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Approaching Democracy: The Virtues of Representative Government in Mid-Victorian England

Elisabete Mendes Silva

Instituto Politécnico de Bragança

Centro de Estudos Anglísticos, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa

Approaching Democracy: The Virtues of Representative Government in Mid-Victorian England

1. Introduction

Seizing Michael Ignatieff's visit to Portugal in 2014, the Portuguese newspaper *Público* published an interview (Moura 26-27) addressed to the historian, academic, and former leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. In that interview Ignatieff stated that, despite the upsurge of the capitalist totalitarian regimes in the world which smother public liberties, there are nowadays more people living in democracy, and enjoying civil and political liberties than ever before. By public liberties is meant the right to express one's opinions, to mobilise and act more in public life, and interfere actively in political matters. Private liberty gives people the right to buy and sell and to do whatever they want with their own lives, even if it costs the loss of democratic values. Russia, Turkey, or China represent just some examples of countries where a flourishing middle class chooses order and repression to public liberties, as long as its private liberties are safeguarded.

Brazilian elections symbolise a paradigmatic example of the exercise of democracy. In Brazil the vote is compulsory for all Brazilian citizens over 18, as it ensures that a large percentage of the more than 300 million people would vote. If it were not mandatory, perhaps only 20% of the population would vote. This conveys some downsides such as the lack of political awareness with regard to many voters and the conversion of the elections into democratic triviality.

In the Western civilisation, the word democracy is somehow taken for granted, regardless of the loss of credibility of our current politicians and the still enduring system flaws, but it has not always been so. Suffrage and the ballot, expressions of democracy and citizenship, have been on a long journey before they reached their universality. Britain is known for its long tradition of democracy, sustained on representative government,

heralded by political developments interpreted as marking the evolution of constitutional democracy, so much promoted by the Whig historians, namely Trevelyan (Williams 2; Himmelfarb 97-98). However, despite this biased interpretation, Britain has, in fact, endeavoured to approach democracy through the many reforms that have been adopted mainly since the nineteenth century onwards and more specifically during the second half of the nineteenth century. Until then, democracy and the extension of the franchise were deeply resisted because they were seen as something rather dangerous, a leap in the dark,¹ a footstep into the unknown. Even if the 1832 Reform Act represented a decisive move in the political *status quo* of the nineteenth century *a propos* the reform pressure felt throughout the whole century, it did not meet the requirements of the people who were vindicating representation in Parliament.

Notwithstanding its symbolic importance, we will turn our attention to the Second Reform Act, approved in Parliament in 1867, which has been of major relevance in the course of reform concerning franchise. In order to better understand its causes and impact, we will therefore delve into the social and political debate underlying this Act, stressing the actions and reactions put forward by some of the most prominent political actors of the time, specifically W. E. Gladstone, Benjamin Disraeli, Thomas Carlyle, and John Stuart Mill. The first two represent the political parties which claim to have put Britain in the path of reform, the Liberal and Conservative parties, respectively. Moreover, both Gladstone and Disraeli, acknowledged as the political leaders of the time in focus, fought over governmental power during more than two decades (1868-1892), giving way to a political rivalry centred on the topic of reform.

In the attempt of analysing the different responses to the reform movement and the meanings of political citizenship, we focus on Thomas Carlyle's text "Shooting Niagara— and After?" as it somehow voices the opposing views and uncertainties on the extension of the franchise. John Stuart Mill embodies the intellectual and also the political players who defended reform as he wrote much on the subject (Mill, *Essays on Politics*

¹ The phrase "a leap in the dark" was taken by Lord Cranborne from Thomas Hobbes.

and Society, On Liberty, The Subjection of Women, Essays on Equality, Law and Education), and had a direct intervention in the decisions of Parliament, namely in his struggle for the inclusion of women in the franchise. We dedicate more attention to this last issue.

Notwithstanding the importance of these names we will also bring more valuable contributions to the debate on representative government. As such, other crucial names will also be mentioned, such as Matthew Arnold and Walter Bagehot, because of their utmost importance as critics of the new political and cultural scene of mid-Victorian society. As such, references to some of their positions or impressions regarding mass government, representation, liberty, and culture will be pointed out. Newspapers and periodicals of the time in analysis also devoted space to parliamentary debates. Therefore, we will bring forward these direct statements, together with accounts and speeches presented in both the House of Lords and House of Commons, in order to have a clearer insight on the immediate reactions to reform.

