

Introduction

“Visibility,” wrote Walter Bagehot in *The English Constitution*, is “the great quality which rules the multitude.”¹ By the time that he made that assertion in the mid 1860s, Bagehot would have seen ample evidence of the central role in Victorian culture of visual experience. Spread before him and his contemporaries were apparently endless arrays of scenes and images – outdoor advertising, industrial fairs, theatrical spectacles, traveling art exhibitions, magic-lantern shows both amateur and professional, *cartes de visite*, optical gadgets, and plates in lavishly illustrated books.² Victorian elections were similarly spectacular affairs: they typically involved a flamboyant “politics of sight,”³ complete with parades and banners, ribbons and party colors, outdoor voting, and the chairing of elected candidates. During the years of the Victorian mid century, a spectacle of another sort was rising on the banks of the Thames, the new Palace of Westminster, which replaced the parliamentary buildings that had been destroyed by fire in 1834. Yet three decades later Bagehot was writing specifically about the kind of “visibility” that underwrites a government’s political authority, and he seems to have had in mind such ceremonial events as the Queen’s procession through the streets of London, especially when she rode in a state coach on her way to open Parliament. Such sights, according to Bagehot’s thinking, win the assent of the governed.

While this study takes much of its impetus from Bagehot’s theories, it looks at images made with paint and printer’s ink rather than those created by a royal progress or Gothic grandeur; and it brings within its purview the political work done by the wood engravings of illustrated journalism when they depict not only explicitly political subjects but also the more mundane activities of everyday life. Bringing together Victorian painting with pictures from *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News* provides a way, I argue, of understanding a distinctively Victorian conjunction of art and politics created by the plentitude and heterogeneity of such images. These visualizations also shed light on the institutional politics that altered and were altered by the franchise qualifications mandated by the First and Second Reform Acts, statutes that, in the shorthand of historical generalization, gave the vote, respectively, to men of the middle classes in 1832 and to many of their working-class counterparts in 1867. Responding to

the first of these measures, artists tested the extent of its democratizing tendencies. Anticipating a second extension of the franchise, the *ILN* and *Punch* practiced a politics of vision by inviting their readers to think with their eyes, to see the state of the suffrage in the present and the possibilities for its changed shape in the future.

The principal art objects treated here include two sets of images directly or indirectly related to franchise reform, one from the 1830s and 1840s and another from the 1860s. In the first set are commemorative paintings, chiefly Sir George Hayter's *The House of Commons, 1833*, and prints that record parliamentary activities after the passage of the First Reform Act, particularly wood engravings that were published in the *ILN* and *Punch* in 1843.⁴ In the second set are pictures that appeared in those two papers primarily during the 1860s as preludes to and referenda on the Second Reform Act of 1867, images that brought together the quotidian realm of street politics and the public arena of institutional politics. By moving back and forth between painted images and wood engravings, this study also demonstrates the fluctuating fortunes of these two visual media as forms of political commentary: the public role of the fine art of painting at the beginning of Victoria's reign, for which there were so many hopes, gave way by the 1860s to the influence of the visual commentaries on parliamentary politics provided by the illustrated press.

As these initial pairings – First and Second Reform Acts, *Punch* and the *ILN*, prints and paintings – already signal, the method of this study is unabashedly and insistently comparative. It reflects the remarkable extent to which explicitly recognized binary oppositions dominated mid-Victorian theory and practice in a wide variety of domains and disciplines. Demonstrating both the rigidities and instabilities of such formulations is one of the aims of this study. To the conjunctions already adduced here, I add many others, including the conventions of history painting and genre painting, the 1840s and the 1860s, artists and engravers, middle and working classes, individuals and numbers. This introduction examines a number of such oppositions, including those between electoral laws, newspapers, and decades, and it also provides preliminary accounts of the specific Victorian writers and artists whose work features prominently in this study. Finally, I identify the particular kind of social interaction that authorizes my approach to all these materials.

