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Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850

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?It is time to effect a revolution in female manners? declared the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 ?? time to restore to them their lost dignity ? and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world?.(1) Mary Wollstonecraft?s legacy, which had such important ramifications for the ways in which the female reformer would be represented, is curiously absent from *Rethinking the Age of Reform*, yet her efforts to define reform and how it might be achieved speak to its central concerns: why and how did ?reform? become a key term in political life and what aspirations did it signal: the reformation and renewal of corrupt institutions and practices by the restoration of abandoned procedures and traditions; or, innovation, transformation, revolution?

The volume explores reform as *aspiration* from the seventeen-eighties onwards rather than its *achievements* and, as Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes are careful to state, concentrates more on its origins than its legacy. Their introduction reconsiders the age of reform in the light of the new historiography of the eighteenth century that shows the extent of governmental and institutional reforms, the vitality of ?pressure from without? and the emergence of social criticism in the period caricatured by nineteenth-century reformers as ?Old Corruption?.(pp. 6-7) Nonetheless, the years 1780-82 saw the first use of ?reform? as a noun, when Christopher Wyvil made parliamentary reform the central demand of the Association Movement. This novel

?shift in vocabulary? can be seen as marking the inauguration of the ?age of reform?, although ?[a]ttitudes and practices changed less than the ways in which those attitudes and practices were expressed.?(p. 7) Henceforward, as Innes charts in her chapter tracing ?the fortunes of a word?, reform became a slogan, though much contested. Lately, the language of radicalism has been a major historical preoccupation but the focus has been on popular movements and culture and ?pressure from without?. This book extends this historiography by examining ?pressure from within? and ?above?, illuminating the deployment of reforming rhetoric in government institutions, professional bodies and elite culture.

The verb ?reform? and the nouns ?reformer? and ?reformation?, deployed in political and religious controversy for several centuries, increased in currency from the mid-eighteenth century. To ?reform? largely implied reformation ? the return to a former, less corrupted order, or the revival and regeneration of manners and habits. While even Cromwell saw reformation in terms of restoration, the association of ?reform? with puritanism and the Commonwealth and hence innovation and rebellion, tainted the word and, suggests Innes, encouraged the development of ?improvement? as an alternative from the mid-seventeenth century, especially in relation to the cultivation of learning and manners. ?Patriots? rather than ?reformers? was a preferred term of those who advocated a ?spirit of reformation? in the early eighteenth century. However, the evangelical awakening of the seventeen-thirties revived older Protestant associations of reformation, preparing the way for the ?reformation of manners? that would be seen as central to the purification of institutions as well as individuals. Under the influence of Enlightenment thinking and its calls for legal and financial reform, the principle that institutional reform was a necessary precursor of moral reformation began to be established.

Before 1830, to be a reformer meant principally to support parliamentary reform and other campaigns used different terms to define their objectives; Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts; Catholic *Emancipation*; the *Abolition* of slavery.(p. 85) The avoidance of ?reform? is explained by its association with the French Revolution and hence violence, fervour and excess: ?The very word fell into disrepute?.(p. 13) While Burke acknowledged the need for reform, its English application would be pragmatic: concerned with adjustment rather than change, empiricism rather than speculation. Reform emerged as an alternative to revolution: as progress and improvement rather than dangerous innovation. These distinctive approaches were reflected within the parliamentary reform movement with the widespread adoption of the qualifiers ?moderate? and ?radical? (and the capitalization of ?Reform? and ?Reformer? to distinguish the latter) especially after 1810. By 1819, radical reform was identified with outside agitation among the popular classes who frequently depicted ?reformers? as hypocrites and backsliders. Paradoxically, their willingness to adopt the language of ?radicalism? freed up the term reform for moderates.

While parliamentary reformers focused on institutional reform, the promotion of a reformation of manners from the seventeen-nineties onwards, explicitly in reaction to revolution, offered an alternative lineage for reform, aiding its rehabilitation and sanitisation. The evangelical project and secularised versions of it continued into the eighteen-twenties with the proliferation of societies and agencies for moral and rational improvement, frequently contested by radicals who developed their own versions of useful knowledge and visions of society. Within the freethinking, communitarian and Chartist movements the relationships between environment and character and individual and collective improvement were the subject of intense debate. While some conservatives (a label in currency from the early 1830s) adopted the term reform, the participation of Tory Radicals (many drawn from the elite) in a range of reform and radical movements deserves more attention than is given here.

