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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT AND PARLIAMENTARY HISTORY IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES*

Parliamentarism: from Burke to Weber. By Will Selinger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 246. ISBN 9781108475747. £75.00.

Parliament the mirror of the nation: representation, deliberation, and democracy in Victorian Britain. By Gregory Conti. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 408. ISBN 9781108428736. £90.00.

This review article considers the potentially fruitful relationship between the history of political thought and parliamentary history through a survey of recent books on Britain and France. Traditionally, this relationship has not been intimate, as the major historians of political thought have concentrated on linguistic and philosophical contexts, alongside political economy. However, as historians of political thought turn to concepts such as political representation, constitutionalism, party politics, and parliamentarism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it would be beneficial for parliamentary history to play a greater role. In order to place arguments in their non-intellectual contexts effectively, historians of political thought must become more careful analysts of events, institutions, and quotidian politics, as well as broader historiographical contexts, importantly the history of state formation.¹ This review article argues that the development of parliamentarism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is an especially promising area for considering theory and practice in unison.

Since the 1960s, when Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, and J. G. A. Pocock made the case for turning political theory into a genuinely historical discipline, the notion that ‘context is king’, to borrow Pocock’s phrase, has transformed the field of the history of political thought.² Yet the understanding of context

* Thanks are due to Richard Bourke, James Harris, and Robert Ingram, who read earlier drafts of this review article. I would also like to thank the journal’s anonymous reviewers and Andrew Arsan. All the usual caveats apply.

¹ State formation has been inseparable from parliamentary history in the British Isles, since the British state was the creation of the merging of the English and Scottish parliaments in 1707, and the United Kingdom the merging of the Irish and British parliaments in 1801.

² J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Foundations and moments’, in Annabel Brett and James Tully, eds., *Rethinking the foundations of modern political thought* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 37–49, at p. 37.

has often remained limited, in practice if not in theory. With important exceptions,³ it has usually been understood as linguistic contexts, and routinely those of philosophical texts.⁴ This approach has certainly resulted in much pathbreaking work and altered our understanding of many canonical political thinkers. However, recent research in the field reflects that non-intellectual contexts could advantageously be made more prominent in history of political thought scholarship. This is especially pertinent when we consider periods when the distinction between political thinkers and actors frequently did not exist. Some of the most distinguished political thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – including Bolingbroke, Edmund Burke, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Benjamin Constant, François Guizot, Giuseppe Manzini, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill – were all politicians of sorts and most of them were members of elected assemblies for part of their lives. By contrast, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the seventeenth century belonged to political groupings but were not parliamentarians.

Traditional parliamentary history in the Anglophone world is today mainly carried out at the History of Parliament, which remains indebted to Lewis Namier's prosopographical approach. However, parliamentary history has long since moved away from 'Namierite' assumptions about the unimportance

The key methodological statements include John Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', *Philosophy*, 43 (1968), pp. 85–104; Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas' (1969) and other essays collected in *Visions of politics, vol. 1: regarding method* (Cambridge, 2002); and J. G. A. Pocock's essays in *Politics, language, and time: essays on political thought and history* (2nd edn, Chicago, IL, 1989) and *Political thought and history: essays on theory and method* (Cambridge, 2009). Among the many classic studies are John Dunn, *The political thought of John Locke: an historical account of the argument of the 'Two treatises of government'* (Cambridge, 1969); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment: Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975); Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1978); Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's politics: an essay in historiographic revision* (Cambridge, 1978); Richard Tuck, *Natural rights theories: their origin and development* (Cambridge, 1979); idem, *Philosophy and government 1572–1651* (Cambridge, 1993); James Tully, *An approach to political philosophy: Locke in contexts* (Cambridge, 1993); Annabel Brett, *Liberty, right and nature: individual rights in later scholastic thought* (Cambridge, 1997).

³ For instance, Quentin Skinner, 'History and ideology in the English revolution', *Historical Journal*, 8 (1965), pp. 151–78. The late Nicholas Phillipson exemplified a social approach to the history of political thought; see Colin Kidd, 'The Phillipsonian Enlightenment', *Modern Intellectual History*, 11 (2014), pp. 175–90.