Among the most important of the conjunctions here is the one that joins together two Victorian thinkers: Walter Bagehot, one of the period's most lastingly significant political commentators, and John Ruskin, its pre-eminent art critic. I treat the latter's *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) as the companion text to *The English Constitution* (1867). In their very different ways these two writers brought their extraordinary acuity to bear on the effects of visual experience, explaining why and how certain pictures illuminate political processes and structures. For Ruskin, the compositional

features of a work of art stand for political ideals. Arrangements of “line and colour” in a “great picture” can “remind us, in all we do, of the great laws of Divine government and human polity.” In *The Elements of Drawing* Ruskin equates “pictorial composition” and social organization: “if you enjoy the pursuit of analogies and types, and have any ingenuity of judgment in discerning them, you may always accurately ascertain what are the noble characters in a piece of painting by merely considering what are the noble characters of man in his association with his fellows.” The forms of “visible things” figure forth, as Ruskin writes in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*, “the great truths which are the basis of all political science.” For Bagehot, by contrast, the splendid or “dignified” sights typical of the royal and aristocratic “parts” of British society, all “brilliant to the eye,” so overawe those who see them that they submit to be ruled by politicians whom they do not see, in most instances by the “efficient parts” of Parliament, specifically the cabinet members of a particular ministry.⁵ The ideas of these two theorists are in many ways mirror images of each other, construing in opposed but comparable ways the relation between the seen and the unseen. For Ruskin, the seen stands for the unseen, pictorial forms representing immaterial abstractions or ideals. For Bagehot, the seen obscures the unseen, the spectacular allowing the functional to get on with the task of governing. In both cases the seen bestows significance on the unseen.

Although the relation between literature and politics is often taken to turn on the various meanings of the word *representation*,⁶ Bagehot and Ruskin suggest that the political implications of the formal features of an image depend on questions of *composition* or *constitution*. For Ruskin, pictorial design makes visible a hoped-for continuity between human and divine politics: “Composition” is in a “pure sense ... the type, in the arts of mankind, of the Providential government of the world.”⁷ That insight is particularly relevant to British art and parliamentary politics in the nineteenth century. As Thomas Erskine May, long-time clerk of the House of Commons and the foremost Victorian authority on its functions, claimed first in 1844 and then in eight subsequent editions of *Parliamentary Practice*, understanding the constitution depends on understanding its parts.⁸ The questions raised by such a formulation are equally relevant to works of art and to the nature of a state. What elements constitute a particular phenomenon, be it a picture or a polity? How are they related to each other? Most important, do those elements compose a coherent and stable whole?

A Map of Society Island (fig. 0.1), an engraving that appeared in the early 1830s as a supplement to a working-class newspaper, the *Poor Man's Guardian*, illustrates the force of such questions because it explicitly charts the relation between the shape of society and the shape of the constitution. The creator of this image is “F. G. T., Geographer to their Majesties, the Rabble,” a cartographer whose allegiance is to the authority and