2. Reform and Democracy: a leap in the dark

In nineteenth-century England, reform has opened up new horizons and set new goals for civil liberties and the improvement of individuality. The questions of representation, parliamentary reform, and democracy were addressed by a growing and dominant middle class and by a radical working class that claimed representation in Parliament. During the Industrial Revolution process many social and economic problems were unveiled, exposing thus some of the social malfunctions of the era. Within this process, a new middle class became more prominently wealthy and influential. The working class claimed better working and living conditions. Therefore, social and economic developments in industrial Britain prompted political change. In Parliament, a more radical Liberal wing gave voice to the ones who claimed more social equality and fairer political representation. Liberals such as John Bright and Richard Cobden, leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League, became active participants in the reform process. The popular movement for Parliamentary reform in the 1860s also transcended the scope of urban and industrial communities such as Lancashire, Yorkshire, lowland Scotland, Birmingham, and the East End

London, places where Chartism (1842-1848) "had found its roots" a few decades earlier (Morgan 89-90; Chase).

The extension of the suffrage was rather slow but somehow progressive. The Great Reform Act of 1832 symbolises one of the first political decisions regarding the social pressures felt more overtly in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This Act carried some seeds of hope for the ones claiming to be represented in Parliament, but in fact undermined the majority of the people's expectations since the vote was based on property and on the payment of a rent. It left the working class and the lower middle classes out of the electoral process. The constant pressure of Liberals and Radicals made parliamentary franchise a need and a reality. For this reason, the 1867 Representation of the People Act, also known as the Second Reform Act, tried to correct some still inappropriate guiding principles in the political system which the 1832 Reform Act had then approved. It extended the vote to some working-class men, increasing the electorate from just one million to the double in England and Wales compared to the achievements after the 1832 Reform Act (Leonard 133; Saunders, *The Politics of Reform* 572). As F. B. Smith noted, it enfranchised "almost half of adult male occupiers of the nation", being defined as exclusive, propertied and incomplete (F.B. Smith 2). In fact, the franchise was still based on property qualifications. "One man, one vote" was still beyond its real completion. The so-called universal suffrage would have to wait until 1918, when women, over 30 and subject to property qualifications, were for the first time enfranchised.

This much shortened account might give the impression that the reform was voiced mainly by Whigs and Liberalism and hustled by social and economic changes in the context of the Industrial Revolution. What is called a Marxist interpretation of the history of British politics, also emphasised by social historians of the 1960s and 1970s (Hall, McClelland and Rendall 11), is opposed by a new current analytical approach on social history which rejects Marxist interpretations. According to Hall, McClelland and Rendall (10) this approach placed a considerable stress on the persistent importance until about 1880 of a traditional politics in which local, aristocratic and religious influences remained paramount as against the importance of class in the subsequent era.

Supported by the reform debate, unavoidable in the 1850s and

1860s, the 1867 Reform Act was in fact set in motion not by Liberals but by Conservatives. However, both parties had their share in the 1867 Act, as we will explain far ahead in the text.

Nearly a century later, Gertrude Himmelfarb considered the 1867 Reform Act as:

(...) one of the most decisive events, perhaps the decisive event, in modern English history. It was this act that transformed England into a democracy and made democracy not only a respectable form of government (...), but also, it was soon taken for granted, the only natural and proper form of government. It should be called the "Great Reform Bill."
(Himmelfarb 97)

Notwithstanding what we consider an overstated assessment, what Himmelfarb means is that if it were not for the approval of this Bill the consolidation of democracy and universal suffrage would not have been possible in the subsequent years. However, as the impact of the 1832 Great Reform Act was not so striking, as it intended to harmonise upper and middle class interests, while, at the same time, maintain aristocratic influence, the 1867 Act was also guided by the same motivations. But one cannot deny that the 1867 Act extended the vote to many skilled and unskilled working-class men, and represented the first steps towards democracy as it "propelled the British electoral system into the age of mass politics" as Robert Saunders (*The Politics of Reform* 571) emphasised. Nonetheless the payment of a £10 rent a year or more of all householders and lodgers was still a *sine qua non* condition to get the vote.

