

INTRODUCTION

The contexts of the Social Science Association

I

The National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, known to contemporaries as the Social Science Association, was founded in London on 29 July 1857 and held its inaugural congress in Birmingham some weeks later in early October. Thereafter, its annual meetings captured national attention for a generation. Held in all the major cities of Britain and attended by thousands, they were a focus for social and institutional reform in mid-Victorian Britain. The Social Science Association was an open forum for the discussion of all aspects of social policy and was variously referred to as an ‘outdoor parliament’, a ‘supplementary parliament’, an ‘unofficial parliament’, an ‘amateur parliament’, and a ‘parliament out of session’, staffed, according to *The Spectator* by the ‘volunteer legislators of Great Britain’.¹ In the words of Lord Brougham, its first president, it was ‘to aid legislation by preparing measures, by explaining them, by recommending them to the community, or, it may be, by stimulating the legislature to adopt them’.² After participating in its first two congresses, Lord John Russell, the mid-Victorian prime minister, described it as ‘a yearly Council for national and local government to go by’.³ According to John Stuart Mill, ‘it really brings together persons of all opinions consistent with the profession of a desire for social improvement’.⁴ *The Times* saw it as ‘a centre for the communication and interchange of ideas on current topics of political and social

¹ *The Times*, 25 April 1862, 12; *Daily News*, 30 Sept. 1869, 5; 2 Oct. 1873, 5; *Western Daily Press* (Bristol), 1 Oct. 1869, 2; *The Times*, 9 Oct. 1873, 7; *The Spectator*, 14 June 1862, 657.

² ‘Inaugural Address’, *T.1857*, 23.

³ Russell to G. W. Hastings, 23 Oct. 1858, G. W. Hastings papers in the possession of the late Professor Adrian Hastings, Leeds.

⁴ J. S. Mill to T. B. Potter, 17 March 1864 in *The Later Letters of John Stuart Mill 1849–1873*, ed. F. E. Mineka and D. N. Lindley (Toronto, 1972), in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (ed. J. M. Robson) (33 vols. Toronto, 1963–91), xv, 925.

interest'.⁵ According to the *Daily Telegraph* its function was 'to take up the raw materials of social legislation, and, by the help of statistics, statements and discussions, to reduce the "hard facts" to the condition of manageable matter'. Thus it had linked itself 'more and more with the current business of the state' and become 'a power in the Imperial System'.⁶ One provincial newspaper wrote of it 'gathering together the experience of the nation'.⁷ The pioneer feminist, Bessie Rayner Parkes, described it as a 'convention of the most weighty men and women in England'.⁸ To Edwin Chadwick, speaking for the emergent class of professional men with expert social knowledge on whom the Association came to depend and to represent, the SSA served to bring 'into personal communication with each other . . . persons who give their attention to special subjects as sanitarians, educationists, law reformers and political economists'.⁹

The Social Science Association divided its deliberations into five 'departments' on legal reform, penal policy, education, public health, and 'social economy' (concerned with industrial, commercial, and welfare questions) and maintained a central organisation in London to coordinate the lobbying of parliament and the administration of the day. It commanded an influential membership: in the process of its formation its three patrons were Russell, twice prime minister; Stanley, who could have inherited the leadership of the Conservative Party from his father, the fourteenth earl of Derby, and so displaced Disraeli, had he sought for the highest office, and who was later to serve in both Conservative and Liberal cabinets; and Brougham, the great champion from the past of anti-slavery, popular education, and parliamentary reform. The SSA's inaugural council included eighteen peers; twenty-eight MPs; leading representatives from that gifted group of mid-century public administrators including Chadwick, William Farr, John Simon, and James Kay-Shuttleworth; and, from among the intellectuals, Mill, Ruskin, Kingsley, and Maurice.¹⁰ It gathered together leading figures from the political, administrative, and professional classes of mid-Victorian Britain and brought them into communication with the public during a period in which politics were being popularised and beginning to encompass social

⁵ *The Times*, 21 Sept. 1882, 9.

⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 6 Oct. 1871, 4.

⁷ *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 2 Oct. 1860, 2.

⁸ Bessie Parkes to Barbara Bodichon, 13 Sept. 1859, Bessie Rayner Parkes papers, Girton College, Cambridge, BRP V 90/3.

⁹ *Constitution, Address and List of Members of the American Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (Boston, 1866), 49–50.

