Rethinking the Age of Reform

Britain 1780–1850

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1. *Introduction*

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Historians have variously employed the notion of an 'age of reform': sometimes including within its scope the build-up of pressure for 'reform' from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, sometimes limiting their attention to the years following the 'Great Reform Act' of 1832.[1] A timescale weighted towards the later period is appropriate if the chief object is to assess reforming *achievement*: the effects of the restructuring of the representative system, or the fates of the diverse legislative projects laid before the 'reformed parliament' in its three and a half decades of life.

In this volume our primary concern lies elsewhere: with reform as *aspiration*. We survey the kinds of reform aspiration formulated from the 1780s – the decade when 'reform' first became a key political slogan – down to the 1830s and 1840s, when the enactment of parliamentary and other reforms began to bring about major changes in the political and cultural landscape. 'Reform' remained a key concept in political life for several decades thereafter, but its meaning and significance shifted. These later changes also warrant attention, but that attention is not provided here.[2]

A distinguishing feature of this volume is that we pay closer heed than historians of this period have usually done to contemporary uses of the terminology of 'reform'.[3] We do not suggest that it is possible to unravel reform projects in all their diversity – to understand all that contemporaries hoped and feared,

[1] Cf. Michael J. Turner, *British Politics in an Age of Reform* [1760–1832] (Manchester, 1999); A. S. Turberville, *The House of Lords in the Age of Reform, 1784–1837; with an Epilogue on Aristocracy and the Advent of Democracy, 1837–67* (London, 1958); E. W. Woodward, *The Age of Reform, 1815–70*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1962); Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1990). For the 'Great Reform Act', Michael Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (Aldershot, 1973), though dated, remains the most comprehensive account.

[2] See section VII below for a brief discussion of continuity and change in thinking about reform in the mid-century decades, and references to the historiography of that period.

[3] Though for mid-nineteenth-century decades, see now Derek Beales, 'The Idea of Reform in British Politics, 1829–50', in T. C. W. Blanning and Peter Wende (eds.), *Reform in Great Britain and Germany, 1750–1850* (Oxford, 1999).

and how they argued and manoeuvred – simply by focusing on the uses made of one key term. We do, however, suggest that since 'reform' *was* a key term, and moreover a mutable, contested term, both embodying aspirations and conjuring up fears, there is something to be gained from observing closely what contemporaries did with the word and what it meant to them.

As Joanna Innes shows in her essay, when an extra-parliamentary movement first adopted as its goal the redress of abuses within parliament as a means to 'public reformation', the word already had a long and complex history behind it. Two enduringly common uses were, however, to denote the recasting of abuse-ridden laws and institutions and the correction of moral failings. Those two visions of reform shared some common ground: institutions were thought to become corrupt in part because of the moral failings of those within them; faulty institutions were thought to be important sources of corruption in society. Yet they were also distinguishable: some reform strategies targeted more the one, some more the other.

During the next few decades, the context for reforming effort changed radically, as first the French Revolution helped to bring institutional reform projects into disrepute, then – as the nature of the French regime changed, and ultimately the Allies achieved military mastery – the political climate lightened and reformers' prospects improved. Reforming effort diversified. Evangelicals and other 'practical' reforming activists pushed a broad agenda of 'reforms'; the success of the campaign to abolish the slave-trade, in 1807, showed that it was possible to secure some such reforms even from an 'unreformed' parliament. In the late 1810s, the rise of mass popular support for parliamentary reform, against a background of heated debate about the extent to which parliament should or should not regulate employment and commerce, supplied a new context for older hopes and fears. In the 1820s, the rise of rationalist and proto-socialist movements and of new cultures of the self (notably in the form of the temperance movement) further complicated the scene by giving new life and a variety of new twists to the project of moral reform. Yet it continued to be the case that much of what reform meant to contemporaries was informed by, on the one hand, institutional and, on the other hand, moral understandings of what 'reform' entailed.

Thus conceived, the reform agenda was not all-encompassing: not all schemes of improvement were 'reform' projects. But, conversely, that agenda did encompass many issues which – though they may have their own specialist literatures – have not featured much (if at all) in general accounts. Parliamentary reform was, undoubtedly, *the* reform par excellence: that was what people meant when they talked about 'reform' *tout court*. But alongside calls for parliamentary reform there were calls for the reform of a host of other (as it was claimed) exclusive, corrupt, and oppressive institutions: the church, the criminal law, and prisons; the high courts, and their modes of dealing with civil suits; municipal

corporations; the universities; the medical colleges; the theatrical patent system; the Bank of England; the East India Company. Those who criticized some of these institutions did not necessarily criticize all others: many attracted specialized groups of critics, featuring especially those whose lives were most affected by them: lawyers, medical practitioners, merchants, and so forth, as the case might be. Criticisms were often particular: one might defend one institution and attack another. But there were overlaps in the membership of critical groups, and similarities of rhetoric. We narrow our view of what was at stake in the 'age of reform' unnecessarily if we do not allow this wide range of institutional targets to figure.[4]

Nor should the 'moral reform' strand in the story be overlooked. Quite how institutional and moral reform related, and should relate, was always a matter of debate. Could institutional reform be counted upon to bring moral reform in its train? Or was it a distraction from what needed to be a prior moral-reform project? Were institutional reform efforts even quite misconceived – diverting energy away from the only things truly in need of radical amendment: hearts, minds, and lives? Institutional and moral reformers sometimes saw eye to eye, sometimes they did not. The two projects sometimes interacted, as they did for William Wilberforce and the 'Saints', for example. Even when they were opposed, there might yet be significant critical exchange between them.

Our exploration of this terrain commences with an essay by Joanna Innes, charting the history of the words 'reformation', 'reform', 'reformer', and related terms. Four essays exploring reform efforts targeted on particular institutions follow: Philip Harling writes about demands for the reform of government; Michael Lobban about interest in reforming law; Arthur Burns about the reform of the Church of England; and Ian Burney about the reform of medicine. The next two essays explore reform efforts more 'moral' in character: David Turley writes about the antislavery movement; Kathryn Gleadle about some new cultures of the self.

The following three essays by Jennifer Hall-Witt, Katherine Newey, and Holger Hoock discuss 'reform and the arts'. Several of the themes explored in earlier essays recur here. Efforts to reform the arts sometimes focused on art institutions – the theatrical patent system, the Royal Academy – sometimes on the *content* of artistic production (of course, it was often thought that the institutional context influenced the content of art). Running through much debate on the arts was also a set of social themes: how could the arts be made

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[4] Note thus that John Wade's *Extraordinary Black Book* (London, 1831 edn), often cited by historians for its observations on parliamentary representation, devotes chs. 1–2 to the church; 3–4 to the crown establishment and civil list; 5 to diplomats, and 6 to the peerage. Parliamentary representation features in ch. 7, following which eight further chapters deal with law, debt, taxation, the East India Company, the Bank of England, and sinecures.

accessible to a broader public? Was the current art scene in some way tainted by its privileged and restricted audience? Or would it be tainted if it were opened up to an undiscriminating public?