⁴ For the prominent position of philosophical contexts within the history of political thought, see titles such as Eric Nelson, *The Greek tradition in republican thought* (Cambridge, 2004); Hannah Dawson, *Locke, language and early-modern philosophy* (Cambridge, 2007); Annabel Brett, *Changes of state: nature and the limits of the city in early modern natural law* (Princeton, NJ, 2011); Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic pride: Stoicism and political thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: nature, free will, and the passions* (Oxford, 2015); Istvan Hont, *Politics in commercial society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); Paul Sagar, *The opinion of mankind: sociability and the theory of the state from Hobbes to Smith* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); Tim Stuart-Buttle, *From moral theology to moral philosophy: Cicero and visions of humanity from Locke to Hume* (Oxford, 2019).

of ideas and principles in politics.⁵ In 1967, Geoffrey Holmes decisively repudiated Robert Walcott's attempt to 'Namierize' the early eighteenth century.⁶ In the following decade, John Brewer reintegrated ideology (along with popular politics) into the 1760s, Namier's territory.⁷ Namierite history is often said to have been continued by Maurice Cowling and the 'Peterhouse school of history', although this has recently been called into question.⁸ 'Public sphere' politics, including pamphlets and newspapers, has long played a significant role in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century historiography.⁹ More controversially, Steve Pincus and his students have emphasized the importance of ideology in mid-eighteenth-century high politics in inventive ways.¹⁰ In short, while parliamentary historians have broadened their range of concerns to include ideas,¹¹ historians of political thought have not shown a similar interest in the history of either high politics or political

⁵ The relative eclipse of Namier is stressed in David Hayton, *Conservative revolutionary: the lives of Lewis Namier* (Manchester, 2019), pp. 391–8.

⁶ Geoffrey Holmes, *Politics in the age of Anne* (New York, NY, 1967); Robert Walcott, *English politics in the early eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1956).

⁷ John Brewer, *Party ideology and popular politics at the accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976). Other important works that treat ideas and action together in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries include J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution principles: the politics of party, 1689–1720* (Cambridge, 1977); Reed Browning, *Political and constitutional ideas of the Court Whigs* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1982); Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement: the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1991); Angus Hawkins, *Victorian political culture: 'habits of heart and mind'* (Oxford, 2015).

⁸ David M. Craig, "High politics" and the "new political history", *Historical Journal*, 52 (2010), pp. 453–75. For discussion, see also R. Brent, 'Butterfield's Tories: "high politics" and the writing of modern British history', *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), pp. 943–54.

⁹ Jason Peacey, *Print and public politics in the English revolution* (Cambridge, 2013); idem, *Politicians and pamphleteers: propaganda in the Civil Wars and Interregnum* (Farnham, 2004); Peter Lake and Steve Pincus, eds., *The politics of the public sphere in early modern England* (Manchester, 2012); Mark Knights, *Politics and opinion in crisis, 1678–81* (Cambridge, 1994); idem, *Representation and misrepresentation in later Stuart Britain: partisanship and political culture* (Oxford, 2006); H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and property: political ideology in eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 1977); J. A. W. Gunn, *Beyond liberty and property: the process of self-recognition in eighteenth-century political thought* (Kingston, ON, 1983); Robert (Bob) Harris, *A patriot press: national politics and the London press in the 1740s* (Oxford, 1993). See also Markku Peltonen, *Rhetoric, politics, and popularity in pre-revolutionary England* (New York, NY, 2013); and Blair Worden, *Literature and politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham* (Oxford, 2008).

¹⁰ Steve Pincus, *The heart of the declaration: the founders' case for an activist government* (New Haven, CT, 2016); Justin du Rivage, *Revolution against empire: taxes, politics, and the origins of American independence* (New Haven, CT, 2017).

