Introduction

> My sentiments are well expressed in the old watch-word of the Whigs
> of 'Civil and Religious Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform'. If they
> have in any way deserted their colours the fault is theirs and not
> mine.[1]

> I believe in civil and religious liberty, for all men and for all countries,
> and consequently I am opposed to the dominant Anglican church in
> Catholic Ireland.
> I believe in the virtues of justice on all occasions to effect a reconcilia-
> tion of contending parties . . .
> I believe that a volunteer force is far better for individual and national
> liberty than an array of red coats, whose duty is to obey any order issued
> by its commander, however tyrannical; and that the money spent on a
> standing army is much better in the pockets of the people . . .
> I believe that every parish in the kingdom is much better able to
> manage its local affairs . . . than any centralized board sitting in London
> and appointed by the Crown or by Parliament.
> I believe that [sic] the constitution of the metropolitan police to be
> defective and to be dangerous to the liberties of the people . . .
> I believe it to be the duty of the State to insist that the elements of
> education are taught to all children under thirteen years of age . . . [2]

THEMES AND PROBLEMS

'Every boy and every gal, / That's born into the world alive / Is
either a little Liberal, / Or else a little Conservative' – W. S.
Gilbert wrote quite realistically in 1882. The fact that the two
traditional parties managed to satisfy popular needs for political
and parliamentary representation even after the enlargement of the

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[1] G. Howell, 'Religious beliefs as a test question at elections', n.d. [but Spring 1878], in
Howell Collection, IX, Letter Book, 230, No. 14.
[2] T. M. Webb, 'The Liberal's Creed', *BH*, 5 Sept. 1868, p. 1.

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franchise has always fascinated political scientists and historians. In particular, it is remarkable that the radical reformers among the subaltern classes, the 'extreme left', who in France, Germany or Italy would have supported republican, socialist or anarchist politics, in Great Britain were loyal activists of the Liberal party. This book sets out to explain why and how that happened, focussing on the period between the mid-1860s and the mid-1880s.

As with any other, this work has methodological and interpretative presuppositions. I have followed an established trend in both Italian and British historiography[3] by assuming that ideas matter and that they have a social and political influence, since people's behaviour is deeply influenced by what they think, and especially by what they believe firmly. Moreover, I share Peter Clarke's understanding of Victorian politics as based on status and culture, rather than class, and consider his model to be of particular use in assessing the appeal of the Liberal party to the subaltern classes: what held the rank-and-file together were the values shared by activists, electors and supporters in general,[4] rather than the material interests of the social groups to which they belonged. Politics then did not have the function of providing favourable legislative changes for class-conscious groups: rather it supplied a collective identity to groups whose social and material interests did not in themselves lead to a politically relevant class consciousness.[5] I regard this approach as the only one offering workable hypotheses to explain the evidence that I have collected.

But the debate on these issues is very extensive. Two main problems need discussion here: the first is the nature of Gladstonian Liberalism in general, and the second is the nature of popular liberalism in particular. Since the publication of Shannon's work on the Bulgarian Agitation,[6] many historians have tended to stress the importance of religion in contrast to that of the more traditional 'secular' and economic components of liberalism. This interpretation has provided a useful corrective to the debate, which for too long had been excessively influenced by reductionist forms of

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[3] See Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana* pp. 10, 14; Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, pp. 2–3.

[4] Clarke 'Electoral Sociology of Modern Britain', pp. 44–5.

[5] Harvie, *Lights of Liberalism*, p. 274.

[6] Shannon, *Bulgarian Agitation*; Parry, *Democracy and Religion*; Hilton, 'Gladstone's Theological Politics', in Bentley and Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain*, pp. 28–57; and Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*.

historical materialism. Nowadays, however, the danger is that we will go too far in the opposite direction, and replace historical materialism with a sort of 'historical mysticism', dismissing the role of rational motivation in politics.[7] This trend has been evident since the 1960s, when John Vincent wrote that

coherent thought among Liberal leaders was as rarefied as the atmosphere on the moon . . . Whatever the merits of all theories, no politician could gain from them any addition to his information about the world he had to deal with, or learn to pick out the great issues of policy and place them in relation to a vision of history.[8]