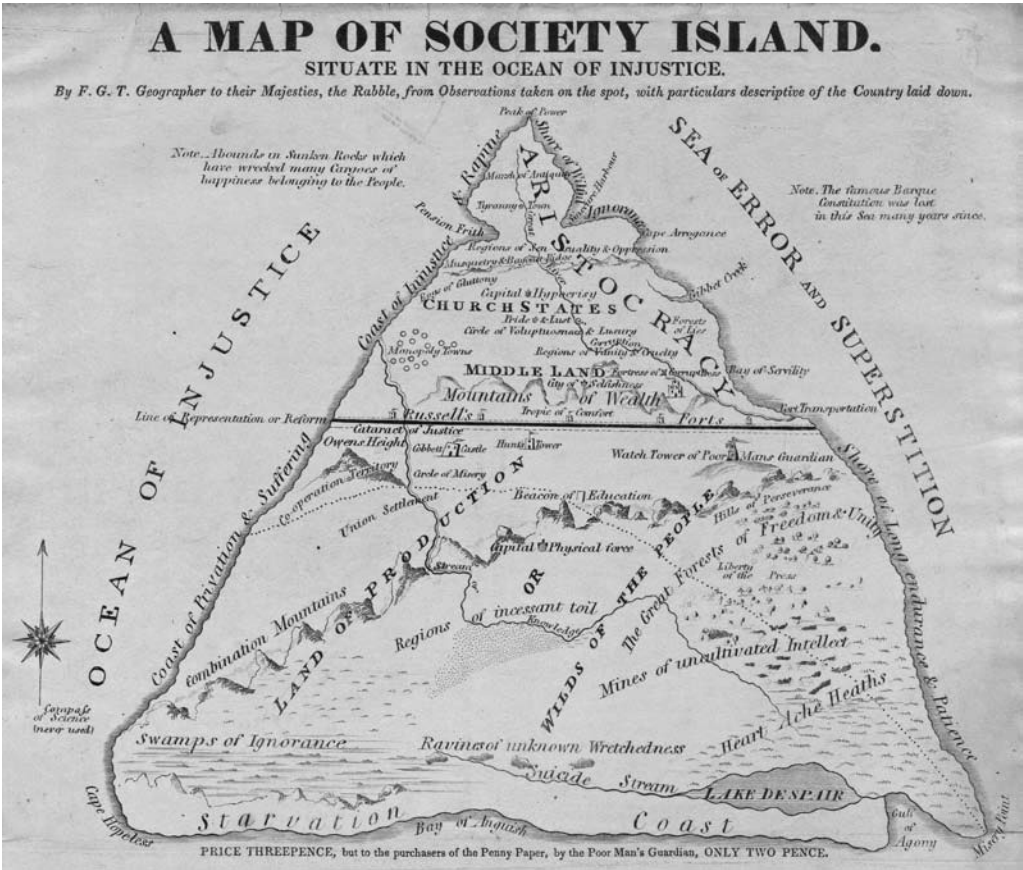


Fig. 0.1 *A Map of Society Island*, wood-engraved broadside, *Poor Man's Guardian* [1832]

regality of the ironically designated “Rabble.” The resulting map depicts a pyramid-shaped island whose forms materialize the realities of social hierarchy. The natural irregularities of mountains, rivers, and coastlines are made to conform to the requirements of human culture by the most regularly linear feature of the image. At the apex of the island, less than a quarter of its entire territory is cut off from the “Land of Production” below it by a dark, heavily ruled demarcation labeled “Line of Representation or Reform.” The largest word on the land mass, a word that starts at the acme of the Peak of Power, is “ARISTOCRACY,” below which are located “Church States” and then “Middle Lands” that rest on “Mountains of Wealth.” These three groups, ranging from the elite to the middling, therefore share one part of the island, a prescient formulation of the way in which middle-class reformers ignored their alliances with members of the working classes once the 1832 act became law. The text below the

image emphasizes that those respectively “tyrannous” and “carnivorous” and “crafty” individuals living above the Land of Production have joined together in “a lasting treaty, called the *Reform Peace*,” which will allow them to “totally subdue[e] the unfortunate people” who are their topographical inferiors. In a fashion conventional in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political satire, this wood engraving fashions the constitution as an object, here ironically the ship of state that has long ago gone down in the “SEA OF ERROR AND SUPERSTITION”: “the famous Barque Constitution was lost in this Sea many years since.”⁹ Although this image of the constitution materializes it as an absence, a place where something ought to be, the triangular land mass substitutes for it, conveying the working-class protest against a constitution whose composition of the body politic forces the majority of its inhabitants to live below the “Line of Representation or Reform.” Although Bagehot sees the spectacular as a form of visibility that governs those who readily subject themselves to its authority, F.G.T. of the *Poor Man’s Guardian* uses the visibility of the lines of this engraving to contest that authority.

During the first three decades of Victoria’s reign, renderings in oil of everyday events and of ceremonial occasions, along with wood engravings in *Punch* and the *ILN*, gave their viewers graphic formulations that sometimes countered and sometimes agreed with the visual argument of *A Map of Society Island*. Yet all such images made visible the fact that every new law, but particularly every new conception of the parliamentary suffrage, created a new political composition, a revised constitution. Even in their most apparently apolitical images – depictions of art exhibitions and epic building projects or visual jokes about the trivialities of domestic life – *Punch* and the *ILN* in particular used the resources of graphic art to picture reform in ways that offered both those who were governed and those who governed them opportunities to envision the changing shape of Britain’s unwritten constitution.