¹⁰ *T.1857*, xv–xvi.

questions. The Social Science Association was uniquely representative of the social concerns of mid-Victorian Britain during this transition, mediating between politicians and an expanding political nation.

Its representations secured the Taunton Commission of 1865–8 from which followed the Endowed Schools Act in 1869 and the reform of secondary education. It prompted the appointment of the Royal Sanitary Commission of 1869–71 which led to reforms in public health in the early 1870s, culminating in the consolidating Public Health Act of 1875. It was principally responsible for the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 and for the wider promotion of feminist reforms. After many years publicising 'reformatory principles' in the treatment of criminals, the SSA dictated the terms of the Habitual Criminals Act in 1869 and the Prevention of Crimes Act in 1871. Its extensive research into trade unionism, published in 1860 as *Trades' Societies and Strikes* assisted public acceptance and legal recognition of organised labour in the 1860s. There was hardly a social question excluded from the SSA's debates, and it had a part to play, whether greater or lesser, in the resolution of many of them – though to assess it in terms of its legislative successes alone does a disservice to an organisation with broader social and cultural influence as well.

II

The extent of the Association's interests, its heterogeneous composition, and the difficulty of discovering the extent of its influence may have deterred historians from trying to understand it as a whole and in the context of its age.¹¹ Generally it has been discussed in relation to discrete aspects of mid-Victorian social development, among them the laws governing women in marriage,¹² secondary education,¹³ public health,¹⁴ penal policy,¹⁵ legal and commercial reform,¹⁶ the treatment of poverty

¹¹ For an early summary see Brian Rogers, 'The Social Science Association, 1857–1886', *Manchester School*, 20 (1952), 283–310.

¹² Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property. Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1983), 123–6.

¹³ Sheila Fletcher, *Feminists and Bureaucrats: A Study in the Development of Girls' Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1980), 14–19. David Allsobrook, *Schools for the Shires. The Reform of Middle-Class Education in Mid-Victorian England* (Manchester, 1986), 140–5. Richard Aldrich, 'Association of Ideas: The National Association for the Promotion of Social Science', *History of Education Society Bulletin*, 16 (1975), 16–21.

¹⁴ F. B. Smith, *Florence Nightingale: Reputation and Power* (London, 1982), 132–5.

¹⁵ Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal. Culture, Law and Policy in England 1830–1914* (Cambridge, 1990), 143–4.

¹⁶ O. R. McGregor, *Social History and Law Reform: The Hamlyn Lectures, 1979* (London, 1981), 17–26; G. R. Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993), 198–201.

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and unemployment,¹⁷ the organisation and growing specialisation of social and academic life,¹⁸ and the increasing significance of a 'scientific' approach to social issues.¹⁹ The links between these concerns which might explain the nature and limits of social policy-making in the period, and the place of the Association in wider political and bureaucratic history, have been largely, if understandably, ignored. Historians have used the Association's *Transactions* when relevant to their subjects, dipping in for illustrations of contemporary opinion, but the sheer scale of the printed volumes published by the Association – and their opacity – have probably deterred more systematic work. And such work as has been undertaken on the SSA has sometimes presented it as a forum for the exercise of the 'troubled conscience' of middle and upper-class Victorians, whereas the arguments to be developed here emphasise the Association's commitment to a different set of values – science, professionalism, and expertise – and a different function as a part of the process of policy-making.²⁰ The Association's definition and practice of social science has attracted attention, though only briefly, and only to argue that far from assisting the development of social-scientific thinking in nineteenth-century Britain, the SSA actually impeded it, diverting it into the mundane tasks of social administration and research and frustrating the impulse to synthesise and theorise.²¹ In short, while the Social Science Association has been used as a source, with one exception it has not been studied in its own right nor fully contextualised as a component of mid-Victorian culture and politics.

The notable exception to this pattern is the important work of Eileen Yeo in her doctoral thesis and more recent survey of nineteenth-century social science. Yeo's pioneering study placed the SSA in the context of a range of groups and projects with a claim on 'social science', including the Statistical Societies and the Owenites at the beginning of the Victorian era and academic sociologists at its end. Her focus was on differing approaches to the study of poverty and the working class across the century. In relation to the Social Science Association she paid

¹⁷ E. P. Hennock, 'Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience of the Eighteen-Eighties', *Social History*, 1 (1976), 67–91, esp. 76–8.

¹⁸ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists. Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), 210–11.