This approach has since been further popularized by D. A. Hamer, whose work is based on the assumption that

Liberal politics in the late nineteenth century were not controlled by any single and generally accepted system of thought, any set of ideas, creed or philosophy relevant to contemporary needs and situations and capable of guiding political practice. Liberals were not held together by any strong sense of common purpose. There was not seen to exist any central core of principle and belief to which were related and in which were cohered all the particular things that Liberals did and all the particular reforms in which they were interested.[9]

In other words, there was no such a thing as 'Liberalism', and the party held together only because its leaders managed periodically to raise 'some single issue or cause around which the diverse elements in Liberal politics could be induced to rally by being persuaded that it was of such overriding importance that their own various interests ought to be subordinated to it'.[10] In these difficult acrobatics the great mediator was Gladstone who, almost miraculously, invented unity and imposed it on backbenchers and rank-and-file alike.[11] No wonder that Hamer thinks that Liberalism outside Westminister was just 'faddism', with each pressure group pursuing in a sectarian way its own specific 'cause', and only occasionally being ready to co-operate with the others.[12]

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[7] See Shannon, *Gladstone*; Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine*; Parry, 'Religion and the Collapse of Gladstone's First Government', pp. 71–101.

[8] Vincent, *Formation of the British Liberal Party*, pp. 68–9. See Goldman's effective criticism in 'The Social Science Association', pp. 123–4.

[9] Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, p. xi.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 42; the thesis that liberalism was basically an invention has recently been suggested by Bentley, *Liberal Mind* and *Politics without Democracy*.

[11] Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, pp. 57–78.

[12] Hamer, *The Politics of Electoral Pressure*.

But this interpretation has a number of flaws, in that it under-values both the cultural unity of the Liberal movement at all levels, and the influence of intellectuals at a time when many politicians were themselves intellectuals. Moreover, even the 'faddists' were not so 'disintegrated' as Hamer maintains: in spite of the seeming anarchy, their aims had a remarkable cohesion and complementarity, to the extent that those who supported one radical cause also tended to uphold many of the others, as shown by the fact that the membership of these associations tended to overlap.[13] These facts can be explained only if we accept the existence of a global and articulated vision of politics and its goals.

In the present work I therefore maintain that Gladstonian Liberalism[14] had a remarkable 'ideological' cohesion, greater than that of any continental Socialism. This cohesion was founded not only on a Reformed religious culture and the Whig constitutional consensus, but also on the pervasive influence of the social and economic thought of the political economists, and J. S. Mill in particular. Cobden was important, as Vincent stresses, but his contribution consisted in clothing free trade with a moral cloak, not in elaborating a 'philosophy of history' (which was already there, having been articulated in the classical works of Macaulay). As for Gladstone's contribution, it was surely crucial, but it was not the alchemy of a 'magician of compromises': rather it was the work of a great executive politician who expressed 'with ideal adequacy both the whole civilization and the needs of the time', and 'translated a social, political, and economic vision, which was comprehensive as well as historically correct, into the clauses of a set of co-ordinated fiscal measures'.[15] Moreover, as a great charismatic leader, Gladstone was able to square the circle of making classical liberalism viable in a mass democracy.[16]

This leads us to consider popular liberalism more closely. When Vincent pointed to the existence of a specific working-class dimen-

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[13] Harrison, 'State Intervention', in Hollis (ed.). *Pressure from Without*, p. 319.
[14] Both in Britain and elsewhere in Europe there were people and movements who shared in one or more of the main traditions of historical 'liberalism' without being connected with a political party called 'Liberal'. With this in mind I have reserved the terms 'Liberal' and 'Liberalism' (capital initials) for the Liberal party, its ideology, or the rank-and-file support for it. See Note on the Text, p. xvi.
[15] Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, p. 403; see Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874*.
[16] See Matthew, 'Rhetoric and Politics', in Waller (ed.), *Politics and Social Change*, pp. 34–58.