VISUALIZING REFORM

Conventionally treated as the event that inaugurated the Victorian era, even though it preceded the young queen’s accession to the throne by five years, the passage of the First Reform Act seemed at the time so momentous as to make its achievement inconceivable, and it is treated here primarily in terms of its immediate effects during the first years of her reign. By contrast, I examine the run-up to the Second Reform Act, which involved much more low-key parliamentary maneuverings that appeared at times to be leading to a foregone conclusion, so that I can gauge how and how well the visual practices of the *ILN* and *Punch* in the 1860s served a variety of political purposes. In a typically Victorian binary fashion, both acts distinguished between the borough franchise and the county franchise, which,

according to a widely accepted generalization, demarcated boundaries that separated the cities and towns from the villages and countryside. That neat distinction frequently dissolved before the customary practices that determined where one constituency ended and another began, but I adopt it by focusing solely on the borough franchise in England and Wales as it was altered by the first two reform acts. (Since the Third Reform Act of 1884 dealt principally with the country franchise by bringing it in line with that already operative in the boroughs, it is beyond the scope of this study.) Because analyzing representations of franchise reform requires an understanding of what is at stake in a particular measure, I offer here some preliminary distinctions.

The relation between the First and the Second Reform Acts presents itself initially as a simple contrast. By the 1860s, the measure of 1832 was acknowledged as the Great Reform Act and that of 1867 inevitably became, as *Punch* labeled it, the “little” one (March 31, 1866: 133).¹⁰ Many oppositions seem equally obvious. The first act was the work of a Whig government: Lord John Russell presented three reform bills in the House of Commons for Earl Grey, the prime minister in the Lords. The last one finally passed in May of 1832, much to the consternation of the Tories, whose disorganized forces the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel tried with difficulty to manage. Conversely, the second act was a victory for the Conservative party, won after the Liberals, led by W. E. Gladstone in the House of Commons and by John Russell, now Earl Russell, in the Lords, had failed to pass a more moderate bill in 1866. Like their defeated Tory counterparts in 1832, the Liberals gave way before the more determined efforts of the Conservatives, politicians led by Benjamin Disraeli in the Commons and in the upper house by the ageing Lord Derby, who had over thirty years before served in Earl Grey’s first post-reform ministry.

Other contrasts between the two acts are also sharply drawn. The scale of enfranchisement legislated by them differed greatly. In 1832 the number of potential electors grew immediately by approximately 40 percent or 50 percent, an increase that yielded a proportion of one voter for every six or seven adult men; in 1867, the number eligible was enlarged by about 90 percent, to about one man in three,¹¹ though both acts continued to exclude specific groups of men by virtue of their status or occupations. In some locales the earlier act disfranchised large numbers of working men: in Stafford, for instance, over 80 percent of those previously eligible to vote were not so under the new law. In contrast, by 1868 in some cities like Leeds, the later act had enlarged the electorate to nearly five times its size in 1866.¹² During the debates of the early 1830s, the word *people* was understood to mean men of the middle classes; in the mid 1860s, it indicated the working classes. Earl Grey, in support of the earlier bill, said famously that the people deserved good legislation, not the right to vote for their legislators; some thirty years later his son was committed, theoretically at

least, to the idea that a very different sort of “people” deserved both.¹³ In 1832 cases of widespread and endemic corruption – rotten boroughs with few electors, pocket or nomination boroughs controlled by aristocratic landowners, unabashed and rampant bribery, and the consequently high costs of elections – were often cited as motivations for reform; later, debate focused more consistently on whether workers had earned inclusion in a re-formed constitution. Before 1832, the middle classes were lauded as the “*very sinews* of the nation”;¹⁴ in 1866 and 1867, working men were often similarly idealized.

Many recent accounts of these two acts make two important points: the redistricting or lack thereof mandated by them had greater and more lasting effects than did the changes in franchise qualifications; and, particularly in the case of the 1867 measure, some of the changes in the qualifications for voters in the counties were more significant than those in the boroughs.¹⁵ Yet the borough franchise was the issue that received the most vigorous and often nervous attention in the debates over reform in both the early 1830s and the mid 1860s. Again the contrast between the two bills seems stark. The clauses dealing with the borough franchise in 1832, historians often assert, depended on the principle of property, thereby applying to middle-class men.¹⁶ The stipulations of 1867 were based on the principle of householding, thus encompassing working-class men. Yet the terms typically used to convey this difference – a “property qualification” versus “household suffrage” – are misleading. The actual phrasing of the statutes tells a different story. (A word of warning is in order here. The provisions of both acts are so arcane that they were often misunderstood by the MPs voting for or against them. During the debates of the early 1830s, one member lamented that the bill under discussion was a “web” beyond “the ingenuity of man to unravel”; and one of his counterparts in the 1860s could not help crying out that “it was quite impossible to know what was going on.”¹⁷ As I hope my citations make obvious, my analysis is greatly indebted to the historians who have studied these two reforms. Yet even the most detailed of their accounts leave important questions unanswered. When I am forced to speculate on such matters, I try to signal clearly that I am doing so.)