With the adoption of the Reform Act and the institution of a Reform Ministry in 1832 responsible for measures that were perceived as direct attacks on those excluded from the franchise, the word ?reformer? regained its earlier association with half-measures and betrayal; it was as Chartists rather than as reformers that advocates of universal manhood suffrage pressed their case, while insisting that they were the true inheritors of the reform tradition. Their use of the alternative label enabled those who sought to redress social conditions rather than electoral transformation to champion reform in a new guise, one that by the mid-Victorian decades would become hegemonic: social reform. Once a ?bogey word?, by the mid-century ??reform? had been largely naturalised and tamed? and a ?new bogey? was beginning to take shape, though

what this was (socialism?) is not stated.(p. 62)

While recent work has characterised nineteenth-century radicalism as the extension of an older tradition of popular constitutionalism, in an essay on Parliament and the state ('Parliament, the state, and "old corruption": conceptualising reform, c.1790-1832'), Philip Harling indicates a distinctively novel development in the critique of ?Old Corruption?; the excoriation of the fiscal-military state during and after the French Wars. Such criticisms were not limited to popular radicals and there were persistent calls for retrenchment from establishment figures who, in the face of popular loyalism, evangelical assaults on the pursuit of personal gain, and outdoor demands for public probity by country gentlemen and farmers, sought the ?improvement? or ?amendment? of the system as a means of countering the demand for wholesale parliamentary reform and of securing elite rule. Through a series of ?practical improvements? ? a term that Harling usefully prefers to ?reform? ? and administrative measures, the scale of government patronage and sinecures was reduced substantively. ?Practical improvements? to the institutions of state were regarded less as reform measures than as responses to the movement for parliamentary reform and to the idea of democratic representation. As many Tories argued, far from abolishing ?Old Corruption?, manhood suffrage would impose a new form of tyranny whereby political representatives would lose their disinterestedness by cow-towing to the whims of the mob. ?[M]uch of the language of elite reform, Harling concludes in an important observation, was a language of ?anti-Reform?.(p. 99) When the Reform Act was finally conceded, it was in the face of the sheer scale of outside agitation and in recognition that ?practical improvements? were insufficient to stave off demands for parliamentary reform. If changes to the franchise were less dramatic than earlier historians admitted, the eradication of the borough-mongering system constituted a major transformation of the system of representation. Underlining Chartism?s distinctive place in the radical tradition, Harling argues it was not the abuses of the fiscal-military state that fired popular agitation but the limited franchise and the new institutions of governance enacted by the Reformed Parliament.

Michael Lobban examines the pragmatism of elite ?adjustment? in relation to law reform c.1780-1830 ("'Old wine in new bottles": the concept and practice of law reform, c.1780-1830'). Improvements took some account of continental attempts at codification but the Benthamite principle of utility was largely rejected as too mechanical, lacking the flexibility of the common law?s incremental method. Bacon?s advocacy of ?pruning? rather than ?ploughing up and planting again? characterised legal demands for readjustment rather than innovation.(p.120) The cost of litigation and the sale of offices was a major focus of radical critiques of ?Old Corruption? and elite recognition of the need for retrenchment lay behind some proposals, yet reform was driven principally by the rise in litigation itself. It is no coincidence, Lobban finds, that the pre-Restoration era, which saw the most litigious society in English history, heard the first calls for extensive legal reform and both trends re-emerged after 1790. What Lobban does not explain are the reasons for this expansion in litigation. Bankruptcy law was a major preoccupation from the late-eighteenth century suggesting that pressure for reform was driven by changes within commercial society. The lack of attention to the social and economic context of the institutional adjustments examined in this volume is one of its main weaknesses. There is no extended consideration of economic reform and political economy, which both energised and divided reform projects.

?Revisiting? church reform, Arthur Burns notes that the resonance of the word ?reform? with ?reformation? enabled its more ready adoption by ecclesiastical campaigners than in secular improvement projects. Proposals focused on internal church matters ? abolition of sinecures, redistribution of resources to urban parishes, conditions of the ?working clergy? and so on ? and despite charges of luxury and abuse levelled by anti-clerical critics of ?Old Corruption?, the church was free to put its own house in order without the pressure of outside agitation or censure; few measures received significant opposition in Parliament. Moreover, church reform rarely trespassed into contentious debates over citizenship and religious affiliation, such as the Test and Corporations Acts or Catholic emancipation. Historical overtones of reformation permitted even conservatives to deploy the term ?reform? and churchmen more willingly adopted utilitarian arguments than legal reformers, especially when championing efficiency. The appeal to utility indicates the institutional focus of much church reform and has prompted many historians to examine such measures as part of a process of professionalisation and yet, ironically, Burns argues, Victorian churchmen attributed

their transformation of the lax Hanoverian church to moral zeal, connoting a ?reformation of manners? in which the church had played little part. Unlike evangelicals, church reformers paid scarce attention to the ideal of domestic or overseas mission, vital aspects of other reform projects.