sion in rank-and-file Liberalism,[17] he thought that this phenom-
enon – which in those days seemed 'strange' – required a special
explanation, different from that used to assess the participation of
the subaltern classes in Chartism or the Labour party. Partly
because of his devaluation of 'official' Liberalism, and partly
because he could find no plausible reasons why the poor voted
Liberal, Vincent maintained that for the working classes liberalism
had a purely symbolic and psychological meaning,[18] and that the
Gladstone they admired and followed was a product of their own
imagination.[19] More recently a similarly irrationalistic approach
has also been accepted by other scholars who – like D. C. Moore
and P. Joyce – have tried to demonstrate that popular electoral
behaviour was basically regulated by 'tribal' or 'feudal' loyalty to
landlords, squires, or industrial entrepreneurs:[20] in this way politics
were not 'a matter of reasoning, opinion, understanding, but
perhaps of discipline exacted or, more often, of identification with
a "community" '.[21] Derek Beales, however, has pointed out three
weaknesses in this approach.[22] First, Moore and Joyce try to
generalize from conclusions reached in the analysis of constituen-
cies which were not representative of the national situation, as
other historians have shown.[23] Second, the evidence offered by
Moore and Joyce illustrates not only that many electors voted *for*
the candidates of their patrons, but also that many others voted
against – the latter constituting a large minority whose existence
requires an explanation.[24] Finally, Moore and Joyce underestimate
the effectiveness with which religion could generate 'independent'
attitudes in popular politics, at least so far as the influence of the
notables was disregarded when it contrasted with the politics of

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[17] Vincent, *Formation of the British Liberal Party*, pp. 76–82.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 265.
[20] See Moore, *Politics of Deference*; Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics*. However, Joyce has
  subsequently modified his interpretation of popular politics (*Visions of the People*,
  pp. 27–141).
[21] Beales, 'Victorian Politics Observed', p. 702.
[22] Actually Beales deals only with Moore, but his observations apply to Joyce as well: *ibid.*,
  pp. 702–4.
[23] See Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England*; Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion, and Political
  Idioms*; but also Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism*, and Smith, *Conflict and Compromise*.
[24] Beales, 'Victorian Politics Observed', p. 702; McClelland, 'Patrick Joyce, Work, Society
  and Politics', p. 173.

the religious groups locally predominant.[25] The credibility of
Moore's and Joyce's works as general interpretations (rather than
as explanations of particular cases) is also limited because the best
histories of popular radicalism during the second half of the century
provide a very different insight into the politics of the subaltern
classes. Tholfsen and Crossick[26] have demonstrated the importance
and diffusion of 'independence' in popular politics, and Royle has
studied the extent to which plebeian radicals could go on the basis
of a consistent loyalty to this notion.[27] Royle's secularists and
republicans were few, though influential, but working-class Dissent
had a similar effect on a much larger scale, as has been shown by
J. P. D. Dunbabin, R. Moore, N. Scotland, A. Howkins,[28] and
others.

In this work I maintain that popular support for the Liberal
party was not irrational in either its objectives or its motivations,
but that – on the contrary – its dissemination was due to the fact
that the programme of reforms proposed by the party leaders
offered convincing solutions to some of the problems perceived to
be real and urgent at the time. In this sense I also part company
with Vincent, whose views on the irrationality of popular liberalism
are in my opinion reductionist, and rather than helping to explain
the existing problems only tend to generate new ones.

Moreover, I develop the hypothesis that working-class liberalism
was not the fruit of the ideological success of bourgeois ideas during
the mid-Victorian decades, but rather the continuation of older
and genuinely popular plebeian traditions. Thus it is striking that
most of the ingredients of Gladstonian Liberalism were already
present in previously existing movements: independence, anti-
State attitudes, free trade, anti-clericalism, had all been energeti-
cally supported by plebeian radicals since the days of Thomas
Paine.[29] In this interpretation I also disagree with Marxist his-
torians – though nowadays it is difficult to define who they are and
what they stand for, since several of them have abandoned the
materialist interpretation of history and have begun to argue that

[25] See Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism*, pp. 1–81; Beales, 'Victorian Politics Observed',
p. 703.
[26] Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*; Crossick, *An Artisan Elite*.
[27] Royle, *Victorian Infidels*; and *Radicals, Republicans and Secularists*.
[28] Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt of the Field"'; Moore, *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics*; Scotland,
Methodism and the Revolt of the Fields; Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*.
[29] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*.