The Act to Amend the Representation of the People in England and Wales (1832) created what came to be known as a “fixed-line franchise”: it gave the right to vote to “every male person of full age, and not subject to any legal incapacity, who shall occupy” in a city or borough “as owner or tenant, any house, warehouse, counting-house, shop, or other building ... of the clear yearly value of not less than 10l.,” the amount of rent at which poor rates typically began to be assessed on unfurnished property. Additionally, potential voters had to have occupied the premises for one year, and paid all the taxes on the property and all rates levied for the relief of the poor, without having themselves received poor relief

in the previous twelve months; they needed also to have lived for at least six months within seven miles of the borough.¹⁸ *Possession of property* is another term often used to describe the 1832 standard for the suffrage. Yet in a country in which only approximately 10 percent of the population at mid century lived in houses that they or their families owned, with most in that small minority being artisans,¹⁹ “possession” meant in relatively few instances owning a “house,” either as a place of business or as a dwelling. In most cases it meant renting. When MPs referred to £10 occupiers, they were often assuming, I think, that the property owned by such men was of the personal, movable variety rather than real property, furniture rather than land or buildings. Even movable belongings could encourage stability. In the worst days of the 1854 cholera epidemic in London, those who fled first were people living in furnished dwellings; only later did those who owned furniture decide that they had to abandon their homes.²⁰ The Act Further to Amend the Laws Relating to the Representation of the People in England and Wales (1867) repeated the 1832 prohibitions against granting the vote to young or incapacitated men and to those who had been on the dole in the previous twelve months. Yet, without invalidating any of the forms of enfranchisement legislated by the 1832 act, it also granted the vote to men who had been for one year “an Inhabitant Occupier, as Owner or Tenant, of any Dwelling House within the Borough.” Such an elector must also have paid “all Rates” for that purpose, with the added qualification that those rates “if any” should be “equal” to the “Amount in the Pound ... payable by other ordinary Occupiers” – in other words, I think, that the voter had not been exempted from paying the poor rates, as was standard practice in many parishes, because he himself was too poor to be asked to do so.²¹ In essence, then, the reforms of 1832 and 1867 involved, respectively, an occupation franchise and a residential franchise. In both pieces of legislation, what mattered most was the steady use of property over a period of time: rate-paying and stability of tenure, rather than the ownership of real property, were as much the requirements for the vote in the mid 1830s as they were in the late 1860s.

In the case of both these acts, many debates on the borough franchise turned on matters of civic and moral worthiness. Respectability became the watchword of those who championed franchise reform both early and late. It even seems at times as if the MPs in the 1860s were reading parliamentary debates in the volumes of *Hansard* from the early 1830s when they framed their arguments in support of changes in the suffrage. Lord Palmerston, the Whig prime minister in the first half of the 1860s, remained obdurately opposed to any new extension of the franchise; and he acted as if he had been betrayed when in 1864 Gladstone, his Chancellor of the Exchequer, raised the issue by famously asserting that “the qualities which fit a man ... for the franchise” are “self-command, self-control, respect for order, patience under suffering, confidence in the

law, regard for superiors.” Yet when Palmerston himself had supported electoral reform in the early 1830s, he had used nearly the same terms that Gladstone invoked some thirty years later: according to Palmerston, the vote should be given to those “distinguished by morality and good conduct – by obedience to the laws – by the love of order – by attachment to the Throne and Constitution [and] devotion to their country.”²² Similarly, Earl Grey in the 1830s and Gladstone in the 1860s used the same phrase when they specified that new electors should be “fathers of families.”²³ That standard clearly defined the limits of any extension of the franchise. Even among those who championed manhood suffrage, the term *manhood* indicated that only a particular kind of man was deemed worthy of the vote; it specifically excluded, as the radical MP John Bright explained, the “residuum” of those living in the borough constituencies, men characterized by their “almost hopeless poverty and dependence.”²⁴ In the debates over each reform measure, another congruity emerged: the men soon to be included in the franchise were described as both trustworthy enough to be granted the vote and “dangerous” enough to threaten revolution if they were not.²⁵