In ?Medicine in the age of reform?, Ian Burney examines how radicals couched their demands within a discourse of English particularism. The Lancet launched its attack on medical bodies and institutions in the language of ?Old Corruption?, castigating the Royal Colleges as ?rotten corporations? while championing the rights of the disenfranchised surgeon-apothecaries. Medicine after the French Revolution has been seen as increasingly polarised between two competing camps: those influenced by the ?universalist? approach to the diseased body developed in French medicine, who advocated the reorganisation of medical practice on rationalist and abstract principles; and those who defended the traditional view of the patient as a unique constitution influenced by a particular environment that required individual ? rather than standardised ? treatment, best catered for by institutions that had evolved organically. Yet despite being influenced by continental theories and experiments, radicals framed their demands within the discourse of English constitutionalism and its appeals to historical wisdom. While acting for under-represented elements within the profession, particularly the general practitioner, they pursued a meritocracy based on their possession of approved, specialised knowledge. Their vision of reform was constructed as much against competition from popular, demotic medicine as against a reactionary medical hierarchy: ?never have quacks, quackish doctrines, and quack medicines, exercised a greater influence over the minds and bodies of the people? raged the *Lancet* in 1835.(quoted on p. 178)

Burney?s essay touches on issues of the discursive formation of power and knowledge that inform much recent work on medicine and politics. Interestingly, in a volume that seeks to reconceptualise the ?age of reform?, there is no explicit engagement with theoretical models of power that have informed studies of the state, professional bodies and even voluntary associations in the last decades, such as the nuanced readings of the workings of hegemony and ideology in Corrigan and Sayer?s *The Great Arch* and Robert Gray?s, *The Factory Question* or Mary Poovey?s Foucauldian take on discursive regimes in *The Making of the Social Body*.(2) Most essays focus instead on dialogues between individual actors within the elite or would-be-elite, which are explained by reference to the historical context.

One strength of the volume is the examination of the imperial dimension of many reform projects, evident particularly in the abolition movement as David Turley demonstrates in his reassessment of British antislavery. ?Reform? was an ambiguous term for abolitionists who aimed to eradicate, rather than renew, the slavery system and they mostly avoided its use before 1830. ?Improvement? was their preferred term, signalling the movement?s associations with rational dissent, evangelical mission and philanthropy that fuelled its concern with the reformation of domestic manners as well as colonial institutions. Comparing the movements in Manchester and Sheffield, Turley shows how abolition was constructed as a civilising project, dependent on the liberation of the market and the cultivation of the habits and discipline of free labour, as well as emancipation. The conviction that commercial and moral objectives went hand-in-hand continued into the post-Emancipation movement. The removal of the ?stain? was also imperative for the regeneration of the metropolis, where the cultivation of civilised Christian habits was perceived to be as needed as in the colonies; in Sheffield, abolitionist missionary zeal infused a campaign to improve the conditions of climbing boys. The centrality of missionary and civilising ideals to philanthropic, radical and reforming projects and its absence from others merits further research. While Owenism and feminism invoked the enthusiastic rhetoric of mission, its use in Chartism, except by women, is strikingly infrequent, despite the movement?s extensive deployment of Christian references. Philanthropic conceptions of mission at home and abroad were premised on the provision of instruction in the promotion of order and duty; a model largely rejected by Chartists who formulated knowledge as a means of working-class independence and empowerment.

The rhetoric of mission pervaded discussions of ?the Woman Question? in all its manifestations from the seventeen-eighties through to the Edwardian suffrage movement and the campaigns for women?s rights were particularly animated by the concepts of slavery and emancipation with all their imperial connotations. Given that these debates were inspired by radical and conservative formulations of ?woman?s mission?, they deserve closer attention than is afforded by this volume. In what ways, for example, did their discussions of

the relationship between institutional and moral reform, restoration and innovation, mark the differences in Mary Wollstonecraft?s and Hannah More?s understanding of the reform of gender relations and its place in national regeneration? Kathryn Gleadle?s essay '"The age of physiological reformers": rethinking gender and domesticity in the age of reform', is the only study that directly addresses women?s participation in reform culture. Her focus is physiological reform ? vegetarianism, homoeopathy, hydropathy, hygeism and medical botany ? where the body and the home were reconceived as politicised sites. Domestic roles were far more significant in early Victorian radicalism than is generally acknowledged and by privileging domestic activities over formal public politics, physiological reform enabled women ?to express ideological conviction in the ?public? world of reforming politics?.(p. 201)