¹¹ As well as other things, importantly popular politics and the culture of politics, themes which are finely treated in a recent festschrift for Paul Langford, who started out as a parliamentary historian but became increasingly interested in the interaction between 'high' and 'low', and local and central, politics. See Elaine Chalus and Perry Gauci, eds., *Revisiting the polite and commercial people* (Oxford, 2019). For discussion of 'new political history', involving party politics along with political thought, popular politics, and political culture, mainly with reference to nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians, see Susan Pedersen, 'What is political history now?', in David Cannadine, ed., *What is history now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 36–56.

institutions, with the important exceptions of Richard Bourke's recent intellectual biography of Edmund Burke, and the growing number of studies on the politics of religion, notably the research of Mark Goldie and his students.¹² By contrast, the history of political thought has a more robust tradition of engaging with the history of political economy, thanks to the work of Istvan Hont, Donald Winch, and Gareth Stedman Jones.¹³

Two new books published in Cambridge University Press's 'Ideas in context' series can be seen as preparing the way for a parliamentary and institutional turn in the history of political thought. Both authors did their doctoral training in Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the supervision of two Quentin Skinner students, Richard Tuck and Eric Nelson, whose recent work has sought to connect philosophical and historiographical debates of early modernity with institutional and constitutional questions of the eighteenth century and beyond.¹⁴ Like Tuck and Nelson, William Selinger and Gregory Conti combine history and political theory. In his book, *Parliamentarism*, Selinger distinguishes parliamentarism from democratic theory, and argues that we need to turn our attention to the former if we are to understand the overarching projects of thinkers such as Constant, Tocqueville, and Mill. In modern politics, representative assemblies have been increasingly displaced by

¹² Richard Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ, 2015); Niall O'Flaherty, *Utilitarianism in the age of enlightenment: the moral and political thought of William Paley* (Cambridge, 2019); Robert Ingram, *Reformation without end: religion, politics and the past in post-revolutionary England* (Manchester, 2018); Jacqueline Rose, *Godly kingship in Restoration England: the politics of the royal supremacy, 1660–1688* (Cambridge, 2011); Brian Young, *Religion and enlightenment in eighteenth-century England: theological debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, 1998); John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the age of the Enlightenment: science, religion and politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1989); J. C. D. Clark, *English society, 1660–1832: religion, ideology and politics during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, 2000; orig. edn 1985). The work of Goldie is important for thinking about politics, religion, and ideas in unison in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which is recognized in his recent festschrift; see Justin Champion, John Coffey, Tim Harris, and John Marshall, eds., *Politics, religion and ideas in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain: essays in honour of Mark Goldie* (Woodbridge, 2019).

¹³ Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of trade: international competition and the nation-state in historical perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Donald Winch, *Riches and poverty: an intellectual history of political economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge, 1996); idem, *Wealth and life: essays on the intellectual history of political economy in Britain, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 2009); John Robertson, *The case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the deluge: public debt, inequality, and the intellectual origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: greatness and illusion* (London, 2016); idem, *An end to poverty: a historical debate* (New York, NY, 2004); Emma Rothschild, *Economic sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Richard Whatmore, *Against war and empire: Geneva, Britain, and France in the eighteenth century* (New Haven, CT, 2012); idem, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: an intellectual history of Jean-Baptiste Say's political economy* (Oxford, 2000). See also Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The idea of poverty: England in the early industrial age* (New York, NY, 1983).

¹⁴ Richard Tuck, *The sleeping sovereign* (Cambridge, 2016); Eric Nelson, *The royalist revolution: monarchy and the American founding* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

constitutional courts and administrative agencies, leading to a crisis of representation which has been exploited by populist movements (p. 17). Selinger believes that populism today can best be countered with parliamentarism: parliamentary opposition to check populism within elected assemblies, and working political representation to prevent it from arising in the first place. Although he argues that this tradition has been severely emasculated following the growth of executive power which, since the turn of the twentieth century, coincided with the rise of mass democracy, its logic might help us understand our present-day challenges. Conti's *Parliament the mirror of the nation* engages in detail with how to achieve adequate political representation. He argues that the nineteenth-century idea of parliament as a deliberative assembly was related to the notion that the House of Commons was 'the mirror of the nation' and effectively represented all the relevant interests and opinions in society. As he highlights, the relative merits and demerits of different systems of representation are still integral to politics. Both books relate historical ideas to modern politics. In this review article, however, I will concentrate on their historical contributions and the potential they have for refocusing future studies in the history of political thought.

