**Introduction: a new political history?**

In these historic times politics are back in fashion. The apparent about turn of the forward march of labour, the Right’s electoral successes on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1980s and 1990s, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, have led many to reassess their understanding of politics. For some there is a distinct millennial feel to this postmodern world, one in which all the narratives we need to explain and understand politics have disintegrated before our very eyes; while for others these events represent not so much a defeat as a triumph, a triumph of just one narrative, liberalism. Critical to this rethinking of politics has been our understanding of the ways in which political identities, subjectivities, and constituencies of support are created. Just as commentators have chronicled the increasing power of the media in shaping our perceptions of politics, so postmodernist critical theory has turned our attention to the decentred subject and the discursive techniques by which the narrative forms of language construct political subjectivities as stable and coherent. As ever somewhat belatedly, and certainly in Britain somewhat begrudgingly, a new ‘cultural history’ which critically engages with such postmodernist insights has begun to emerge, one which offers us the possibility of expanding our concept of politics and political history. Although, like a bad smell they wished would go away, most political historians have tried to ignore these new developments, they do have far-reaching implications for the study of nineteenth-century English politics. This book hopes to unravel some of these implications and, in so doing, to advocate a new cultural history of politics.

One of the attractions of such a cultural approach is as a remedy for the deficiencies of the current narratives of nineteenth-century political history, with their triumphalist accounts of the development of England’s democratic and libertarian constitution. Following
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Lewis Namier, for instance, Tory narratives have concentrated on the aristocratic institutions and actors of high politics, interpreting the constitutional reforms of 1832 and 1867 as the consequences of high political manoeuvring, not pressure from outside Westminster. In these accounts it is the political forces of Conservative reaction, not the triumphs of Liberal public opinion, which are brought to the fore. Thus, for D. C. Moore the first Reform Act represented an attempt to reinforce aristocratic electoral control over rural areas, just as for Maurice Cowling the second Reform Act was the result of Disraeli’s ambition to dish the whigs, both readings denying extra-parliamentary politics a role in either reform. In such narratives power is seen to emanate from the centre to the periphery, a centre which for some tory historians seems to have become ever more narrow, impervious, and overwhelmingly aristocratic. The central concern, then, of these tory narratives has been to reject the liberal fiction that nineteenth-century politics was about the seemingly ceaseless progression to a liberal democratic constitution. Instead, for tories England’s libertarian tradition lies not in the struggle for democracy, but in the struggle for a prosperous, entrepreneurial Protestant nation.

It is a narrative that has recently found forceful, not to say at times vitriolic, support from J. C. D. Clark’s portrayal of the persistent presence of England’s resilient Anglican, aristocratic, and monarchical ancien régime during the nineteenth century. Gradually, the contours of this ancien régime are being stretched out to 1914, and for Clark it is this hierarchical regime, not a bourgeois liberal individualist one, which provides the most fruitful setting both for the growth of the market and for liberty. Although the style and content of Clark’s work is far from unproblematic, it does represent one of the few serious attempts to rethink the politics of the period. As we shall see, his emphasis upon the continued importance of religion, monarchy, and aristocracy, and his new found (albeit idealist) interest in the language of politics, has much in common with other ‘revisionist’ accounts written within seemingly competing historiographical traditions. And yet, despite Clark’s attempt to liberate politics from the reductionist teleologies of liberal and marxist narratives, he ultimately falls back upon an equally reductionist high political definition of politics and the public sphere. Having opened Pandora’s Box he promptly closes it again.

None the less, as I have already indicated, Clark has challenged
those heroic liberal narratives which portray the emerging bourgeois as the guardians of English liberty and democracy, for it was they who enabled the rise of party and public opinion to defeat aristocratic hegemony with the electoral reforms of 1832, 1867, and 1872. It was a teleological story of the eclipse of the traditional politics of interest, influence, and the market by the progressive politics of individual opinion. And yet, by concentrating on the growth of those political institutions, organisations, and representative systems which most facilitated the development of such ‘progressive’ and ‘modern’ political forms, these liberal narratives tended to exclude those other forms of popular politics which did not fit this model. Inevitably this meant that the poor, the disenfranchised, and others dispossessed, were excluded from their accounts of the triumph of England’s libertarian constitution.

Recent revisionist narratives, written from what may be termed here a broadly social democratic position, have also done much to question the often complacent teleologies of these liberal narratives. Thus, while the 1832 Reform Act and the mid-Victorian invention of party were always privileged within liberal narratives as the engines which propelled English politics into the ‘modern’ democratic era, revisionist narratives have turned our attentions backwards. It is in the once much neglected world of eighteenth-century politics that historians now find the genesis of popular party and electoral politics, politics which were in no way the exclusive domain of the middle classes. Indeed, the strength of these accounts lies in their treatment of politics from the bottom up, their recovery of a popular political culture which had previously been lost to view. And yet, however long the eighteenth century has now become, there remains an implicit assumption in much of this body of work that nineteenth-century politics was qualitatively different, that the emphasis shifted from the local to the national, from the moral to the commercial, and from a popular politics to one informed by class. In this sense these revisionist narratives can be read as merely extending the teleology of whim interpretations, either liberal or marxist, back into the eighteenth century.