the key to understanding the political behaviour of the subaltern classes is rather to be found in their culture. Many have pointed to the continuities between early nineteenth-century plebeian radicalism and Chartism; some even appreciate the 'Liberal phase' in working-class politics, and rather than rejecting it as a 'bourgeois' deviation, stress its reforming tendencies which 'prefigured' the Labour party.[30]

But historians who have not abandoned Marxism are still struggling to explain the 'anomaly' of an organized labour movement which was solidly Liberal. Among the interpretations proposed by them, the most extreme and least credible is that of Foster,[31] while one of the most convincing has been advanced by Hobsbawm. The latter has focussed on the 'spontaneous' development of the British labour movement,[32] and the frustration of 'revolutionary ideologists' as a result of its early acceptance and legalization. These factors, operating in a cultural climate dominated by liberal constitutionalism, 'enmeshed' the labour movement 'in the web of conciliation and collaboration more deeply, and far longer, than anywhere else'.[33] In other words – as Ralf Dahrendorf would put it – these legal and constitutional developments made it possible for the popular desire for political transformation to find satisfaction through institutional channels, while political conflicts were institutionalized and 'isolated'[34] from the complex of other conflicts. These phenomena meant the dissociation of the social subordination of the subaltern classes from their political subordination.

In this situation, a crucial role was played by the law and the ideology of 'neutrality' of the State. Again, this was not a completely new development in Victorian Britain, as in both the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth the law had been an instrument of social mediation.[35] However, in the second half of the nineteenth century the scale and effectiveness of this mediation changed in a significant way: after factory legislation, free trade,

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[30] Samuel, 'Liberalism', pp. 1–2; Smith, 'Labour Tradition in Glasgow and Liverpool', pp. 32–56.
[31] See Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*.
[32] Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, pp. 334 ff.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 336.
[34] See Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict*, pp. 269 ff.
[35] Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, pp. 258–69; Harvie, 'Revolutions and the Rule of Law', in Morgan (ed.), *Illustrated History of Britain*, pp. 421–60.

and fiscal reforms had reduced the bitterness of political and economic conflicts, the law became a terrain on which radicals and labour leaders could realistically hope to achieve significant gains,[36] as illustrated by two particularly significant examples, the debate on taxation and the struggle for the reform of the labour laws.[37]

This helps to explain why the tradition of revolutionary socialism was so weak in Great Britain.[38] McKibbin has shown that during the second half of the century a change took place in the mediation of class interests, since the reforms passed by both Liberals and Conservatives sanctioned the withdrawal of the State from the labour market. Once the ruling elites had placed politics on the level of the social contract,[39] the stress on the rule of law, which was a central tenet of classical liberalism,[40] also became crucial to the ideology and strategy of the organized labour movement: a fact important in itself for the understanding of popular liberalism, which was based not on empty rhetoric but on concrete results.

WHO WERE THE POPULAR LIBERALS?

But let us now focus on the social composition of the movement. For a long time the theory of the 'labour aristocracy' seemed to supply an answer to any question: it singled out a privileged social group within the working class – almost a sort of 'sub-class'[41] – which on account of its superior living standards and security of employment was ready to provide political support for the ruling classes.[42] But during the 1980s this interpretation has entered into an apparently irreversible crisis.[43] As a theory it had several weaknesses, including the difficulty of showing that the best paid and most 'respectable' workers formed a coherent stratum,[44] and that they were politically more moderate than the other sections of

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[36] McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', pp. 322–4; see also Matthew, 'Politics of Mid-Victorian Budgets', p. 616.
[37] See *infra* chapters 2 and 3.
[38] McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', pp. 305–26.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 319.
[40] Vivarelli, *Il fallimento del liberalismo*, p. 289.
[41] Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, pp. 272–3.
[42] Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital*, p. 225; and *Labouring Men*, p. 325.
[43] See Gray, *The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 63–5; Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, pp. 215–19.
[44] See Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, pp. 276, 279–80, 295.

the working classes.[45] More recently Hobsbawm has even admitted
that the very use of the word 'aristocracy' in this connection can
be misleading, since the 'better-off' among the working classes
included about 40 per cent (rather than 10 per cent, as previously
assumed) of the workers.[46]