Despite its subtitle (*from Burke to Weber*), Selinger's book starts much earlier than Burke: with the increasing importance of the English (and, after 1707, British) parliament in the wake of the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9. A key figure in the story is Bolingbroke, who was not only an active pamphleteer but also a parliamentarian until 1715. Selinger briefly but effectively relates Bolingbroke's writings to the parliamentary opposition campaign against Walpole, notably during the Excise Crisis of 1733–4 (p. 38).¹⁵ He argues that Bolingbroke articulated a new doctrine of political responsibility in his opposition to Walpole when stressing that ministers needed the confidence of the House of Commons to remain in power (p. 37). In this context, Selinger also highlights Samuel Sandys's historic motion in the Commons to remove Walpole from office in 1741.¹⁶ Although this motion was unsuccessful, in the following year Walpole became the first 'prime minister'¹⁷ to resign after having lost a key vote in the Commons. In 1782, Lord North and his cabinet resigned after losing a vote of no confidence, and the principle that ministers need the confidence of the legislature to stay in power became a lynchpin of what Selinger calls 'parliamentary liberalism' (p. 39).

Selinger's emphasis on the growing power of the Commons – moderated by executive influence and patronage, which was itself moderated by party connections – aims to correct the conventional, and Montesquieu-dominated, story

¹⁵ Paul Langford, *The Excise Crisis: society and politics in the age of Walpole* (Oxford, 1975).

¹⁶ Drawing on Tapani Turkuu, *The origins of parliamentarism: a study of Sandys' motion* (Baden-Baden, 2007).

¹⁷ This term was still pejorative. Walpole's official titles were first lord of the Treasury, chancellor of the Exchequer, and leader of the House of Commons.

that sees Britain's eighteenth-century constitution as a balanced one, with three partners (monarch, lords, and commons) checking each other. One of the most innovative aspects of Selinger's study is his treatment of Burke. *Contra* much of the historiography,¹⁸ Selinger interprets Burke as a critic of Montesquieu rather than a strict follower. In short, Montesquieu appropriated Bolingbroke's criticism of executive influence over the legislature,¹⁹ whereas Burke agreed with Walpole and David Hume that the politics of patronage, known as *corruption* in eighteenth-century parlance, was not only inevitable but also beneficial. Selinger perceptively reads Burke's diatribes against the French Revolution as representing continuity in his constitutional thinking from the 1760s to the 1790s. In the final part of the *Reflections on the revolution in France* (1790), Burke criticized the separation between legislative and executive officials in the National Assembly (pp. 75–9). Complete separation of legislative and executive powers was, for Burke, a recipe for disunity and asymmetry.

Burke's constitutional ideal of a limited monarchy governing through responsible ministers in parliament was never fully realized in his lifetime but became his legacy in the following century. In the remainder of the book, Selinger treats the great British and French constitutional theorists of the nineteenth century: Germaine de Staël, Constant, Tocqueville, and J. S. Mill each receive a chapter. In what is perhaps its most important contribution, the book places the British constitutional model, which rejects strict separation of executive and legislative powers, at the heart of the development of 'liberalism' in the nineteenth century. According to this argument, the Montesquieu-inspired American constitutional model was less influential, at least in Europe. In the conclusion, Selinger shows that, when Max Weber proposed a new political system for Germany after its crushing defeat in the First World War, the German polymath turned to Britain's parliamentary system rather than to the USA. The American model gives executive power to an elected president, who can claim as much popular legitimacy as Congress. This had little attraction for nineteenth-century European liberals, at a time of widespread agreement about the benefits of hereditary monarchy. A difference between political actors-cum-writers such as Guizot and Constant was whether the monarch should be involved in the parliamentary process (pp. 137–43). Victorian liberals such as Mill and Bagehot followed Constant in preferring a monarch who reigns but does not rule. Like his fellow Victorians, Mill believed that opening up the highest office in the state for election would result in turbulence and disorder. In the conclusion, Selinger demonstrates that Weber agreed with Mill and other British Victorians about the boon of a hereditary,

¹⁸ See, e.g., Bourke, *Empire and revolution*, esp. pp. 19–26.