Three final essays set British reform in a wider context. Jennifer Ridden explores the salience of 'reform' in early nineteenth-century Ireland. Miles Taylor considers a broader set of interrelations: between Britain and her empire. British parliamentary reform had implications for the representation of extra-British interests. Imperial issues helped to create a climate in which reform could be represented as necessary; subsequently – partly in consequence – they presented a major challenge to policy-makers in the reformed polity. Jonathan Sperber sets British reform movements in a wider European context, and emphasizes their numerous distinctive features.

We regard it as a virtue of this collection that it brings into consideration topics that have not figured much in previous overarching accounts, including calls for reform in medicine and in the theatre, the place of reform in early nineteenth-century Irish politics, and the implications of parliamentary reform for the empire. We hope to have demonstrated that reform agendas in this period were more diverse than has sometimes been appreciated. We also demonstrate, incidentally, that reformers employed a wide range of strategies. Attempts to influence parliament through mobilizing public opinion were a feature of the age, but this approach was not appropriate for all varieties of 'reform'.

Our account is none the less selective and limited: selective, in that we have not included essays on by any means all of the topics suggested by our approach – thus on the Bank of England, on universities, or on temperance;[5] limited, in so far as there is much that our approach tends to marginalize or under-represent. In the remainder of this introduction, we make a small effort to remedy these deficiencies by outlining the larger historiographical and historical context in which this volume must be set. That it provides context for, not a summary of what follows perhaps needs emphasis. In a concluding section, however, we return to say a little more about the essays which follow against the background of the introduction.

I

Historians of eighteenth-century Britain working over the past half-century and more have fundamentally challenged ideas about the period embodying what

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[5] For some insight into these topics see, however, Timothy L. Alborn, *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England* (London, 1998); Anthony C. Howe, 'From "Old Corruption" to "New Probity": The Bank of England and its Directors in the Age of Reform', in Alan O'Day (ed.), *Government and Institutions in the Post-1832 United Kingdom* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1995); Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion and Reform, 1830–41* (Oxford, 1987), ch. 5; Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815–72*, 2nd edn (Keele, 1994).

has been termed a 'reform perspective'.[6] As that term suggests, this view of the period had its origins in the writings of reformers trying to position their own efforts in time. Often lacking any very rich understanding of earlier generations, and inclined to denigrate the past in order to magnify their own aspirations and achievements, nineteenth-century writers sympathetic to the reform endeavours of their own day often portrayed the eighteenth century as an *essentially* 'unreformed' era. Eighteenth-century government was depicted as oligarchic and corrupt; parliaments as tools in the hands of 'the aristocracy' and 'the landed interest'; the church as self-satisfied and out of touch with the laity; criminal justice as bloody and barbaric; prisons as sites of oppression and moral degradation. Eighteenth-century manners and modes of conduct, correspondingly, were portrayed as coarse and lax, marred by gluttony, drunkenness, and tolerance for the sexual peccadilloes of lords and gentlemen. Some aspects of eighteenth-century life were equally often idealized, notably the paternalism of the squirearchy, the old poor law, and traditional master–apprentice relationships – but here again it is evident that nineteenth-century preoccupations strongly coloured the picture. The reports of royal commissions – a favourite tool of government from the 1830s – provide many classic formulations of such views, and have undoubtedly done much to shape the ways in which subsequent generations have cast their accounts.

One does not have to be an apologist for the eighteenth century to recognize that these are skewed perspectives. Several generations of historians have now striven to shift the balance, and to complicate our understandings of eighteenth-century practices and attitudes. The eighteenth century stands revealed by such research as having been less different from the nineteenth century than reformers liked to suppose. Both practices and aspirations anticipated much of what later generations took to be distinctive features of their own era. Thus, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw important efforts to improve efficiency in government: nineteenth-century critics of 'Old Corruption' were in some respects trying to *complete* an earlier programme of reform, while simultaneously grappling with the dislocating consequences of the enormous increase in government business which followed from the French Wars and economic growth.[7] Eighteenth-century political power was

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[6] For this phrase, see Joanna Innes and John Styles, 'The Crime Wave: Recent Writing on Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century England', *Jl Brit. Studies*, 25 (1986), 410. See also Paul Langford, 'Introduction: Time and Space', in Langford (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2002), 1–8, for an overview of historiographical trends stressing recent reassessment of 'the nineteenth century's deep contempt for the eighteenth'. Recent examples of accounts adopting this perspective include Peter Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence: Ecclesiastical Structure and Problems of Church Reform, 1700–1840* (Cambridge, 1989); Herbert Schlossberg, *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (Columbus, Ohio, 2000).

[7] These earlier developments are surveyed by John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989), esp. ch. 3. For the French Wars' exacerbation of earlier problems, see Philip Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996), 63–88.

not monopolized by the aristocracy and gentry: the business classes were experienced and demanding lobbyists, and the views of the electorate mattered. Though most eighteenth-century constituencies were small, most *voters* lived in large constituencies, characterized by an active political life. There were many political and quasi-political clubs, and much long-distance political networking. Eighteenth-century ministers and MPs were therefore exposed to a variety of more and less visible forms of 'pressure from without'.[8] Institutions and governmental practices were often criticized, and efforts made to improve them; John Beattie, for example, has uncovered a history of experimentation with criminal law, policing, trial, and punishment that dates back at least to the late seventeenth century.[9] From the 1750s, sentimental and philanthropic writings developed a specific form of social criticism.[10] Efforts to further the 'progress of politeness' among upper and middling social groups had as their counterpoint recurrent campaigns to 'reform the manners' of the lower orders – efforts which had some success, inasmuch as, for example, the once popular practice of 'throwing at cocks' seems to have been largely abandoned by the end of the century.[11] All this bears emphasizing because it is not our intention,

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[8] For lobbying, see Brewer, *Sinews of Power*, ch. 8; Perry Gauci, *The Politics of Trade: The Overseas Merchant in State and Society, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 2001), ch. 5. For the vitality of the eighteenth-century electorate, see *inter alia* Geoffrey Holmes, *The Electorate and the National Will in the First Age of Party* (Lancaster, 1976); Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–85* (Cambridge, 1995); Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1742–1832* (Oxford, 1989). For the developing concept of 'public opinion', see J. A. W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston, Ont., 1983). Eighteenth-century 'public opinion' manifested itself most dramatically in the occasional storm of protest: see thus Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Dr Sacheverell* (London, 1973); Paul Langford, *The Excise Crisis: Society and Politics in the Age of Walpole* (Oxford, 1973); T. W. Perry, *Public Opinion, Propaganda and Politics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study of the Jew Bill of 1753* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962). Wilkite excitement in the 1760s and 1770s (surveyed by George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty* (London, 1962) and John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1972), ch. 9) and the Association Movement of the 1780s (for which see n. 13 below) can be seen as successors to such earlier storms. But at a less dramatic level there was constant interaction between the propertied classes, very broadly defined, and parliament, for which see Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1789* (Oxford, 1991), esp. chs. 3, 5; Joanna Innes, 'Parliament and the Shaping of Eighteenth-Century English Social Policy', *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., 60 (1990).