The 1867 Reform Act was hence a result of "political calculations" (Hall, McClelland and Rendall 8) and, as Jonathan Parry put it, "the most unintentional revolution in the history of British politics" (Parry 216 quoted in Hall 9). F. B. Smith (1) highlights the treachery on which the reform bills of the 1960s were grounded and all leading participants, "Russell, Bright, Gladstone, Derby and Disraeli, found themselves lost in it." Maurice Cowling (3) defined it as "an incident in the history of the party" because "party was the mould in which parliamentary ambition had to be set" (Cowling 4). Despite the most certain inevitability of the expansion of the franchise, due to the pressure of the working-class movement and their respective associations, such as the London Working

Men Association (LWMA), the Reform League and the more radical Chartists, we need to give Cowling's position some credibility. Based on one of the two main schools that interpret the 1867 accounts (Saunders, *The Politics of Reform* 572) [the other being the actions of the Reform League], this line of thought "puts emphasis on a crisis of party and the rivalry between W. E. Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli" (Saunders, *The Politics of Reform* 572).

The political leaders of the time, Gladstone and Disraeli, "forced up the price of reform, not the reformers inside and outside the House of Commons" (Himmelfarb 106-107) for their own revival and promotion. In 1866, after defeating the Liberal John Russell in elections, Benjamin Disraeli was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer by the elected Tory Prime Minister, Lord Derby, who retired from political life in 1868. As a consequence, Disraeli replaced him in the leadership of the government. Gladstone was Russell's Chancellor of Exchequer and was to become Prime Minister four times, 1868, 1880, 1886, and 1892. The idea of setting forth political reform became one of the core issues of the governments led by both Russell and Derby. However, opinions differed widely regarding who could have the right to get the vote and thus become an active citizen in a more representative and thus fairer government.

Contrary to Robert Lowe, utilitarian, free-trader, and the leader of the Addullamites, an anti-reform faction within the Liberal party, and even Disraeli, Gladstone was not worried about the balance of classes but with the dissolution of classes of which the extension of franchise was part (Saunders, *The Politics of Reform* 582). Within this agenda, the distribution of seats was not so important for Gladstone. In addition, the Russell-Gladstone proposal of 1866 met this assumption as imposing a £7 rating franchise represented a safeguard against indiscriminate enfranchisement (Saunders, *The Politics of Reform* 586).

If it was generally accepted that every class should be represented in Parliament, the extension of the representation, i.e. "the distribution of seats between town and county," was one of the "fault-lines" which fractured the parties:

It was generally accepted that every class and every interest should have a voice in Parliament, and in this respect, enfranchising the working classes in the 1850s was like

enfranchising Manchester and Birmingham in 1832: it added one more piece to the matrix of representation. The difficulty was the sheer size and ubiquity of that class, which meant that any franchise to which they could realistically aspire risked swamping every other interest. This would not be the extension of the representative government but its negation, replacing Britain's mixed government with the exclusive rule of a single class. (Saunders, *The Politics of Reform* 578)

The 1866 proposal was brought down by the Tories with the support of the Adullamites who were in disagreement with Gladstone's principles. This bill established that qualification to get the vote would be dependent on the payment of a house every year. Lodgers should also reside the house for at least 12 months. £14 in the counties and £7 in the boroughs were the new figures proposed. Unlike the amount set in 1832, £50 in the counties and £10 in the boroughs, the new model set in 1866 was rather extreme, as Saunders explains:

The change in itself was radically extreme: a £7 house, when set alongside further requirements on rating and residence, remained beyond the reach of most working families, and £7 marked a retreat from the £6 figure Russell had proposed in 1860. What troubled MPs was the lack of any 'principle' for the new figure. The occupation of a £7 house could hardly be said to be a test of character, for rents fluctuated wildly in different parts of the country. The qualification was simply a figure plucked from the air, on the basis that it enfranchised roughly the desired number of votes. (Saunders, "Introduction": *Shooting Niagara— and after?* 9)

It also added one more piece to the many reform bills that had already been put forth since 1832, namely 1852, 1854, and 1860. Saunders (*Shooting Niagara— and after?* 2) defines the thirty-year reform movement as having accounted for the establishment reform as the "Bermuda Triangle of British politics." Saunders notes that the 1867 "Reform Act brought to a climax a controversy that had bedevilled governments for a generation." (Saunders, "Introduction": *Shooting Niagara— and after?* 2)