¹⁹ On Montesquieu and Bolingbroke, see Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: a critical biography* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 297–8; Rachel Hammersley, *The English republican tradition and eighteenth-century France* (Manchester, 2016; orig. edn 2010), pp. 73–8.

neutral monarch, even though he had to modify this position following the abdication of the German Kaiser after the First World War (pp. 202–3).

Selinger's book treats a great deal of material with skill in a slim 200 pages. He will certainly succeed in his ambition of making 'canonical thinkers strange and unfamiliar again' to many readers (p. 4). However, more precision is occasionally needed. I wonder, for example, what kind of evidence there is to back up the claim that Hume's *Essay moral and political* (1741–2) was 'one of the best-selling books of the eighteenth century' (p. 33). None is given, and Hume himself said that his *Political discourses* (1752) was 'the only work of mine that was successful on the first publication', while it was his *History of England* (1754–61) which made him rich and famous.²⁰ It is also puzzling that Selinger calls Hume Walpole's most famous defender (p. 51). Hume wrote an essay on Walpole shortly before the latter's resignation which can be read as an attempt at a balanced and non-partisan assessment, but in which he nonetheless concluded that 'As I am a man, I love him [Walpole]; as I am a scholar, I hate him; as I am a BRITON, I calmly wish his fall. And were I a member of either house, I would give my vote for removing him from ST. JAMES'S [i.e. the court]'.²¹ Selinger makes a good point about Hume's agreement with Walpole on the question of influence, but the old notion that Hume was a Court Whig in 1741–2 can hardly be sustained if all his essays from that period are taken into consideration.

Sometimes Selinger appears to be using the House of Commons and parliament interchangeably and synonymously. He notes rightly that 'ministers were drawn from the House of Commons' across the eighteenth century (p. 47). A key additional point here, however, is that, while the most effective leading ministers were members of the lower house (Walpole, William Pitt the Elder, Lord North, and William Pitt the Younger), the great majority of cabinet ministers were members of the upper house. It was unusual to have more than a couple of cabinet ministers in the Commons. Walpole, for instance, was the only commoner in the ministry in the first half of his period in office, until 1730. The second Rockingham and the Shelburne administrations of 1782 and 1782–3 had only one commoner each (Charles James Fox and the younger Pitt, respectively).²² Moreover, while it is important to emphasize that the longest-serving leading ministers of the eighteenth century sat in the Commons, we also need to recognize that a majority were peers, whose numbers included not just Rockingham and Shelburne, but also Godolphin, Oxford, Townshend, Stanhope, Sunderland, Wilmington, Newcastle, Devonshire, Bute, Chatham, Grafton, and Portland.

When discussing ministers in the legislature, Selinger writes that 'The Act of Settlement included a prohibition against government employees serving in

²⁰ David Hume, *Essays moral, political and literary* (Indianapolis, IN, 1987; orig. edn 1741–2), p. xxxvi.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

²² Burke's position as paymaster of the forces did not count as cabinet-level at the time.

Parliament, which would have applied to ministers – though it was repealed before it ever went into effect’ (p. 49, emphasis added). In actuality, however, the Act of Settlement of 1701 explicitly forbade office holders to sit in the *House of Commons*, which would not have been as radical a measure since most ministers were drawn from the Lords anyway.²³ As demonstrated above, certainly before Walpole and frequently afterwards as well, this applied to leading ministers too. The role of the Lords is rather unappreciated in the book until we reach the Victorian period (p. 167).²⁴ This does not alter Selinger’s larger point that the ‘notion that ministers had to struggle to defend the Crown’s position within parliamentary deliberation’ was central to ‘the emerging theory of parliamentary government’ (p. 56). Selinger is also right about the growing importance of the lower chamber, although this development was much more contested and uneven than his argument allows.