[9] John Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 1986); John Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660–1750: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror* (Oxford, 2001). See also Lee Davison *et al.* (eds.), *Stilling the Grumbling Hive: The Response to Social and Economic Problems in England, 1689–1750* (Stroud, 1992).

[10] See, e.g., Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730–1830* (London, 1999), ch. 7.

[11] For the progress of politeness and the reformation of manners – a booming topic in modern scholarship – see *inter alia* Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–83* (Oxford, 1989); G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992). For changes in popular manners, see R. W. Malcolmson,

in directing attention to an 'age of reform' which we have dated from 1780, to add weight to the notion that preceding decades were 'unreformed'. On the contrary, if anything, we wish to reorient understandings of the reform era so as to achieve a better fit with the new historiography of the preceding period.

In what sense, then, can the year 1780 be said to have inaugurated an 'age of reform'?

What is at issue is in part a shift in vocabulary. This played a part in conditioning the ways in which subsequent generations understood their relationship to their own forebears, and thus in due course in shaping a distorting 'reform perspective' on the past. Attitudes and practices changed less than the ways in which those attitudes and practices were expressed and recorded. But the change in vocabulary itself reflected, and gained significance from, certain wider events, and certain slowly unfolding, but ultimately significant, changes in the forms of public life.

The War of American Independence (1776–83) marked a crisis for the British polity.[12] This was the only major war of the period to end in clear defeat for Britain. In the course of the war, indeed, the threat of losses on more than just the American continent loomed, as the Irish too protested at British misrule and demanded more independence, questions were raised about the justice and effectiveness of British rule in India, and the French, Spanish, and Dutch tried to strip away parts of Britain's global empire. Christopher Wyvill's Association movement – a movement of protest against an expensive and arguably misdirected war – helped to launch the career of the word 'reform' as a key term in British political life by turning the call for a restructuring of the relationship between parliament and public (a traditional enough demand) into a slogan that would resound many times through the next century: 'parliamentary reform'.[13] This period of crisis brought to the centre of British politics – uniquely in the

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(*cont.*)
Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850 (Cambridge, 1973); Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200–1830* (Harlow, 1983), chs. 8–11; R. B. Shoemaker, 'The Decline of Public Insult in London, 1660–1800', *Past and Present*, no. 169 (Nov. 2000).

[12] Since Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People, 1779–80* (London, 1949) there has been a tendency to play this down, but the significance of the moment has been re-emphasized by recent scholarship. See, e.g., Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1994), 132–45; Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford, 2000). Note also Mark Philp, 'The Role of America in the "Debate on France" 1791–5: Thomas Paine's Insertion', *Utilitas*, 5 (1993).

[13] Wyvill's Association is assigned a prominent place in older studies of the rise of extra-parliamentary reforming politics: see, e.g., E. C. Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769–1793* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640–1832* (Cambridge, 1972). Though it clearly had various novel features, it has not been fully reassessed in the light of recent work on earlier popular politics (for which see n. 8 above) – though see Linda Colley, 'Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism before Wilkes', *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., 31 (1981), for an attempt to provoke debate. For a recent study of Wyvillite agitation in the press, see Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1998). For the slogan 'reform', see Joanna Innes' essay below.

eighteenth century – two political leaders, William Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox, *both* of whom at least ostensibly favoured 'reform', both in the form of 'parliamentary reform' and in terms of being prepared to countenance other significant reshaping of government.[14] It was symptomatic of the time that the two should have competed, in 1783–4, to find effective ways of reforming the East India Company, on whose faulty structure certain problematic features of British rule in India were blamed. The massively detailed reports of the parliamentary select committee set up to enquire into the Company's proceedings were unprecedented, in scale and ambition, as parliamentary publications.[15]

Among its many and varied effects, the American war helped to destabilize Britain's late-seventeenth-century religious settlement, arousing both hopes for change and determined opposition to change.[16] The desire to align England and Scotland's Catholic minorities and Ireland's Catholic majority behind the war effort prompted symbolically important modifications of anti-Catholic laws in 1778, but when Lord George Gordon's protestant crusade precipitated anti-Catholic rioting in London in June 1780, tensions within elite opinion were revealed. Much more significant concessions would follow in the 1790s, but full 'Catholic Emancipation' – the opening up of parliament and the highest offices in the state to Catholics – was to remain a contentious issue up to and beyond its passage into law in 1829.[17] The immediate response of protestant dissenters was to argue that concessions to Catholics should be matched by concessions to them, and these followed in 1779, but, because some among their number showed sympathy for the American cause, the war added weight to the view that dissenters were subversives.[18] In the late 1780s, dissenters

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[14] Michael Duffy, *The Younger Pitt* (Harlow, 2000); for much more detail on this early period in Pitt's career, see John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt*, 3 vols. (London, 1969–96), i; L. G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party, 1782–94* (London, 1971).

[15] Detailed accounts are supplied in Lucy Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century English Politics* (Oxford, 1962); Vincent Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire*, 2 vols. (London, 1952–64), ii, chs. 2–3; for the political struggle, see also John Cannon, *The Fox–North Coalition: Crisis of the Constitution, 1782–4* (Cambridge, 1969). The reports occupy three volumes in the first series of *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, 15 vols. (London, 1806).

[16] Religious ramifications of the impact of the American War are now helpfully surveyed in Conway, *British Isles and the War of American Independence*, ch. 7.

[17] The British political context of important concessions to Catholics in 1791 (31 Geo. III, c. xxxii) has not been much studied, though see Ehrman, *Younger Pitt*, ii, 81–4, for a brief account. For an overview of Irish developments, see Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation: The Catholic Question, 1690–1830* (Dublin, 1992). For the politics of emancipation in the 1820s, see below, n. 135.