¹⁹ S. Checkland, *British Public Policy 1776–1939. An Economic, Social and Political Perspective* (Cambridge, 1983), 138.

²⁰ Lawrence Ritt, 'The Victorian Conscience in Action: The National Association for the Promotion of Social Science 1857–1886' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1959), 78.

²¹ Philip Abrams, *The Origins of British Sociology, 1834–1914* (Chicago, 1968), 44–52.

particular attention to its social composition and role in inter-class conflicts. Her chapters on the SSA present a valuable case-study in the social determination of sociological knowledge and its relationship to social activism.²² More recently she has placed the Association in a broad tradition of nineteenth-century debates on gender as well as social class, and presented it, appropriately and accurately, as representative of one of several competing forms of social explanation in the period, each of which reflected a specific social grouping and its interests.²³ While this book also examines the SSA in terms of its class interests – notably in chapter 7 on its role in mid-Victorian industrial relations – it is as concerned with the consequences of inter-class solidarity and social cohesion in the 1850s and 1860s as with class divisions. Its primary focus, however, is on the SSA as a policy-making forum and its role within the developing legislative, administrative, and party-political structures of a crucial transitional period. Accepting that the Association naturally and reflexively represented the interests of specific sections of the Victorian bourgeoisie, the aim has been to reconstruct carefully its debates, lobbies, and political interactions to discover how, and in what way, the Association was able to develop and promote specific policies on different social questions. This has made it possible to understand in general how social policies were generated and implemented in the period. When this study turns to an examination of Victorian social science as understood and practised by the SSA, meanwhile, it does so within the framework of an international-comparative analysis rather than in relation to other domestic movements, relating the Association to similar organisations in Europe and the United States. In these ways the approach and focus of this book are complementary to Yeo's but also fundamentally different, and the resulting account is probably more sympathetic to the Association and its achievements.

Because of the breadth of its interests and the historical significance of the people who took part in its discussions, the Social Science Association lends itself to many different historical approaches and treatments. It provides a window through which to observe the mid-Victorian generation and it offers an opportunity to generalise about the age as a whole. But if generalisation is one of the aims of this study, it must be

²² Eileen Yeo, 'Social Science and Social Change: A Social History of Some Aspects of Social Science and Social Investigation in Britain, 1830–1890' (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 1972).

²³ Eileen Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science. Relations and Representations of Gender and Class* (London, 1996), 120–80.

emphasised that detailed work on specific questions shows that the Association had a considerable and, perhaps, surprising degree of influence over the making of social policies. More than just an emblem of the age, it was itself a maker of mid-Victorian history and it demonstrates that a richer interplay between legislation, expert intervention, and public opinion characterised these decades than has been realised hitherto.

Yet reconstructing this complex interaction has proved difficult because of the nature of the sources: there is too much of one type and too little of another. In 1879 one newspaper cast forward to speculate on the Association's place in history: 'At a future period its archives may be disinterred, in order to afford to the curious of a distant generation some light upon the social ideas and methods of the present benighted age.'²⁴ Unfortunately, there are no such archives: hardly any institutional papers have survived. Instead, the Association's history has had to be pieced together using collections of the personal papers of some of its leading figures and, where they exist, published memoirs and biographies. On the other hand, the SSA left behind voluminous *Transactions* – volumes of verbatim papers, discussions, and reports. They form 'an immense, invaluable, and as yet little-used source of Victorian social and administrative history'.²⁵ But the sheer density of this material, and the manner of its presentation, thrown together without editorial intervention and explanation, make it difficult to place contributions in relation to each other and in relation to national debate; or to understand which among a plethora of alternative ideas was favoured by the Association; and, if action was taken on an issue, what was done, and what resulted. As one newspaper commented 'Papers on every conceivable topic have been read, but not considered; leaving all the points brought forward to fall stillborn on the world.'²⁶ Perhaps these problems were appreciated by the Association itself, and explain why, on its twenty-fifth anniversary, it issued a summary of its major interests and achievements. This manual was itself so defective and error-strewn, however, that it only compounds the problem.²⁷ Yet there are other sources for its history. The mid-Victorian press has been used consistently, for the reports of provincial newspapers, especially in those cities which played host to a

²⁴ *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 2 Oct. 1879, 5.

²⁵ M. W. Flinn, 'Introduction' in Alexander P. Stewart and Edward Jenkins, *The Medical and Legal Aspects of Sanitary Reform* (1866) (Leicester, 1969 edn), 21.