One of the many highlights of Selinger’s book is the way in which political writers and actors are treated on an equal footing. Walpole’s parliamentary speeches are cited alongside his opponents’ pamphlets. Later in the book, Tocqueville’s understudied parliamentary career is given plenty of prominence (pp. 154–62). One actor curiously absent from the first part of the story, however, is the monarch him- or herself. Selinger writes: ‘With the decline in the monarch’s ability to veto legislation, [patronage] was the *only* way for the Crown to have *any* influence on the legislative process’ (p. 58, emphasis added). This particular statement underestimates the monarch’s softer powers. George III secured the defeat of Fox’s East India Bill in December 1783 in the House of Lords when he declared that he would consider anyone voting for it his enemy. This brought down the Fox–North coalition and prepared the way for the long premiership of the younger Pitt. It can also be seen as the monarchy and the peers effectively combining to defeat the legislative agenda of the Commons.²⁵ Moreover, when Pitt took on George III on the question of Catholic emancipation he lost office in 1801, despite controlling an enormous majority in the Commons. He was only allowed to return as prime minister three years later because he promised never to raise the topic again. The last prime minister to be installed by the king (William IV) against the wishes of a large Commons majority was Robert Peel, as late as 1834.²⁶ While Selinger is right that Britain in the long perspective was heading in the direction of an increasingly circumscribed monarchy, we

²³ Geoffrey Holmes, ‘The attack on “the influence of the crown” 1702–16’, *Historical Research*, 39 (1966), pp. 47–68.

²⁴ For the Lords, see John Cannon, *Aristocratic century: the peerage of eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1984); Clyve Jones and David Lewis Jones, eds., *Peers, politics and power: the House of Lords, 1603–1911* (London, 1986); Ruth Paley, ed., *The history of parliament: the House of Lords, 1660–1715* (Cambridge, 2016).

²⁵ Selinger briefly relays these events at p. 67.

²⁶ Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people? England, 1783–1846* (Oxford, 2006), p. 497.

should stress that this was far from a linear story before the accession of Victoria in 1837.

In the final chapter, Selinger considers Mill in the context of Victorian liberal thinkers who rarely figure in present-day political theory, including Bagehot, T. B. Macaulay, A. V. Dicey, and the 3rd Earl Grey. The finale of *Parliamentarism* thus forms a neat segue into Conti's *Parliament the mirror of the nation*, which deals exclusively with Victorian debates about political representation. Conti begins the book by scrutinizing various arguments for a diverse franchise. It was then widely feared that universal suffrage would lead to the dominance of the 'lower classes' and thus prevent other interests from being represented. A variegated franchise was thus seen as a prerequisite for a parliament which would truly mirror the various interests and classes of the nation. Conti demonstrates how important 'descriptive representation' – that is, the idea of representation as likeness – was in Victorian political thought.²⁷ By emphasizing the 'variety-of-suffrage' tradition, Conti's book neatly complements Selinger's since it also argues that nineteenth-century thinkers such as Bagehot should be seen as representing an alternative to mass democracy rather than a linear unfolding of democratic theory.

Conti's starting point for his discussion of 'diversity without democracy' in chapters one and two is the Scottish political writer, historian, and Whig MP Sir James Mackintosh. Mackintosh, Burke's antagonist in the 1790s, emerged as the defender of the 'Whig consensus' in the second decade of the nineteenth century when he argued against the universal suffrage supported by Jeremy Bentham and the philosophical radicals (pp. 18–19). Constitutional arguments took a sociological turn with Mackintosh, who stressed the importance of the Commons mirroring social reality. The key for Burke's former critic was to avoid working-class monopoly on representation. Whigs and Tories adopted different visions of a diverse franchise in opposition to democracy. The future Tory/Conservative prime minister Sir Robert Peel opposed the First Reform Act since it, by eliminating irregularities and making the suffrage more uniform, disenfranchised working-class voters and paradoxically made the electorate at once more numerous and less inclusive (pp. 24–5). After the First Reform Act, Whig-Liberals such as Bagehot and Henry Davis Pochin and Tory-Conservatives such as Henry Warwick Cole proposed ways of introducing a number of working-class representatives – interestingly, Cole wanted sixty-nine compared with fifty-six for Pochin and forty for Bagehot – while preventing this interest from dominating the Commons.