[18] For the argument that they *were* subversives, and that religious heterodoxy lay at the root of all political radicalism, see J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2000), ch. 4; J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge, 1994), esp. ch. 3. Cf. James Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990); for a review and assessment, John Seed, "'A Set of Men

campaigned for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, full of hope that, in the new political climate, their efforts would meet with success. Not only were they disappointed, but concurrent theological controversy drew forth new champions of Anglican orthodoxy and contributed to the reinvigoration of the high-church tradition within the Church of England.[19]

This era of political crisis and change was marked also by heightened moral anxiety. The 1770s and 1780s saw a series of high-profile scandals among the social elite, publicized by the press both as objects of reprobation, and for titillating effect. The duchess of Kingston's trial for bigamy, and the murder of the earl of Sandwich's mistress by a disappointed lover, cast disturbing light on aristocratic mores. Concern about elite morals seems in 1779 to have prompted the first of a series of legislative attempts to discourage adultery. In the 1780s, it was argued that Fox's notorious penchant for gambling called his suitability for leadership into question.[20] The war played its part in shaping the new moral climate. Anxiety lest losses in war indicate withdrawal of God's approval helped to spur the diffusion of evangelicalism among both churchmen and dissenters. Local authorities undertook a concerted drive against 'vice' in common life: at the war's end, magistrates throughout England circulated plans to combat 'vice and immorality' and 'better' society by such means as building new model prisons and encouraging the establishment of contributory 'friendly societies'. William Wilberforce, newly emerged from a religious conversion experience, tried to coordinate local activity into a 'reformation of manners' campaign – echoing a late-seventeenth/early eighteenth-century effort.[21]

Also infused with moral energy, and also endorsed by Wilberforce, was another campaign that was at once more popular in its appeal, more innovative in its

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(*cont.*)
Powerful Enough in Many Things": Rational Dissent and Political Opposition in England, 1770–1790', in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1996).

[19] For dissenting campaigns, see R. B. Barlow, *Citizenship and Conscience: A Study of the Theory and Practice of Religious Toleration during the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1962); G. M. Ditchfield, 'The Parliamentary Struggle over the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, 1787–1790', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, 89 (1974). See also G. M. Ditchfield, '"How Narrow Will the Limits of This Toleration Appear?" Dissenting Petitions to Parliament, 1772–1773', and James Bradley, 'The Public, Parliament and the Protestant Dissenting Deputies', in Stephen Taylor and David Wykes (eds.), *Parliament and Dissent* (forthcoming, Edinburgh, 2005). For the high-church revival, see Peter Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760–1857* (Cambridge, 1994); F. C. Mather, *High Church Prophet: Bishop Samuel Horsley and the Caroline Tradition in the later Georgian Church* (Oxford, 1992).

[20] Phyllis Deutsch, 'Moral Trespass in Georgian London: Gaming, Gender and Electoral Politics in the Age of George III', *Hist. Jl*, 39 (1996); Donna Andrew, '"Adultery à la Mode": Privilege, the Law and Attitudes to Adultery 1770–1809', *Hist.*, 82 (1997); see also Donna Andrew and Randall McGowen, *The Perreaus and Mrs Rudd: Forgery and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century London* (Berkeley, 2001), ch. 5.

[21] Joanna Innes, 'Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-Century England', in E. Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late-Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990).

methods, and more striking in its impact: the campaign against the slave-trade. The institution of slavery had long attracted diffuse criticism from 'freeborn Englishmen'. In the climate of imperial rethinking and moral self-criticism that followed the American War, some Quakers strove to give the issue a higher public profile. As its support base broadened in the late 1780s, the campaign developed in novel ways, combining the petitioning tactics of Wyvill's Association movement with publicity and fund-raising efforts more reminiscent of subscription charities. The rise in importance of the midlands and the north of England as commercial and manufacturing districts was reflected in the significant role urban centres and business leaders in these regions played in the campaign. Operating outside traditional political frameworks, and drawing upon religious and humanitarian among other forms of support, the antislavery campaign succeeded in 1791 in mobilizing petitions on an unprecedented scale: in contrast to the few dozen petitions previously evoked by major political and economic campaigns, this one elicited over five hundred. After the campaign achieved its goal, in 1807, the activist Thomas Clarkson published a history that detailed the way in which it had evolved and the tactics employed. This was the first developed history of a reform campaign. The campaign was subsequently cited as a model from which other would-be reformers might learn.[22]

The 1780s were a unique decade in eighteenth-century history: a decade in which not only were many forms of 'abuse' and 'vice' denigrated, but also a wide variety of 'reform' and 'improvement' campaigns commanded support across a broad front – though the decade also saw the crystallization of some anti-reform sentiment. Supporters of a variety of later reform efforts looked back to this as the period in which their cause first took clear shape: including parliamentary reformers, prison reformers, and antislavery activists. Such perceptions encouraged some caricaturing of previous decades, but also reflected real shifts in the character of political culture. All periodizations have an element of arbitrariness, and threaten to distort as much as they reveal – but these are the considerations that have led us to choose this decade as the starting-point for our enquiries. It must none the less be borne in mind – as some of the essays that follow will stress – that many varieties of 'reforming' thought and practice had important antecedents, even if, in the earlier period, these concerns were not expressed or pursued in quite the same way.

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[22] Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (London, 1975), remains a helpful survey. Recent studies include Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Anti-Slavery: British Anti-Slavery Mobilisation in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1987); Judi Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783–1807* (London, 1997); J. E. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (London, 1998). See also Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, 1992). For Thomas Clarkson's pioneering history, see his *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolishment of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (London, 1808).

II

Jonathan Sperber in his chapter emphasizes the distinctiveness of British reform projects in this period. But this is not to say that British developments can or should be studied in isolation from wider European and American currents. We turn now to provide an account of that broader context from the late eighteenth century through to the 1830s before examining in more detail British developments over the same period.

Historians have termed the late eighteenth century the era of the 'late Enlightenment'. In these decades, the possibility of improving the human condition through governmental or other forms of public action provided a focus for much discussion and indeed practical effort. The resolution of religious conflicts (sometimes by compromise, more often by force), and development of more powerful military and fiscal apparatuses in the course of a series of European wars from the 1660s down to the 1760s, had left many rulers and their advisers better equipped than before to pursue schemes of domestic improvement. What scope there was for such action, and in what forms it might best be undertaken, were increasingly debated by intellectuals. 'Reform' was a term that flitted through these continental discussions.[23]

English newspapers and magazines carried reports of some of these European efforts: the king of Prussia's 1730s scheme of law reform, for example, and Empress Catherine of Russia's establishment of a 'Legislative Commission'.[24] Continental essays and treatises were sometimes read in their original languages, sometimes in translation: Cesare Beccaria's treatise on crimes and punishments, thus, was translated into English in 1767, and repeatedly cited by English authors thereafter.[25] Englishmen interested in promoting reforms sometimes corresponded with fellow workers abroad: Jeremy Bentham developed an extensive network of European contacts, while English antislavery activists corresponded with their American counterparts. Some travelled to make contacts and see for themselves: Bentham visited Russia; the prison reformer John Howard toured the continent, and indeed died of a fever contracted while visiting Russian prisons.[26] The period saw an upsurge in what Jeroen Dekker has called 'philanthropic tourism'. This brought foreigners to Britain, as well as the reverse: the French physicians Jacques Tenon and Charles Auguste de Coulomb

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[23] For an overview, see Hamish Scott (ed.), *Enlightened Absolutism: Reform and Reformers in Later Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke, 1990).