This is less surprising in light of the shadow E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* cast upon many of these revisionists, a text which romantically and imaginatively redefined marxist narratives of England’s libertarian political past. Thompson’s project (perhaps crusade would be a better word) was to rescue
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those excluded from liberal and tory narratives by showing that it was they, ‘the people’, whose experience of their struggle for liberty, against both a coercive state and the developing market, not only made them as a class but forced the state to redefine the constitution in 1832. Thompson’s definition of the ‘people’ as the dispossessed in political struggle may ultimately have been reduced to the making of the male working class, but it did provide a counterpoint to the equally romantic, but restrictive, definitions of ‘the people’ and liberty evident in tory and liberal narratives. Despite, or because of, the teleology and triumphalism of Thompson’s narrative, especially its insistence on the ability of the people to make their own history (so long as they did so as working-class men), it still dominates much broadly marxist political history.

Recently, however, historians have begun to question Thompson’s account of the politics and experience of class formation, pointing not only to the reactionary nature of much plebeian politics, but also to current interpretations of the industrial revolution as being not so much a big bang as a long and uneven whimper. Such criticisms have also been fuelled by the theoretical reservations of those taking the linguistic turn who have increasingly criticised Thompson’s reflective concept of language, in which the language of politics is seen as reflecting, rather than actively constituting, social experience. Thus for Stedman Jones the language of Chartism was not a language of class because it reflected some anterior working-class experience of industrialisation, but because, in the political context of mid nineteenth-century England, Chartist language spoke to the politically excluded people as a class. Although Stedman Jones has rightly been criticised for replicating that peculiarly Cambridge tradition of the history of the political ideas – where primacy is afforded to printed, rather than oral or visual, texts, and the questions of agency, the instability of meaning, and the play of differences within texts are simply ignored – his work has proved an important catalyst to the rethinking of nineteenth-century English politics. Taking up where Stedman Jones left off, Patrick Joyce has argued that class was just one of many identities articulated by the languages of radical politics, all of which, as Joan Scott has demonstrated, were highly gendered, just as they also spoke to a dominant ethnos, of Englishness against all its Others.

Much of the impetus for this linguistic turn came from the feminist movement, born of disenchantment with the Left and its social
structural models of subjugation. Of course it is both difficult and
dangerous to place feminist narratives so precisely in such a brief
survey of the historiography of English politics, for they have always
been diverse and heterogeneous, sitting uneasily aside, and yet
always apart from, other historiographical traditions, united only by
their concern to write women into history. It is clearly significant
that it is feminist historians like Joan Scott and Denise Riley who have
found the post-structuralist emphasis on the centred subject, the
instability of language and the ordering of factors of difference within
it, most useful (or have used them most) to understand knowledge as
power so as to subvert and deconstruct the authoritative and
repressive languages and categories to which ‘women’ have been
subjected. However, such techniques and concerns have also been
evident in those feminist critiques of modern liberal democracy,
whose uses of the Enlightenment ideal of the rational, virtuous,
individual citizen at its founding moment during the Age of
Revolution, was based upon the exclusion of women. In these
feminist narratives then, the whole Enlightenment belief in the
progress of reason, liberty, and democracy is revealed as a sham, an
attempt to fix the political subjects’ relations of sexual difference in
such a way as to privilege reasonable public men at the expense of
natural irrational women. Certainly such a narrative challenges the
triumphant teleologies of its whiggish rivals, be they tory, liberal,
social democratic or marxist.

And yet the linguistic turn under the influence of post-structura-
lism, offers so many other possibilities for a new political history
than those suggested by feminist histories. By acknowledging that it
is language and not some prior social structure that creates the
diverse, unstable, and often contradictory identities of the centred
subject, figures such as Patrick Joyce and Geoff Eley have begun to
open up new and exciting approaches to the histories of nineteenth-
century politics and class. Reading politics as an attempt to put the
centred Humpty Dumpty back together again by making identity
fixed, stable, and coherent (however provisionally) through the
narrative forms of its languages, they have enabled us to see politics
as a discursive struggle to empower people by imagining them as
legitimately acting subjects around specific fixed identities. Of course,
as feminist narratives remind us, such an attempt to create fixed,
centred subjectivities inevitably rely upon an ordering of the factors
of difference, so that each secured, stable identity was based upon
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exclusions of ‘Others’ and therefore equally liable to disable, as enable, the subject. This consideration of politics as power, as a discursive attempt to create or prevent a sense of agency, represents a significant step forward. It is worth emphasising that, although individual and collective actors are constrained by the finite subjectivities of political languages, they are none the less always able to play at the margins of those languages, extending their possibilities, appropriating and subverting them in unanticipated ways.