Conti's book is particularly strong on unearthing what may be called 'Tory radicalism' prior to the Second Reform Act, which was carried out by Benjamin Disraeli's Conservative ministry. One of the few who viewed universal male suffrage as an end in itself before the democratic Idealist tradition later in the century was the Tory George Harris (p. 55). Augustus Stapleton, who served

²⁷ The classic study is Hanna Pitkin, *The concept of representation* (Berkeley, CA, 1967).

as the Tory prime minister George Canning's private secretary in his youth, attacked the Whig Reform Act of 1832 and argued for the reconstitution of national representation for the poor (p. 68). Additional sources that Conti could have used in relation to this are the early writings of Disraeli, who identified democracy as the Tory cause. For him, the 1832 Reform Act had not advanced democracy but had been equivalent to the Septennial Act of 1716.²⁸ Whereas the latter had undermined a Commons traditionally dominated by the Tory party, the former had reconfigured it to secure the 'preponderating influence to [the Whigs'] sectarian allies'.²⁹

Victorian thinkers wedded to the notion of variegated suffrage believed that the inclusion of the full scope of public opinion enhanced parliament's deliberations. Bagehot wanted MPs to represent 'the average Englishman' rather than the wisest (p. 85). On this reasoning, proper mirroring would not only lead to better deliberations but also support political stability. Bagehot believed that the exclusive franchise of the July Monarchy in France – championed by Guizot, who as prime minister notoriously said 'get rich then you can vote' – invited revolution in 1848 (p. 149). For the variety-of-suffrages tradition, 'getting political institutions right, which fundamentally collapsed into the problem of crafting a truly representative reform, was sufficient to keep away the spectre of revolution' (p. 152).

The Second and Third Reform Acts undermined variegated-suffrage visions and facilitated a democratic turn in constitutional thinking. Some, including W. E. H. Lecky and Henry Sidgwick, continued to sympathize with such visions in principle, but most recognized that it was no longer tenable. The latter acknowledged that giving 'due weight' in the legislature to all classes, groups, interests, and opinions would inevitably be imprecise and controversial (p. 186). In this way, the idea of a mirroring Commons was increasingly challenged. However, the transition was a tricky one. As Conti shows, those favouring democracy had to demonstrate that this system was compatible with diversity. This entailed countering notions that the working class was a homogeneous group which was liable to corruption and to seduction by demagogues. Advocates of universal male suffrage here faced similar challenges to those of female suffrage. Arguing that admitting the working class and women into the suffrage would produce radical change in legislation was unlikely to persuade the sceptics, and suggesting that it would produce no change because of their deferential character would lend the question little urgency. In this context, a group of academic liberals (among them the young Leslie

²⁸ For the latter event, see Max Skjönsberg, 'Ancient constitutionalism, fundamental law, and eighteenth-century Toryism in the Septennial Act (1716) debates', *History of Political Thought*, 40 (2019), pp. 270–301.

²⁹ Benjamin Disraeli, *Vindication of the English constitution in a letter to a noble and learned lord* (London, 1835), p. 189.

Stephen, James Bryce, and Dicey) argued in *Essays on reform* (1867) that an extended suffrage could by itself create new and diverse opinions (pp. 170–2).

In the last two chapters of the book, Conti deals with the institutional conception and perceived moral benefits of proportional representation (PR) – the one constitutional programme which was properly innovative in the nineteenth century. Despite never being implemented in *England* – forms of proportionate representation have been implemented in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – Conti shows that PR left a significant mark on British political theory. The trailblazers of PR in Britain were Thomas Hare and his follower (at least in this respect) Mill. According to Hare's system, voters would rank candidates and vote for any candidate across the country and not simply those standing in a specific constituency. All votes in the country would be counted and surplus votes transferred until all seats were filled. Each candidate would represent the same number of voters. Hare's scheme is related to the single transferable vote system, as well as the alternative vote system, the subject of a 2011 referendum in the United Kingdom.