[24] Both were also the subject of independent publications: *The King of Prussia's Plan for Reforming the Administration of Justice* (London, 1750); *The Grand Instructions to the Commissioners appointed to frame a New Code of Laws for the Russian Empire . . .* (London, 1768).

[25] A. J. Draper, 'Cesare Beccaria's Influence on English Discussions of Punishment, 1764–1789', *Hist. European Ideas*, 26 (2000).

[26] Ian R. Christie, *The Benthams in Russia, 1780–1791* (Oxford, 1993). John Aikin, *A View of the Character and Public Services of the late John Howard* (London, 1796), for Howard's travels and death.

were sent by the French Academy of Sciences to visit English hospitals; Baron von Voght, one of the promoters of a Hamburg poor-relief experiment, came to Edinburgh.[27] Britons became increasingly self-conscious about how their legal and social institutions stood up to comparison with the 'most improved' European and American laws and practices.

The French Revolution at first seemed to set the scene for more such fruitful interactions. As Frenchmen set about drafting and implementing unprecedentedly ambitious schemes for reform and regeneration, English reformers watched with interest. Samuel Romilly, a young barrister who had recently written against the excessive number of penal hangings in England, suggested in his *Thoughts on the Probable Influence of the French Revolution on Great Britain* (1790) that the time had come for the English to consider, in the light of their own reason and not that of their ancestors, the merits of not just the standing army (a long-standing concern), an unrepresentative parliament (an issue of the day), and cruel criminal statutes (his own chosen cause), but also the hardships of sailors; privateering; expensive law proceedings; the requirement that Church of England clergy subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles; the 'settlement' laws as they affected entitlement to poor relief; monopoly in commerce and the Navigation Laws more generally; municipal corporations; and classical education.[28] This is an interesting list, suggestive of the way in which a 'reform agenda' was taking shape; it is hard to imagine anyone compiling quite such an agenda twenty years before.

French assertion of the 'Rights of Man', attacks on feudal privilege, and moves to establish a representative assembly on a broad franchise encouraged those in Britain who would have liked to see more respect for individual rights and a shift towards democracy. The French Revolution breathed life and enthusiasm into the popular end of the parliamentary-reform movement; French-style caps of liberty and 'liberty trees' supplied popular radicalism with new icons. Thomas Paine's writings encouraged the view that the French Revolution carried forward the themes of the American Revolution, and that the two together marked the dawn of a new age, in which tyranny and superstition would wither or be crushed.[29]

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[27] Jeroen Dekker, 'Transforming the Nation and the Child: Philanthropy in the Netherlands, Belgium, France and England, c. 1780–1850', in H. Cunningham and J. Innes (eds.), *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform from the 1690s to 1850* (Basingstoke, 1998), 137–9. For Anglo-European exchanges on welfare issues, see Joanna Innes, 'The State and the Poor: Eighteenth-Century England in European Perspective', in John Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth (eds.), *Rethinking Leviathan: The Eighteenth-Century State in Britain and Germany* (Oxford, 1999).

[28] [Samuel Romilly], *Thoughts on the Probable Influence of the French Revolution on Great Britain* (London, 1790).

[29] Early enthusiasm for the French Revolution is chronicled in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revd edn (Harmondsworth, 1968); Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979). For further discussion of English responses to the Revolution, see below pp. 16–20.

Yet, as the constitutional monarchy collapsed and the Terror took shape, what the French Revolution in fact precipitated in England was the reverse: a reaction against reform and reformers of all kinds.[30] The very word fell into disrepute. Pitt avowed that the time was no longer ripe for constitutional reform, and suggested that those who continued to urge it harboured sinister intentions. The 'Two Acts' of 1795 aimed to restrict popular political activity. Belief that the British constitution was perfect as it stood, and that established laws and institutions embodied the accumulated wisdom of generations, such that any innovation was likely to be for the worse, antedated the French Revolution: the early parliamentary-reform movement had broken on this recalcitrance. But the French Revolution buttressed and entrenched fear of change even among those who regarded the constitution as imperfect. For the next few decades, would-be reformers would have a harder time making their case. People's political identities came to be defined, in important part, by their attitudes to change – not previously a key divisive issue. Change remained possible: the slave-trade was, after all, abolished in 1807.[31] We shall say more about the continuing scope for improving activity shortly. But opponents of change, in general or in particular, gained an important new ideological resource.

The Revolution, and subsequent extension of French rule over much of Europe, also sundered lines of communication. Though Napoleon continued the work of reforming French laws and institutions, and imposed his reforms on many other parts of Europe, there was much less in the way of exchange of ideas between Britain and the continent between 1793 and 1815 – between the outbreak of war and the fall of Napoleon – than there had been before. The Peace of Amiens (1802) sparked a brief flurry of Anglo-French interaction: British tourists rushed over to inspect the new face of post-revolutionary Paris; Jeremy Bentham's writings on law reform were first published in French translation at this time. But this interlude proved brief.[32]

The changing geography of conflict shaped the patterns of interchange that were sustained. There was some enlivening of interest in Scandinavian and German societies and cultures. German drama, literature, and philosophy had been growing in popularity and prestige on the eve of revolution; this interest continued to grow.[33] The evangelical revival encouraged communication

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[30] See the works cited in n. 29 above and, for the additional complications introduced by the outbreak of war, Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars, 1793–1815* (London, 1979).

[31] Under the hybrid 'Ministry of All the Talents'. See also the works cited in n. 22.

[32] Constantia Maxwell, *The English Traveller in France, 1698–1815* (London, 1932). For Bentham, see J. R. Dinwiddy, 'Bentham and the Early Nineteenth Century', in Dinwiddy, *Radicalism and Reform in Britain, 1780–1850* (London, 1992), 293.