The ?democratic epistemologies? of physiological reformers were developed across the classes from the eighteen-twenties, reaching a peak in the eighteen-fifties and -sixties, revealing a chronology different from the rise and fall of the Chartist platform. Gleadle suggests that the continuation of women?s participation in such movements ? and at home through radical practices of hygiene, diet and nursing ? might indicate that after 1850 women became more closely involved in, rather than alienated from, politics. The argument that women ?disappeared? from public politics after Chartism is forcefully contested by Gleadle, but while this may apply to middle-class radicals who were more clearly prominent in public campaigns, after 1850 it is difficult to make the case for working-class women who, after decades of visible presence in public demonstration and organisations, vanished from view. While some may have continued to name children after radicals or practise natural childbirth, the nature of working-class women?s political participation dramatically changed at the very moment that many middle-class women sought to speak and act on their behalf.

Gleadle?s is the only essay to explore working-class participation in reform, though the pressure exerted by plebeian radicals forms the context for the professional and elite responses examined in the volume. The omission is recognised by the editors who outline the trajectory of working-class agitation in the period and point to its extensive treatment elsewhere. Nevertheless, more attention could be given to the interaction between elite, middle-class and plebeian radicals. Such dynamics might be explored in literature, an important arena for cross-class ?dialogue? in terms of production as well as consumption, and another significant absence from the volume. Moreover, it was perhaps most explicitly within literature that women writers imaginatively reconfigured the relationship between elite, professional and industrial society. Novels can be read as revealing the complex relationship between ?reform? and ?reaction?, for authors notable for their political conservatism ? Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte ? mounted excoriating critiques of contemporary gender relations. Women writers were also, of course, prominent pioneers of the social or industrial novel that did much to popularise ?social reform?. To what extent, though, did this genre, conventionally associated with the mid-Victorian period, mark a development of, rather than a departure from, earlier reform literature?

The performative aspects of radicalism have engaged historians of the theatre and politics and this interdisciplinary exchange is extended here by three essays exploring the role of the arts during the age of reform, beginning with Jennifer Hall-Witt?s study of opera and elite culture ('Reforming the aristocracy: opera and elite culture, 1780-1860'). While the opera was not supported by public funds, its function as the site of fashionable society invited attacks on aristocratic manners that drew on radical discourse and pandered to the popular taste for Society scandal fed by the silver-fork novels of the eighteen-twenties and -thirties. Often exaggerated and salacious, such literature exposed the mechanisms of exclusion that demarcated elite culture, many maintained by women, as in their control over admission to balls, concerts and plays. Between 1780 and 1820, the nobility tightened its grasp over the opera via patronage and administration. While there were calls in the press for a reform of the opera, Hall-Witt suggests that reform was brought about chiefly through commercialisation and, perhaps as significantly, by the response of elite society to this process. After 1832 lady patrons released their hold on admissions and increasingly tickets were sold by commercial agents. No longer occupying the same pre-eminence as the place to be seen, opera-spectating became more anonymous and performers, rather than the audience, the focus of gossip. As its rule came under scrutiny inside and outside Parliament, at the opera house the aristocracy reformed itself. Yet,

despite concessions to wider public mores and the loosening of control over the opera, Hall-Witt maintains the landed elite dominated membership of the audience long after 1832, just as their counterparts in the political sphere continued to preside over Parliament.

Unlike opera, the theatre was tightly controlled by statute before 1843, with only the patented or ?legitimate? theatre licensed to produce the classical genres. Consequently, the theatrical world developed its own radical critique of monopoly and corruption as well as close connections with political reform, as Kate Newey investigates in ?Reform on the London Stage?. Though deregulation did not occur till 1843, it was preceded by a House of Commons select committee, set up shortly after the Reform Act, to address a long-running debate over the purpose of ?the national drama?. The patented theatres were in competition with the more commercialised ?illegitimate? theatres south of the river and in the East End, which thrived on the melodrama and spectacle that infused radical representation. In the eighteen-twenties and -thirties they dramatised alternative visions of the national community, lauding inclusivity and mutuality and appealing especially to working-class audiences, as in the staging of Shakespeare?s *Play of King John! Or, the Days of Magna Charta* and Montcrief?s *Reform! Or John Bull Triumphant!*(p. 252) As Parliament cemented working-class exclusion from the Houses of Parliament, the illegitimate theatre provided substitute venues where the popular classes could participate in another kind of community that represented their own sense of cultural, as well as political, value.