So much then is the state of the art. Hopefully, it is now clear how far those of us who have fellow-travelled on the tide of post-structuralism have moved away from the old political histories of ‘interests’ with their institutions and ideologies. What I am offering here is a new cultural history of the meanings of politics – a history of its subjectivities and identities, the ways in which politics defined and imagined people – which in turn provides, at least in my reading, a new narrative of nineteenth-century English political history. There is, then, little of the stuff of orthodox political history in this book. There is no discussion of the organisations, personnel or policies of the national institutions of politics, nor any detailed analyses of social and economic structures. Those traditional sources of political history which have tended to privilege the most literate and articulate members of the political nation have also been dispensed with, in favour of much neglected traces like ballads, banners, cartoons, handbills, statues, architecture, the uses of time and space, and the rich vein of ceremonial and iconographic forms. Even the standard texts of political history, like newspapers and poll books, have been re-read in innovative ways.

Chronologically, however, the book is rather conventional. It spans perhaps the most well-picked bone on the carcass of British political history, that half-century between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the passing of the second Reform Act in 1867. Of course, such periodisation is inevitably essentially arbitrary, and it is certainly not intended to imply some qualitative change in the nature of politics in the periods preceding or following these dates – indeed often the reader may be aware of passages in the text discussing events before and after them. However, it does serve a rhetorical purpose, as we have been led to believe that this was the period which established English political liberty and democracy. The chronology is a familiar one. The rise of the radical mass platform between 1815 and 1819 paved the way for the successful reform agitation of
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1829–32, and yet it was the disappointments of the 1832 Reform Act which fuelled a decade of Chartist activity ending with the collapse of the mass platform in 1848. In the following mid-Victorian decades the working class were either forced, or convinced, to work within the political system which excluded them, seeking inclusion through the nascent Liberal and Conservative parties and the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884, a process completed with the arrival of independent labour politics and the Representation of the Peoples Act of 1918. It is a teleological chronology which caricatures itself. Even its more recent revisionist versions, where the emphasis is on continuities and the slow and uneven nature of political change, have evoked either a world where nothing ever really happens, or one in which paradise was indefinitely postponed due to lack of interest.20 In these readings English liberty and democracy, with their engine’s party and class, may have taken much longer to arrive than we previously thought, but they were still delivered and proved enabling and progressive. Instead this book will argue that such developments often constituted a disabling retreat. By examining the creation of political subjectivities as they were played out in the debate over the meaning of the constitution and the nature of citizenship, I will argue that definitions of the constitution became increasingly exclusive during this period. In short, at the founding moment of English liberty and democracy, it was the closure of democratic political forms, the stifling of a radical libertarian tradition, that was most evident.

Central to such an account is the recognition that politics is about far more than orthodox political institutions and their representative systems. Instead it turns upon the idea of English political culture as an arena of struggle in which competing groups contested each others’ definitions of the public political sphere according to their interpretation of the constitution.21 It was, however, an uneven struggle, a fact recognised in the very organisation of this book. Those who controlled the offices of state – the local and national political institutions with their associated powers over the military, police, and media – those who propagated official definitions of the public political sphere, always had the upper hand. For their definitions and subjectivities were always backed by the force of the law, or sometimes even just plain, brutal force. Yet it would be misleading to overemphasise this coercive aspect, for official definitions of the constitution could not always be imposed by force alone. The illegality of certain types of politics and the risk of imprisonment (or
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fates still worse) rarely served as a guarantee that people would not continue to practise them. Consequently, in Part 1 I analyse the ways in which popular support was generated for exclusive official definitions of the public political sphere with their restrictive subjectivities. Thus the first two chapters reveal the remarkable degree of popular participation within all levels of official politics, from the parish meeting to civic ceremony and the parliamentary election. Clearly, however, this participation was carefully structured, organised, and disciplined around subjectivities which were unlikely to challenge the legitimacy of the political and social status quo. Conversely, in Parts 2 and 3 I examine the attempts of popular political groups to contest such exclusive official definitions with their own expanded and inclusive definitions of the constitution. Chapters 5, 6 and 8 are all concerned with the ways in which radicals and reformers endeavoured to empower those groups officially excluded from the constitution by creating subjectivities which spoke to them as citizens, including them within their cultures and organisations and providing them a platform within the public political sphere.