[33] Thus Thomas Malthus visited Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in 1799, when 'Englishmen were excluded from almost every part of the continent by the distracted state of public affairs': *The Travel Diaries of T. R. Malthus*, ed. P. James (Cambridge, 1966), 14–16, 24–220.

between protestants in diverse states. Some protestant Germans were inspired by new English associational forms and endeavours.[34]

Though the French Revolution would long cast a shadow over British debate,[35] later changes in European politics somewhat eased British reformers' lot. At the start of the nineteenth century, especially in 1803, when Britain faced the most serious threat yet of French invasion, British political opinion muddled together into a patriotic middle ground. Thereafter left and right wings re-emerged – if not always on the same lines as before. The Spanish revolt against Napoleon, which took its rise from 1808, played a part, by relegitimating 'reform', even revolution, in the eyes of some. The recently founded *Edinburgh Review* first gained its role as an organ of liberal opinion when it came out in favour of Spanish opposition; its more conservative contributors and readers promptly deserted it to launch the rival *Quarterly Review*. Solidarity with Spanish rebels subsequently formed one of the first planks of radical internationalism.[36]

The Restoration era on the continent – post-1815 – brought with it divisions over how far *anciens régimes* should be restored, and how far the need to guard against further revolutionary outbursts legitimated the restriction of civil liberties – debates seen as critical to the future of Europe, and echoed within Britain.[37] Many Britons were not inclined to support the forces of 'reaction' or the efforts of European 'ultras' (new terms, both of French origin, which acquired currency in Britain at this time).[38] What was needed instead, many supposed, was some middle way between reaction and revolution. Within that middle way, there might be scope for reform. The argument that reform *did*

(*cont.*)

There exists no convenient general account of German cultural influence, but some insights are provided in F. W. Stokoe, *German Influence in the British Romantic Period, 1788–1818: With Special Reference to Scott, Coleridge, Shelley and Byron* (Cambridge, 1926); René Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England, 1793–1838* (Princeton, 1931); H. C. G. Matthew, 'Edward Bouverie Pusey: From Scholar to Tractarian', *Jl Theol. Studies*, 22 (1981); Bertrand Evans, *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley* (Berkeley, 1947), ch. 7; W. Vaughan, *German Romanticism and English Art* (New Haven, 1979), 15, 17–20, 23–6, 44, 83–5.

34 There is unfortunately no early nineteenth-century equivalent of W. R. Ward's study of the early eighteenth century: W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge, 1992), but some insights emerge from Christopher Clark, *The Politics of Conversion: Missionary Protestantism and the Jews in Prussia, 1728–1941* (Oxford, 1995), esp. ch. 3.

35 See John Dinwiddy, 'English Radicals and the French Revolution, 1800–50', in Dinwiddy, *Radicalism and Reform*. Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1833–67* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 63–4, notes the effect of the appearance of a wave of histories of the Revolution in 1830.

36 Peter Spence, *The Birth of Romantic Radicalism: War, Popular Politics and English Radical Reformism, 1800–15* (Aldershot, 1996), 62–98; John Clive, *Scotch Reviewers: The 'Edinburgh Review', 1802–15* (London, 1957), 110–13, for the split among reviewers; H. Weisser, *British Working-Class Movements and Europe, 1815–48* (Manchester, 1975), 7.

37 For a recent survey, see David Laven and Lucy Riall (eds.), *Napoleon's Legacy: Problems of Government in Restoration Europe* (Oxford, 2000).

38 For the emergence of these terms, see the *Oxford English Dictionary*. For 'reaction', see also Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1976), 214–15.

represent a middle way – that, properly conceived, it was a preservative *against* revolution, not a precipitant of it – had been made by Edmund Burke as early as 1790. Those who tried to stem the flood tide of counter-revolution had made some use of it in the remainder of that decade. But not until the 1820s and 1830s did that contrast become formulaic, both in Britain and in Europe. Initially employed chiefly by representatives of new, inchoate 'liberalism', the formula gradually won a degree of acceptance even among conservatives; by the 1830s, even the notoriously conservative Austrian foreign minister Klemens von Metternich was prepared to countenance 'reform'.[39]

The conclusion of the Napoleonic episode opened the way once more for the pan-European circulation of ideas. One area of lively exchange was the relatively novel discipline of political economy. Britain's position particularly fascinated continental observers: they saw her burdened with an enormous war debt and rocked by industrial and agrarian protest, and wondered what might ensue, and what lessons might be drawn from her experience for continental states.[40] Some sceptical European observers found the forebodings of British radicals congenial. In this context the French economist J. B. Say became friendly with the 'utilitarian' James Mill. Much British public policy debate was mired in the particularities of British law and practice, which restricted its appeal; Bentham's highly abstract and programmatic writings on law reform, however, constituted an exception, and acquired a global reputation: they were translated into not only French, but also Russian, Spanish, Italian, and German, and made an especial impact on Spanish liberals and in the newly independent states of Latin America.[41] In public policy, the form of European practice attracting most interest in Britain at this time was probably education. Pestalozzi's Swiss educational experiments attracted particular comment; they helped to spark the post-war foundation of British 'infant schools'.[42] Meanwhile British medical students, seizing opportunities presented by the ending of conflict to travel and study in France, acquainted themselves with new French medical and scientific ideas and practices.[43]

The outbreak of a wave of revolutions in 1820 – in Spain, Portugal, Naples, Sicily, Piedmont, and Greece – evoked shows of support among British reformers of all classes. In line with notions of social progress prevailing at the time, these uprisings were celebrated as evidence of 'the progress of reason' or

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[39] O. Brunner *et al.* (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 8 vols. (1972–97), v, 341–55. For Burke, see below p. 88.
[40] Gareth Stedman Jones, 'National Bankruptcy and Social Revolution: European Observers on Britain, 1813–44', in Donald Winch and Patrick K. O'Brien (eds.), *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience* (Oxford, 2002).
[41] Dinwiddy, 'Bentham and the Early Nineteenth Century'.
[42] Philip McCann and Francis A. Young, *Samuel Wilderspin and the Infant School Movement* (Beckenham, 1982), esp. 61–6.
[43] L. S. Jacyna, *Philosophic Whigs: Medicine, Science and Citizenship in Edinburgh, 1789–1818* (London, 1964), 124.