Again both early and late, that danger was seen to result from the sheer numbers of men who might be enfranchised. The contrast between the unique individual and massed numbers²⁶ – frequently evoking other differentiations such as those between weakness and strength or mind and matter – often dominated reform debates. In 1832 that opposition involved on one side the ranks of potential middle-class voters, with individuality the preserve of their so-called betters, members of the landed gentry and the aristocracy. In the 1860s, working-class men were the unenfranchised numbers; middle-class voters, the representatives of the values of individuality. Yet in both contexts this opposition functioned in much the same way to distinguish those who had been deemed worthy of political power from those who were attempting to gain it. When the House of Lords rejected the second reform bill that had passed Commons in 1831, a radical poster inadvertently made the case against reform by comparing the will of “200 individuals” against the political aspirations of “millions.” Debating the next bill in 1832, T. B. Macaulay, then a young MP, entangled himself in inconsistencies when he declared that the “nation” should be ruled by “property and intelligence,” not by “mere numbers,” even though he referred to the men of the middle classes as “vast numbers.” For the Whig Henry Brougham, similarly, the middle classes of the 1830s were “those hundreds of thousands of respectable persons – the most numerous, and by far the most wealthy order in the community.” (To which the radical working-class newspaper the *Poor Man's Guardian* replied in scornful disbelief, “the most numerous!”)²⁷ When the Conservative government took up reform in 1867, with amendment after amendment altering its original provisions until they included even lodgers, the previous focus on the

artisans who as individuals could be expected to conform to middle-class conceptions of respectability was replaced by an overriding concern with the apparently incalculable number of working men who might be added to the registers. In the 1860s opponents of reform deplored the potential “swamping” effect of extending the suffrage to workers. Palmerston decried the “Scum of the Community” who would rise to the surface if “Power [is placed] in the Hands of the Masses.” As both Palmerston and Bagehot recognized, concerns about electoral “fitness” inevitably involved troubling questions about the numerical extent of an increased franchise.²⁸

Ruskin shared Palmerston’s fears, and the distinctions that Bagehot and Ruskin draw in their writings between respectability and numerousness suggest how Victorian paintings and engravings might give visual form to the issues raised by changes in the qualifications for the suffrage. Bagehot argues that in “*deferential* nations” the “numerous unwiser part” of the population is ruled by the “less numerous wiser part,” or, as he later calls them, “the vacant many” as opposed to “the inquiring few.” The difference between these “parts” of society, however, is not simply a matter of intellect. The members of the “*élite*,” especially when there is a “*family* on the throne,” are unquestionably respectable, and the “pretty events” in which they participate attract attention by “appeal[ing] to the senses” of the “many.” Ruskin, for his part, conjures up a vision of numerousness that is little short of nightmare. Slipping without effort or apparent contradiction from a discussion of the features characteristic of the “masterly work” of great painters to “the rules ... that hold in moral things,” he describes a society that fails to honor individuality as a society without reverence or charity or gratitude or admiration, a world “in which every man would walk as in a frightful dream, seeing spectres of himself, in everlasting multiplication, gliding helplessly around him in a speechless darkness.” The loss of “differences” and “dissimilarities” and “irregularities” is, for Ruskin, a calamity in the realms of both art and government; and, like Bagehot, he sets himself against the reign of the many.²⁹

The ways in which paintings and wood engravings from the 1830s to the 1860s portray the respectability and numbers of men therefore illuminate what was at stake in altering suffrage qualifications during those decades. Historical accounts of the First Reform Act typically debate whether it actually lessened the power of the landed interests in British political and social life. Hayter’s enormous ceremonial group portrait *The House of Commons, 1833* and the prints published by *Punch* and the *ILN* during their first years serve as visual evaluations of that act by providing images of the constitution that had been amended by its provisions. Particularly when those pictures relate to the state-sponsored project to decorate the new Houses of Parliament, they reveal that contemporaries had good reason to see both democratic and anti-democratic principles at work in the new law. In the decade of the Second Reform Act, the *ILN* and *Punch*