Of course this division of the book into ‘official’ and ‘popular’ parts is in many ways artificial and ahistorical, implying fixed, discrete, and unitary categories which cry out for deconstruction. It is therefore worth emphasising that I do not intend to imply that these categories can be referred back to specific social groups, or that they boasted intrinsic cultural forms, beliefs and practices. Instead in what follows I am at pains to point to the relationship between these categories and the differences and tensions within them. It is certainly possible to read such a formulation as part a corrective to the recent trend to afford primacy to the state’s attempt to define the political agenda and its subjectivities, which at times sails perilously close to reviving a history of high politics.22 If we are to have a history of the reception of political languages as well as the history of their production it is the dynamic relationships between the worlds of ‘official’ and ‘popular’, ‘high’ and ‘low’, politics that we must strive to reveal – in any case they make no sense as discrete categories. Their only utility is that they enable us to imagine and portray something of the complex process through which political subjectivities and the public political sphere were continually redefined and contested.

As I have already suggested, the central theme of the book is that, despite laying the legislative foundations of liberal democracy in 1832
and 1867, English politics became progressively less democratic during this period as political subjectivities and the public political sphere were defined in increasingly restrictive and exclusive fashions. Much of this was due to the changing dynamics of political communication which gradually afforded individuals less and less power in the creation of their own political languages and identities. As we shall see in chapter 3, a mass of legislation sought to discipline popular modes of political communication: partly by regulating the occurrence of meetings, the contents of speeches, handbills, newspapers, and the uses of banners, flags and favours; and partly by privileging the use of print in political communication, as opposed to customary oral and visual forms. Taken together this body of legislation – often ingeniously labelled anti-corruption laws – encouraged the private, individual, and masculine uses of politics at the expense of more threatening, subversive, and popular public and collective uses. Although this gradual and uneven closure of the public political sphere was by no means complete in 1867, it found little resistance from radicals and reformers. They, too, increasingly sought to discipline popular politics, tempting it out from its customary venue of the pub to purpose-built halls in which audiences could be better regulated, shunning the customary techniques of popular political protest as irrational, and providing women with well-defined roles and identities which would not challenge the ascendancy of the patriarchal discourse of their politics. As we shall see in chapters 4 and 6, read in this way even the mid-Victorian invention of party can be seen as part of this closure of the public political sphere, a means of disciplining popular politics by securing it within certain limited and restrictive subjectivities and practices. And yet, as chapter 7 reminds us, the relationship between political leaders, languages, and their popular constituencies was a complex one, the meaning of the leader lying as much in the mind of the beholder as with the leader himself. Despite the best efforts of leaders to project their own images of themselves, they remained the icon and creation of their followers.

Many of these themes come together in Part 3 in an analysis of the narrative forms of the language of politics. Here I argue that the debate over the meaning of the constitution’s past, present, and future, that is the discourse of popular constitutionalism, represented the master narrative of nineteenth-century English politics. It was through their different appropriations and interpretations of this
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constitutional narrative that political groups articulated their own definitions of the public political sphere, seeking to construct constituencies of support by empowering the centred subject with a stable and coherent identity. And yet this did not mean that the range or variety of identities available to individual or collective actors was in any sense limited or static, like the narrative of the constitution they were multi-vocal, amenable to a myriad uses and meanings, both empowering and disabling. Indeed, one of the advantages of such a reading is that it enables us to escape from the historiographical preoccupation with class, to conceptualise how subjects were imagined as members of a sex, religion, a nation, or as a people, as well, and as often, as members of a particular class. It enables us to acknowledge that the languages, categories, and identities of nineteenth-century politics were both shared – in that they all drew their authority from the same constitutional master narrative – and different – in that each individual or collective subject appropriated those languages, categories, and identities in different ways. Thus, just as we cannot imagine difference without the unity of a shared code, neither can we imagine that unity without an awareness of its different uses.

This is also apparent in the typology of the book. At the outset this study was intended as a comparative account of five parliamentary constituencies with very different geographic, demographic, political, social, and economic contexts, differences which I assumed would be reflected in their political cultures. Geographically the constituencies stretched from Oldham in the north-west to Tower Hamlets and Lewes in the south-east, from Boston in the east Midlands to Devon in the West Country. The two urban and industrialising constituencies of Oldham and Tower Hamlets were deliberately offset by the small market-towns of Boston and Lewes, and the predominantly rural county of Devon as such places have tended to be neglected by historians intent on finding models for social and political development. Of course these images are themselves caricatures. Tower Hamlets was notoriously by-passed by the sort of intensive industrial production of cotton, coal, and engineering evident in Oldham. If the industrial proletariat was to be found anywhere in nineteenth-century England it was in Oldham, not Tower Hamlets which remained dominated by small-scale domestic artisan production, despite its large fluid population and commercial docks. And yet both constituencies came to represent,