'march of mind'.[44] Concern about the effect of British policy on the balance between the forces of liberalism and reaction elsewhere helped to make foreign policy a significant issue in the politics of the early 1820s. Perhaps inappropriately, Viscount Castlereagh's reputation was blackened, and George Canning's enhanced – even though the latter's success in fostering new republics in Latin America was paralleled on the European continent only in the peripheral case of Greece.[45]

A further wave of revolutionary outbreaks in 1830 – notably in France, Belgium, and Poland – coincided with the onset of Britain's own Reform crisis, encouraging debate as to how far British and European circumstances were analogous. The peaceful resolution of the British crisis reinforced notions of British exceptionalism: British institutions and social structures seemed peculiarly adept at containing change within constitutional and civil constraints. Yet it was widely supposed – perhaps more than it should have been supposed – that some of the same forces were in play in different states. Some disenchanted radicals framed their analysis in 'class' terms. As they saw it, in Britain as in France, liberal rather than reactionary outcomes – the triumph of 'moderate reform' – in truth represented the betrayal by the rising middle classes of the working classes, whose day was yet to come.[46]

III

In 1790, the penal reformer Samuel Romilly had expressed the hope that changes in France might 'diminish some of that horror at innovation, which seems so generally to prevail among us'. By 1808, he was certain that it had had the reverse effect:

> If any person be desirous of having an adequate idea of the mischievous effects which have been produced in this country by the French Revolution and all its attendant horrors, he should attempt some legislative reform, on humane and liberal principles. He will then find, not only what a stupid dread of innovation, but what a savage spirit it has infused in the minds of many of his countrymen.[47]

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[44] Weisser, *British Working-Class Movements*, 17.
[45] Paul M. Hayes, *The Nineteenth Century, 1814–80* (London, 1975), 76–90.
[46] Clive H. Church, *Europe in 1830: Revolutions and Political Change* (London, 1983). Roland Quinault, 'The French Revolution of 1830 and Parliamentary Reform', *Hist.*, 79 (1994), argues that events in France played a crucial part in enlivening the English parliamentary-reform movement. For developing ideas about the nature of British exceptionalism, see J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), 11–93; Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion and Reform, 1830–41* (Oxford, 1987), 40–63; also Paul Langford, 'The English as Reformers: Foreign Visitors' Impressions, 1750–1850', in Blanning and Wende (eds.), *Reform in Great Britain and Germany*. For disenchanted radicals, see Weisser, *British Working-Class Movements*, 34–41.
[47] *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly*, 3 vols. (London, 1840), ii, 253–4.

The claim was not without grounds. Yet it can be exaggerated, even if we restrict our attention to the years before Waterloo. Romilly's own initial comment makes it plain that 'innovation' had met with resistance previously. 'Reform' projects, moreover, came in many shapes and sizes, had their roots in a variety of preoccupations, and could be justified in diverse ways. In what follows, we partly endorse but also qualify characterizations of the war years as years of reaction.[48]

The years 1792–3, which saw the toppling of the French monarchy, the execution of the king, the institution of the Terror, and the outbreak of war between Britain and France, were years in which reform was particularly likely to be anathematized. These years saw a royal proclamation against seditious publication, moves to suppress popular political societies, and the formation of John Reeves' Association for the Protection of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers to carry forward that effort.[49] A significant group of Whigs swung behind Pitt's government – a situation formalized by the coalition of 1794.[50] Even in this period, however, there were moderate voices contesting the counter-revolutionary hard line. Thus the Essex clergyman John Howlett wrote to the Reevesite executive to protest against their assertion that the British system of government was perfect in all respects. He entirely agreed, he said, with the need to repel the revolutionary threat from without and within – but, at a time when rising prices and changes in rural society were rendering the

[48] Among older assessments of the impact of the French Revolution and ensuing war, see once more Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*; Emsley, *Britain and the French Wars*. The bicentennial of the Revolution in 1989 prompted a number of collective efforts at reassessment: thus H. T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789– 1815* (Basingstoke, 1989); M. Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge, 1991). A notable feature of writing in the late 1980s and 1990s was the development of interest in conservative responses to revolution, for which see n. 49 below. Jenny Graham's extended account, *The Nation, the Law and the King: Reform Politics in England, 1789–99*, 2 vols. (Lanham, Md., 1999), provides a rare recent instance of a study focusing squarely on radicalism. Most recently, interest in ideas and representations has come to the fore. See thus David Bindman's bicentennial exhibition catalogue, *The Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution* (London, 1989); Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society, 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1995); Emma Vincent, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars against Revolutionary France, 1792–1802* (Aldershot, 1998); Stuart Andrews, *The British Periodical Press and the French Revolution* (London, 2000); John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–6* (Oxford, 2000).

[49] Accounts of conservative responses to revolution include Black, *Association*, ch. 7; Ian Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on Britain's Avoidance of Revolution* (Oxford, 1984); R. R. Dozier, *For King, Constitution and Country: The English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, Ky., 1983); Philip Schofield, 'Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the French Revolution', *Hist. Jl*, 39 (1986); Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760–1832* (Cambridge, 1989); Matthew Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2001). Mark Philp responds critically in 'Vulgar Conservatism, 1792–3', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, 110 (1995).

[50] For the Whig split, see Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party*, ch. 6.

condition of the poor increasingly miserable, it was foolish to assert that the British polity was beyond improvement; nor was this the best way to win hearts and minds. Instead, efforts should be made to improve the lot of the poor, so that they had solid reasons for being loyal. (Magistrates who drew up generous tables of allowances in the bad-harvest, high-price year of 1795 were implicitly acting on the same diagnosis; in 1796, a largely evangelical group of senior clergy and well-placed laymen founded the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor with similar aims.)[51]

It may have served the needs of political polemic to suggest that the country was divided into foes and friends of revolution – but in practice the political scene was more complicated, and this became more evident once the first panic had passed. Among leading members of the governing coalition there was a range of views, Pitt's own being by no means the most reactionary.[52] Wilberforce and the 'Saints' (other religiously 'serious' MPs), though generally government supporters, could not always be counted upon: for them, the cause of religion and morality came first. In 1795, Wilberforce made life difficult for Pitt by criticizing his failure to take advantage of the fall of Robespierre and the appearance of a more moderate regime in France to seek peace.[53] Whigs who swung to support Pitt did not necessarily wish to support the status quo; in relation to Ireland especially it could be argued that significant further concessions to Catholics were needed if that island were to be kept on side. In 1793, in fact, restrictions on Irish Catholic worship were removed, and qualified Catholics given the vote. When the Whig Earl Fitzwilliam, as Irish lord lieutenant, seemed to be rushing towards total 'Emancipation' faster than Pitt thought prudent, and was dismissed, he left the government camp and rejoined the opposition.[54] Country squires by and large supported Pitt: probably at no time in the century had the landed classes been so much of one mind. But not all of them supported everything as it was, nor even accepted Pitt's argument that the time was not ripe for constitutional reform. The few dozen supporters of the young Whig Charles Grey's parliamentary reform motion of 1797 were not all Whigs: they included the evangelicals Sir Richard Hill and Henry Thornton, and a few 'country party' independents, such as Northamptonshire's

[51] Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 16,920, fos. 7 ff. For new initiatives in the treatment of the poor, see J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795–1834* (London, 1969), ch. 3; more generally, Roger Wells, *Wretched Faces: Famine in Wartime England, 1793–1801* (Gloucester, 1988).