But the doctrine is not simply untenable: it is also superfluous,
as Stedman Jones has written.[47] One of the questions which the
theory of the 'labour aristocracy' tried to explain was the change
in popular politics between the 'revolutionary' first half of the
century, and the 'bourgeois' second half: but in the light of recent
research this alleged shift appears much less important than the
elements of continuity characterizing popular radicalism through-
out the century.[48] Important changes did take place during the
second half of the century, but they primarily concerned not the
attitude of the subaltern classes, but that of the ruling classes, as I
have suggested in the previous section: a change which is well
symbolized by the fact that a man like Joseph Arch, who in the
1830s would have been transported like the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs',
was by the 1880s accepted as a personification of the 'respectable'
working man. As for the shift in the tone and rhetoric of popular
radicalism, this can easily be accounted for once the role of
generational changes is considered, as A. J. Reid has demonstrated
in his important essay on Thomas Wright.[49]

Historians are now revising their interpretations along these
lines. Dorothy Thompson has conceded that Chartism differed
from previous radical movements more because of its dimensions
and dissemination throughout the country, than because of its
programme.[50] In a more energetic and consistent way Stedman
Jones has argued for an interpretation of Chartism as alien to
industrial society, and based on a strong continuity with eight-
eenth-century radicalism:[51] Chartist ideology was in general that

[45] Pelling, *Social Geography*, pp. 424–5; and *Popular Politics*, pp. 56 ff.; this interpretation has
    eventually been accepted by Hobsbawm (*Worlds of Labour*, p. 223).
[46] Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, pp. 182–3, 218, 226, 245–6; again, it is remarkable that
    only in 1979 did Hobsbawm accept this point, which was originally made by Pelling in
    1968 (*Popular Politics*, pp. 53–4).
[47] Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 107.
[48] See in particular Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in *Languages of Class*; and editors'
    introduction to Biagini and Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism*.
[49] Reid, 'Essays of Thomas Wright', in Winter (ed.), *The Working Class*, pp. 171–86.
[50] Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 47.
[51] Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, pp. 18, 171, 173.

of 'Locke and Adam Smith, viewed through the eyes of Godwin',[52] based on 'natural rights' and including 'the natural right of the producer to his *property*, the fruit of his labour'.[53] Only landed property was criticized since 'the works of God's creation' could not be 'bought and sold in the market, the same as if they were the works of human hands': it was the very principle of the right to property which forbade it.[54]

But if there is continuity between Chartism and pre-Chartist movements, there is also continuity between Chartism and popular Liberalism as proposed by Brian Harrison and Patricia Hollis in their work on Lowery,[55] and confirmed by a number of other historians with fresh evidence from local case-studies on Oldham,[56] Halifax,[57] Leeds and West Yorkshire.[58] This has been further illustrated by T. C. Smout, who has placed Scottish Chartism in its proper context by emphasizing the influence of the American and French Revolutions filtered by a deep faith in the virtue of moderation, 'the power of reasoned argument', the reluctance to condone violence 'as a means to a good end', and 'a belief that cooperation with the middle classes could still ultimately pay higher dividends than class struggle'.[59] Like Stedman Jones, Smout has also contributed towards dismissing historiographical superstitions about popular desire for 'State socialism' and has made it clear that 'the early Victorian world was still far from thinking in terms of any sort of government intervention as being a good thing, except in exceptional circumstances. Chartism was about liberty, and about the political self-help of the people acting collectively':[60] exactly the same can be said of later popular liberalism. Nowadays, even Dorothy Thompson and Hobsbawm admit that in the second half of the century it was 'Chartist democracy which still prevailed amid the sober suits of Liberal

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[52] *Ibid.*, p. 135.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 156.
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] See Harrison and Hollis, *Robert Lowery*, p. 19.
[56] Weaver, *John Fielden*, pp. 272–3.
[57] Tiller, 'Halifax 1847–1858', in Thompson and Epstein, *Chartist Experience*, pp. 312–15, 338–40.
[58] Layburn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, pp. 20–1. See also, on Northumberland, the evidence offered by Muris, *Thesis*.
[59] Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People*, p. 234.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 239.