Mill was so enthusiastic about Hare's complex programme that he insisted that no 'real democracy' would be possible without it (p. 211). But the early proponents of PR did not view its adoption as a democratic project. Many of Hare's other followers regarded the question of voting systems as distinct from expansion of the suffrage, and Hare himself appears to have favoured a regulated rather than a universal franchise. He was not a variety-of-suffragist, however, but strongly in favour of uniformity. His scheme thus represents a transition from sociological to numerical accuracy. Electoral liberty was seen as the chief value of PR: citizens' choice would not be limited to the area in which they lived. This would have a series of benefits, according to PR proponents. In sharp contrast with Bagehot and many of the variety-of-suffragists, the PR movement put more emphasis on improving the quality of legislators. This was particularly important for Mill, who notoriously coupled his support of Hare's system with plural voting (based on education) in order to ensure the election of intellectual elites. It was also believed that Hare's PR would break the grip of local interests and decrease the power of party machines. Finally, the key consequence of electoral liberty was that it would elevate the electorate itself, a point stressed by both Hare and Mill (p. 294). Making each vote count would boost turnout, participation, and engagement, they claimed, echoing modern arguments for PR. Mill also emphasized that PR would replace the winner-takes-all mentality of first past the post, pacify party animosity, and foster a spirit of collaboration (pp. 313–14). Opponents such as the future Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald countered that PR would undermine the vitality of the British political system and prevent the formation of strong government (p. 320). According to MacDonald, introducing PR would lead to Mill's greatest fear: stagnation. For others, PR exemplified an extreme individualism which neglected the importance of the local and the collective in politics.

'Antipartyism' featured prominently on both sides of the PR debate. Perhaps the most scathing criticism of PR was that it would reinforce the domination of party which its proponents so disliked. The limited political knowledge of the average elector meant that he (this was before female suffrage) would inevitably rely on lists of candidates drawn up by centralized party machines (p. 344). In this environment, Victorian arguments in favour of party began to be advanced. Joseph Chamberlain and others contended along Tocquevillian lines that, rather than stifling diversity, parties were intermediate associations which enabled weak and isolated individuals to become involved in politics (pp. 350–2). Conti argues that this Victorian embrace of party signalled a transition from the 'mirroring ideal' of descriptive representation and a shift away from a sociological logic towards a logic of competition for power (pp. 354–5).

Arguments are best studied in detail, and no-one is going to complain that *Parliament the mirror of the nation* is lacking in detail. Conti subjects a wide range of thinkers, writers, and sources – many of whom will be unfamiliar to those who are not experts on nineteenth-century Britain – to careful and incisive scrutiny in 360 pages of conceptual and institutional analysis. Throughout the book, he pays attention to a plethora of counter-arguments and countless perspectives (although he consciously excludes some, including Chartism). In short, this is a definitive study of its subject.

Perhaps the biggest issue in Conti's book is that he, like Selinger, almost invariably writes of England rather than Britain or the United Kingdom. Both books are thus composed in the idiom and spirit of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century rather than Pocock's 'new British history'.³⁰ The authors are certainly being true to their sources. Bagehot, after all, wrote of *The English constitution* (1867) – and with good reason, considering its anglican pre-history.³¹ Yet Conti's book would have benefited from a more systematic engagement with the other countries represented in Westminster in the nineteenth century: Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. There is certainly scope for this when he discusses the geographical dimension of PR. Out of the three, the Irish case is given most attention (pp. 293, 317), but the *nation* in the book's title certainly refers to England.

To conclude, Selinger's and Conti's new books are seminal contributions to political theory, but they can also be viewed as representing a welcome parliamentary turn in the history of political thought. In this new phase, we can hope that historians of political thought will study parliamentary debates, pamphlets, and political correspondence (although the last is underutilized by both authors) alongside canonical texts and philosophical treatises. Going

³⁰ J. G. A. Pocock, 'British history: a plea for a new subject', *Journal of Modern History*, 47 (1975), pp. 601–21. See also idem, *The discovery of islands: essays in British history* (Cambridge, 2005).

³¹ See Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's past: Scottish Whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689–c.1830* (Cambridge, 1993).

forward, political action, understood more broadly than writing, may be taken more seriously, and the relationship between theory and practice could be moved firmly to the centre stage of enquiries. I am not suggesting that either Selinger or Conti would necessarily subscribe to this recommendation, as both focus predominantly on political writing. But the stage is set, and such a development could make the history of political thought more relevant to other historians and perhaps also help revitalize parliamentary history in the process.

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