²⁶ *The Bee-Hive*, 24 Oct. 1863, 4.

²⁷ NAPSS, [J. L. Clifford-Smith] *A Manual for the Congress with a Narrative of Past Labours and Results* (London, 1882).

congress, are not only vibrant examples of Victorian ‘print culture’, but provide further information on the SSA’s institutional history and policies. Each year the SSA’s congress was an event of national importance. The London press presented the major addresses and papers verbatim, allotting daily editorials to their discussion, while provincial newspapers were devoted to every detail of the meetings in their locales and produced special supplements once the congress had departed. From them it is possible to place the Association in the life of the nation.

III

It is also possible to place the Social Science Association in the context of several different historiographical discussions: on the nature and distinctiveness of mid-Victorian political culture, the process by which Victorian social policies were made, the growth of bureaucratic government in the nineteenth century, and the contribution made by the Victorians to the development of a social science.

For a period in the 1970s and 1980s Victorian political historiography was focused on the rival claims of approaches emphasising the primacy of either ‘high’ or ‘low’ politics.²⁸ A traditional interpretation of growing popular participation in nineteenth-century politics, and of a growing responsiveness to this on the part of a governing class attempting to maintain its position by demonstrating its capacity for continued leadership of a changing society, was challenged by a renewed focus on the ‘high politics’ of the cabinet and a handful of political leaders. It was argued that personality and personal political advantage mattered as much, if not more, at critical moments than wider questions of social need or political principle. Careerism and character – be it Disraeli’s ‘leap in the dark’ in 1867 or the conflict between Chamberlain and Gladstone in 1885–6 – could explain a great deal about the fortunes of parties as well as individuals.²⁹ The challenge was salutary and the point taken. It may be a truism that politicians have careers to build and enemies to ditch, but such simple facets of human nature had been overlooked in the study of movements and pressures ‘from without’ and countervailing parliamentary responses ‘from within’ which had largely consumed historians in the 1960s and 1970s. The debate petered out, perhaps because on both sides there was a recognition that Victorian political history was too

²⁸ M. Bentley and J. Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1983).

²⁹ M. Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution* (London, 1967); J. Vincent and A. B. Cooke, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885–86* (Brighton, 1974).

complex and interesting to be reduced to one or other interpretation.³⁰ High-political historiography may have the edge in explaining political calculation at acknowledged moments of parliamentary and cabinet instability such as 1866–7 and 1885–6, but it cannot explain why the question of a second reform bill or of Home Rule had become so urgent that each had to be faced: why politicians were presented with issues which could be manipulated for baser personal as well as higher public ends. Gladstone may have used Irish questions to purge his party of his personal opponents – though he was animated by many other considerations as well – but the issue itself was not manufactured for this purpose: the Irish problem, ever-changing, had the deepest popular and ‘low-political’ roots.

The debate was hampered by the use of polarities – high and low – which could not do justice to the complexity and transformations of Victorian political culture. The *modus operandi* of the Social Science Association, which used its large public gatherings to direct attention towards abuses, would have had little impact or point in a ‘high-political’ system closed off from popular politics. But neither would it have made sense to invest as much time and effort as the Association devoted to the careful cultivation of potential and actual ministers if parliament and the executive had been instinctively sensitive to extra-parliamentary needs and demands from below. In truth, the Social Science Association was required to link together top and bottom, centre and periphery, metropolis and province, within an expanding political nation. It emerged precisely because an earlier, more enclosed and self-referential political system was giving way – with the spread of literacy, improvements in communication, the dissemination of information, and the growth of mass political consciousness – to a broader and more inclusive political culture. It was an intermediary institution, bringing parliamentary stars before the people and taking provincial opinion with it when it returned from each congress to the capital. And it operated at a time when, in the same administration, ministers differed very considerably in their responsiveness to extra-parliamentary movements and pressure.³¹ As such, if it shows the limitations of a strictly ‘high-political’ approach, its form and function also suggest that the very terms of the debate so polarised

³⁰ For more recent remarks on this debate see James Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 2–3; Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People. Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998), 61–4.