[52] For a recent account that brings this out, see Jennifer Mori, *William Pitt and the French Revolution, 1785–95* (Edinburgh, 1997); also Jennifer Mori, 'Languages of Loyalism: Patriotism, Nationhood and the State in the 1790s', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, 118 (2003). See also Harling, *Waning of 'Old Corruption'*, 42–5.

[53] Mori, *William Pitt*, 214–15.

[54] E. A. Smith, *Whig Principles and Party Politics: Earl Fitzwilliam and the Whig Party, 1748–1833* (Manchester, 1975), chs. 7–8.

Sir William Dolben (opponent of concessions to dissenters; but promoter of an act to regulate conditions on slave ships).[55]

The royal proclamation against seditious publications of 1792, ensuing prosecutions and 'Treason Trials', and the 'Two Acts' (the Treason and Seditious Meetings Acts) of 1795 were all designed to constrain popular political activity – and probably did have that effect, proving particularly damaging to the democratic political societies which had multiplied in the early 1790s.[56] None the less, the ordinary structures of political life still provided venues in which oppositional voices could be heard – as for example in the 1796 election when key seats were contested by the government's radical critics.[57] There was moreover some form of underground movement (though its exact scale and nature are contested) – manifest in naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in 1797, and in the various mainland 'United' groups identifying themselves with the United Irishmen, who helped to fan Irish discontent into rebellion in 1798.[58]

Once peace talks which had been convened in 1796 collapsed, and the French revolutionary regime lost its reforming edge and directed its military ambitions towards Italy and the eastern Mediterranean, Britons in general rallied behind the war effort. Numbers joining home-defence 'Volunteer' forces were considerably higher in 1797–8, in the face of a threatened French invasion, than they had been in 1792–4, when the Volunteers' chief function had been to repress sedition at home. As several historians have recently argued, however, we should not equate the home-defence nationalism that infused this mobilization with conservatism, in any very strong sense of that term. Given that more or less the whole of the adult male population was enrolled in one or another armed body by the century's end indeed, it is implausible that this rallying should have reflected more than important but limited forms of consensus. The volunteer and military association movements were, moreover, in their own way expressions of popular self-assertion. From the point of view of government,

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[55] W. Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, 36 vols. (London, 1806–20), xxxiii, cols. 734–5 for a list of the minority.

[56] Though note Clive Emsley's sceptical comments on this score: Clive Emsley, 'Repression, Terror and the Rule of Law in England during the French Revolution', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, 100 (1985).

[57] E.g., J. Ann Hone, 'Radicalism in London, 1796–1802: Convergences and Continuities', in John Stevenson (ed.), *London in the Age of Reform* (Oxford, 1977), 83–5; Timothy Jenks, 'Language and Politics in the Westminster Election of 1796', *Hist. Jl*, 44 (2001); C. B. Jewson, *Jacobin City* (Glasgow, 1975), 71–2, and esp. 108–110.

[58] John Dinwiddy raised doubts about E. P. Thompson's account: 'The "Black Lamp" in Yorkshire 1801–2', *Past and Present*, no. 64 (Aug. 1974); Roger Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience, 1795–1803* (Gloucester, 1983), argues that there was an insurrectionary fringe. The Irish case, which looms large in Wells' account, was explored in Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, 1982); David Dickson, Dáire Keogh, and Kevin Whelan (eds.), *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion* (Dublin, 1993). The bicentennial of the Irish insurrection has stimulated a flood of publications: for an overview, see Ian McBride, 'Review Article: Reclaiming the Rebellion: 1798 in 1998', *Irish Hist. Studies*, 31 (1999).

though the movement had its uses, it also had disconcertingly democratic aspects. As the threat of invasion receded, the government therefore moved to discourage 1790s-style volunteering, promoting instead semi-professional 'local militias'.[59]

The changing religious climate of the war years had similarly ambiguous political and cultural implications. Outbreaks of revivalism embodied in some part a reaction against revolutionary excess and anarchy. But they also represented an excited, if anxious response to the opening up of new opportunities.[60] The growth of enthusiasm for domestic and foreign missions itself represented a kind of reform movement – one compatible with a variety of more explicitly political views. Domestic missionaries excited some alarm, being seen as bearers of irrational millenarian and democratic ideas. In 1800 and again a decade later there were moves in parliament to impose constraints upon them, though both efforts were repelled, Wilberforce arguing that itinerant preachers were misrepresented, and that they did more good than harm.[61]

In the new century, the political and cultural scene opened up further. Pitt's fall from power in 1801, when the king refused to countenance Catholic Emancipation, released Whig coalitionists to return to the party fold. Pitt's death in 1806 then opened the way for an experiment in power-sharing on terms more generally acceptable among Whigs, in the form of the 'Ministry of All the Talents' of 1806–7.[62] This was the ministry which abolished the slave-trade. The same ministers tried, in a somewhat underconsidered way, to reform the Scottish law courts, and raised hopes of a variety of reforms in Ireland. (Though the Act of Union of 1800 had yoked Ireland more closely to Britain, in the first few years after union this troubled country had received little more than

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[59] Whereas Dozier, *For King and Country*, and H. T. Dickinson, 'Popular Conservatism and Militant Loyalism', in Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution*, stressed the conservatism of volunteers, this account has been nuanced by Colley, *Britons*, ch. 7, and still more by J. E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793–1815* (London, 1997).

[60] W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790–1850* (London, 1972) stressed the polymorphous promiscuity of religious enthusiasms in this era. For unorthodox popular religion, see also J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (London, 1979); Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton, 1985); Iain McCalman, 'New Jerusalems: Prophecy, Dissent and Radical Culture in England, 1786–1830', in Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion*.

[61] For the take-off of interest in foreign missions, see Roger H. Martin, *Evangelicals United: Ecumenical Stirrings in Pre-Victorian Britain, 1795–1830* (Metuchen, N.J., 1983), chs. 3–4; Elizabeth Elbourne, 'The Foundation of the Church Missionary Society: The Anglican Missionary Impulse', in J. Walsh, C. Haydon, and S. Taylor (eds.), *The Church of England, c. 1689–c. 1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge, 1993). For domestic evangelism, see Deryck Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People: Itinerancy and the Transformation of English Dissent, 1780–1830* (Cambridge, 1988), including 124, 133–7 for proposed legislation; Deryck Lovegrove, '"A Set of Men whose Proceedings Threaten no Small Disorder": The Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home, 1798–1830', *Scottish Hist. Rev.*, 79 (2000).

[62] For a recent overview of party-political manoeuvrings in this period, see Turner, *British Politics*, 74–80.