paths offer alternatives to empirical studies of political conflict and to narratives of class relations. They suggest the possibility of different historical methodologies and identify a far broader political culture within which such histories may be located. They indicate that different perspectives, from the margins as well as the centre of the United Kingdom and the British Empire, may shift our understanding of even the most familiar events. This section traces the development of these new approaches and their relevance to the essays which follow.

Towards a cultural history of nineteenth-century politics

Some historians have turned attention from questions of political interest and socio-economic structures to a focus on the language, ideas and discourses of politics. In the 1990s, the shift has come to be referred to as 'the linguistic turn'. It reflects the response of historians to the postmodernist and post-structuralist theories most closely associated in this context with

⁵⁵ Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), and his 'Bourgeois Hegemony in Victorian Britain', in Jon Bloomfield (ed.), *Class, Hegemony and Party* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 73–93; Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London 1840–1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1978). See also John Foster's 'Leninist' analysis in *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974); Neville Kirk, *The Growth of Working-Class Reformism in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985). For Gramsci's influence in British historical and cultural studies, see, among others, Geoff Eley, 'Reading Gramsci in English: Observations on the Reception of Antonio Gramsci in the English-Speaking World, 1957–1982', *European History Quarterly* 14 (1984), 441–78.

⁵⁶ For the former, particularly germane to this book, see F. B. Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*, ch. 1, 'The Emergence of the Labour Aristocracy'. For the latter, see e.g. Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid, 'Currents of Radicalism, 1850–1914', in Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, pp. 3–4.