³¹ Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform. Whigs and Liberals 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1990), 173–4.

discussion as to blind us to the central question of how ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics interacted in this period. The real interest, in other words, may lie in the middle – in the links that were built between parliamentary and popular politics in the age of Palmerston, Russell, Gladstone, and Disraeli. The SSA can only be understood in the context of a new set of political relations in the 1850s and 1860s which embraced hitherto excluded groups and linked them together with existing elite leaderships in more broadly based political parties.

One protagonist of the ‘high-political’ school has criticised the political historians of the 1960s for their ‘soft-centred image of how British politics functioned – one that alleged conviction at the top and “influence” from below without actually demonstrating it from historical evidence’.³² Whether or not this is fair to the scholarship of a previous generation, this book tries to demonstrate the ‘conviction’ that brought leading figures into active communication with a popular forum like the Social Science Association. Some, like Brougham and Russell, drew on a long and distinguished tradition of whig reformism.³³ Others, like H. A. Bruce, Home Secretary between 1868 and 1873, were men of business who relied on the Association’s expertise in formulating social policy.³⁴ The ‘coming man’ in Conservative politics, Lord Stanley, was involved with the SSA in order to educate himself and thereby offer a new direction to his party. All were demonstrating a ‘conviction’ that social questions mattered, that public opinion deserved high-political respect, and that an expert forum had something to offer the governing class of the age. If politics in the 1850s still denoted constitutional, foreign, and religious issues, and if social questions were relegated to secondary status, then, as this study demonstrates, by the end of the SSA’s lifespan it was recognised that they had assumed a central and growing importance. This book also tries to show how ‘influence from below’ was focused at the SSA and then projected upwards to Westminster and Whitehall by well-orchestrated national campaigns, star-studded public meetings, delegations to ministers, or editorials in the press drawing attention to abuses condemned or issues raised at a congress. Detailed case-studies of the Association at work, meanwhile, should provide the necessary ‘historical evidence’ to prove the interplay between high and low politics, even if they also demonstrate that the SSA’s influence did not always result in solutions and

³² M. Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy 1815–1914. Perception and Preoccupation in British Government* (London, 2nd edn, 1996), 20.

³³ Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform*, *passim*. ³⁴ See ch. 5 below, pp. 163–8.

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institutional rearrangements with which it concurred. Gladstone chairing a famous meeting of the SSA's 'Labour and Capital Committee' on a Saturday afternoon in July 1868, some months before he was first elected prime minister; Russell's role in 1859 in securing the position of the Chief Medical Officer in accordance with the Association's wishes; Bruce's open door at the Home Office to its experts on penal policy; Lord Lyttelton's too-honest discussion at the Association of his policy for the reform of secondary education – these vignettes are evidence of the reciprocal relations between high and low politics. That the SSA existed, and that it operated in this manner, in other words, vindicates the type of political history that was written in the 1960s: its protagonists may have been over-enthusiastic to prove the social determination of politics, but they were not mistaken in seeing the growing *interaction* of high and low levels as the leading trend in Victorian political history.

That the SSA existed *when* it existed is also significant, for this study is premised – against some recent arguments – on the distinctive nature of the mid-Victorian era running roughly from the 1850s until the late 1870s.³⁵ The combination and coincidence in the early 1850s of renewed prosperity; the decline of Chartist radicalism; the acknowledgement of new forms of working-class association – co-operatives, friendly societies, and craft unions – signified in the SSA's famous investigation at the close of the decade, *Trades' Societies and Strikes*; the ending of the transportation of convicts to the colonies; the emergence of the first organised British feminist movement; and the transition to the 'era of state medicine' together mark a distinctive change in the national temperament and in the issues of the moment after the class conflicts of the 1830s and 1840s.³⁶ Contemporaries recognised this stabilisation at the time and, as this book demonstrates, saw evidence of the change in the very organisation of the Association itself. These altered conditions provided the context in which the SSA was founded and help to explain its professed aim of bringing all sections of the nation together in a new spirit of tolerance and co-operation. In like fashion, and as the penultimate chapter explains, the Association was in decline from the mid-1870s as the structural conditions – cultural as well as socio-political – that encouraged its formation began to change and the organisation lost its place in public life. The

³⁵ For a different view stressing continuities, see E. F. Biagini and A. Reid, 'Introduction' in E. F. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism. Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), 1–5. See also ch. 7 below, pp. 201–2.

³⁶ Colin Matthew, 'Introduction: The United Kingdom and the Victorian Century 1815–1901' in Colin Matthew (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century. The British Isles: 1815–1901* (Oxford, 2000), 8–9.