Considerations of cultural value lay at the heart of campaigns for national art institutions examined by Holger Hoock (?Reforming culture : national art institutions in the age of reform'). The relationship between political discourse and fine art remains an under-researched area of cultural history, yet the art world and conceptions of taste ?became intensely politicised? in the age of reform, with calls for a public or ?national? gallery made by artists in the late seventeen-nineties, inspired by developments on the continent, especially the opening of the Louvre to the nation in 1793.(p. 254) In Britain, debate centred on the relationship between public and private funding and property rights; criticism of aristocratic sinecures and control; the accountability of arts institutions to parliament; and public access. The civilising and improving aspects of the access campaign are indicated by the relaxation of the British Museum?s admissions policy to include those of ?decent appearance? in 1810. (p. 260) Soaring visitor figures fired demands for a National Gallery, finally established by government purchase of a private collection in 1828. In this move towards the democratisation of art, elite culture anticipated the political concessions made by the Reform Act and ?helped to launch the multifaceted civilising and restructuring of reform projects? that cut across party lines.(pp. 269-70)

The dynamics of the national and international meanings and contexts of the reform movements are the focus of the final three chapters. Where the reform debates in Ireland have been seen as responses to British centralising policy, Jennifer Ridden examines the development of two native reform movements and their competitive relationship to each other. The Act of Union left open the question of how Ireland was to be administered and how the various nations within the Union were to interact. The government of Ireland, as neither fully centralised nor colonialised, enabled O?Connell?s Catholic Association and the non-denominational liberal reform movement to use British political structures and constitutionalist discourse ?to achieve Irish ends?.(pp. 271-4) In a careful assessment of how the two movements addressed different socio-economic and religious constituencies, Ridden investigates more closely than other essays the complex relationship between political ideology and social aspiration. In his mobilisation of the mass platform, O?Connell sought to construct a cross-class alliance of Catholics under elite leadership to preserve the existing social order; ?I desire no social revolution, no social change?.(quoted on p. 276) A Gaelic-Catholic identity ?operated as a cultural ?glue??, binding together the leadership and followers and ?Repeal of the Union?, far from being a realistic objective, was for O?Connell a bargaining tool for gaining popular support in order to ?terrify[ ] the enemies of the people? who might otherwise ?adjourn. . . all practical improvement?.(quoted on p. 280) By contrast, the moderate, liberal reform movement was emphatically non-denominational and non-ethnic, appealing to a middle- rather than cross-class constituency, aiming to replace the Ascendancy with a ?virtuous, legitimate, and broadly Christian elite? and to promote economic, educational and urban reform within the Union. With a ?liberal theology ? of citizenship? that emphasised

?the individual and improvability? such reformers sought a ?middle way? between the radical rights discourse of the Catholic Association, evangelical Protestantism and the Ascendancy.(p. 286) Despite very different modes of appeal and objectives, both movements were, unlike reformers in other parts of the Union, willing to work within a centralised state, provided that it was not dominated by the Protestant oligarchy, and in this capacity may have heavily influenced the ?British age of reform? at its centre. (pp. 293-4)

Miles Taylor (in 'Empire and parliamentary reform : the 1832 reform act revisited') examines an extraordinary omission from histories of the Reform Act: the imperial considerations that underlay much Tory opposition to the legislation, namely the charges that Scottish and Irish representation would be increased to the detriment of the English and that, in the name of emancipation within the island, the reform bills threatened to end the representation of millions across the empire. Moreover, the balance between domestic and imperial parliamentary representation was debated at a major ?turning-point? in the history of empire. Parliamentary reform was itself fuelled by demands for colonial reform ? tithe and ecclesiastical reform in Ireland, slave emancipation, the renewal of the East India Company?s Charter and military retrenchment ? and the representative duties of the British parliament were contested by all sides of the Reform debate, just as other European rivals were thrown into fiscal and constitutional crisis by imperial over-reach. If the Whigs won the battle ?at home? with the 1832 settlement, crisis overseas was scarcely averted by massive compensations to colonial interests (half the UK annual revenue to the planters) and with rebellion and war in Jamaica, Canada and India in 1837-8, ?it was clear that while stability might have been brought to the British mainland by the Reform Act, in the empire it was a rather different story?.(pp. 310-11) Yet stability was not much in evidence in Britain that year, as mobilisation for the Charter began; the imperial context of that struggle is equally deserving of the attention that Taylor brings here to elite debates.

In their introduction, Burns and Innes emphasise the dialogue between European and British reformers. Even the Napoleonic blockade did not stem the influence of late-Enlightenment thought and ?philanthropic tourism?, as reformers looked to protestant models of reform in Germany and Scandinavia. By contrast, Jonathan Sperber usefully brings the volume to a close by throwing into sharp relief the differences between British and continental experiences of the age of reform, concluding ?The fundamental impression ? remains of two quite different political universes?.(p. 313) Where in Britain and Ireland much agrarian reform was enacted by opponents of parliamentary reform, it was above all the emancipation of agriculture and the abolition of serfdom that animated European attacks on the *anciens régimes* and on much of the continent, it was not until 1848 that the liberation of rural society from pre-capitalist relationships was affected by revolution, rather than reform. Somewhat at odds with Turley?s and Taylor?s assessments of the connections between colonial and domestic reform, Sperber contends it is difficult to see the abolition of slavery as having a similar impact on British and Irish society as the ending of serfdom had for their European neighbours. Though there were comparable developments towards administrative uniformity and legal equality in Britain, these were largely framed in opposition to, rather than in the assertion of, nationalist claims as on the continent and in Ireland. The preoccupation of British radicals with parliamentary reform found little correspondence in the absolutist regimes where it was difficult to conceive democratisation without revolution. With the emergence of ?socialism? and the ?social question? after 1830 there were parallel moves towards social reform but in Europe this was limited to urban districts at least before 1848.

While much reform on the continent was driven by state bureaucrats, mirrored in Britain by the philosophic radicals and the centralisation of Poor Law administration, on the whole British reform was activated by voluntary association and outside pressure. While there were significant moves towards associationism in Europe after the 1830 revolutions, this was limited to urban, industrial areas. Even there, despite improvements in communication, the development of the public sphere was restricted by state repression and led to ?the uniquely continental phenomenon of crypto-political associations? that contrasted with the characteristic openness of the British mass platform.(p. 323) The underdeveloped nature of European civil society also militated against the participation of women in voluntary and political associations ? a striking difference that Sperber observes in respect of the British experience ? although much needed comparative research on European women?s movements might qualify his conclusions.

It is difficult, Sperber confesses, to resist the rather Whiggish claim that the political system in Britain was better able to accommodate change than its European counterparts and this might be indicated in the different associations of the word ?reform?.(p. 329) By the end of the eighteen-twenties, the term signalled a gradualist alternative to revolution, where on the continent it retained its older connotation of innovation and consequently other words were deployed such as ?regeneration? and ?reorganisation?. However, Sperber rejects the applicability of modernisation theory, concluding:

> there were a collection of paths leading to the future (or at least from the ancien régime to a civil society of property-owners), and the concept of reform, the movements of reform, and the successes of these movements, were a particular characteristic of the British one. (p. 330)

Sperber?s closing comment marks a rare instance of theorisation in the volume. In its own terms, how does this collection ?reform? or ?transform? the historiography of the ?age of reform?? The renewed attention to elite discussions is an important reorientation in a field dominated by ?middle-? and ?working-class? activism, although there is no reflection on the ways in which understandings of class formation and ?interest? are problematised in recent work. Gleadle?s contribution on the new ?cultures of self? and the essays on reform and the arts usefully refocus and broaden the object of political history and the book reveals the importance of placing British reform in the context of empire and political developments abroad. The examination of the contested meanings of the language of reform is productive and, as the editors hope, opens up many lines of enquiry for future work, especially in relation to reform projects after 1848; although in a seventy-page introduction some bolder claims about their trajectory might have been advanced. Another way to rethink the historiography would be to examine how contemporaries conceived the ?age of reform? as a distinct historical period, given that so much writing on the era has been informed by the histories that they produced. Where other work on political discourse has engaged explicitly with debates over epistemology and methodology and in some places advocated a new kind of political history, this volume restricts itself to close analysis of the terms of political debate. By focusing so heavily on key players in government and institutional arenas as they ?responded? to outside events or to critics and opponents from ?within?, the form of historical analysis tends to suggest the restoration ? with some ameliorative adjustments ? of a traditional style of political narrative.

Notes

1. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: J. M. Dent, 1985), p. 51.Back to (1)
2. Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); Robert Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England, 1830-60* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).Back to (2)

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