Aiming at securing household suffrage, Lord Derby and Disraeli's proposal introduced a series of far-reaching amendments to the 1866

proposal, such as the inclusion of compound householders, “enfranchising,” therefore, “almost the entire working classes in the boroughs” (Himmelfarb 107). However, this revealed to be “administratively impractical” as Saunders explains (Saunders “Introduction”: *Shooting Niagara— and After?* 9). The Conservative proposal’s main objective was to distinguish between personal ratepayers from compound householders. The latter had local taxes paid by their landlords whereas the former were able to pay taxes for themselves. Nevertheless, compounding depended on local acts and, as such, did not define the value of the lodgers. Compounding was therefore abolished and the system of personal rating ensured that the principle of taxation and representation would be respected. If individual ratepayers were not able to pay for their rates they would be excluded from the borough electorate (Saunders, “Introduction”: *Shooting Niagara— and After?* 9).

On July 12 1867, in the House of Commons debates, when asked about a proposed Amendment by the Member of Parliament (MP) P.A. Taylor, on page 2, line 20, after the words “same lodgings,” to insert the words “or different lodgings in succession,” Disraeli replied that the agreement on such amendment “would throw open the door to many manifold abuses.” However, the amendment stating that “the occupier to be rated in Boroughs and not owner (clause 5)” was agreed to (Hansard online, Commons Debates).² This debate shows how difficult and controversial was to reach a uniform household franchise.

Nonetheless, household suffrage was believed to include the “residuum” of the working classes that would strengthen the Conservative Party, so Disraeli believed, as the *Times* reported:

(...) while the enfranchisement of the elite of the working classes alone would destroy his party, the enfranchisement of the residuum with the elite would renew its source of strength. (Himmelfarb 127)³

² http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1867/jul/12/consideration#S3V0188P0_18670712_HOC_98

³ Joseph H. Park, *The English Reform Bill of 1867*, 243 quoting *The Times*, June 12, 1967, quoted in Himmelfarb 127.

According to Himmelfarb, the Conservatives believed the masses were more deferential upon established tradition and authorities rather than on property, privilege, or power which would not jeopardise the aristocratic outlook of the “future governors of England,” the same as the “old governors of England” (Himmelfarb 131-132). Disraeli was therefore driven by the creed known as “Tory Democracy” and “took advantage of all the political latitude implicit in his social creed, (...) accelerating the movement towards democracy” (Himmelfarb 112-113), based on the assumption that the lower classes were naturally Conservative:

(...) there was an additional impetus towards democracy in the Tory creed. This came from the belief that the lower classes were not only naturally Conservative in temperament but also naturally Conservative in politics. Thus the party had a practical interest as well as a philosophical disposition towards democracy. The Tories were democratic, one might say, because they assumed that the demos was Tory. (Himmelfarb 113)

Deference was indeed a valued and taken for granted characteristic of the working class people which was believed to be needed to enforce the value of constitution. Walter Bagehot, in 1872 in the introduction to the second edition of *The English Constitution*, first published in 1867, noted that when writing the first edition there was a prevalent (liberal) idea that skilled artisans should be enfranchised as they “could form superior opinions on national matters” (9). However, the unexpected enfranchisement of unskilled labour, with no special skill and lacking intellectual abilities created more fears and doubts as to whether the ordinary working man could still be deferential upon his “betters” and therefore accepted to be guided by them:

We have not enfranchised a class less needing to be guided by their betters than the old class; on the contrary, the new class need it more than the old. The real question is, will they submit to it, will they defer in the same way to wealth and rank, and to the higher qualities of which these are the rough symbols and the common accompaniments? (9-10)

Bagehot, a liberal-minded intellectual “with a conservative undertow of deference to customary and established order”, but no “natural democrat” (Fawcett 183) also feared the extension of the franchise to the illiterate

working class as it would endanger parliamentary government. Bagehot supported reform, but he was distrustful of the effects that the extension of franchise would have in cabinet government. In addition, as Bagehot described, in 1867 there were many uncertainties regarding the real extension of the Reform Act:

They are taken up with technicalities as to the ratepayers and the compound householder. Nobody in the country knew what was being done. I happened at the time to visit a purely agricultural and conservative county, and I asked the local Tories, "Do you understand this Reform Bill? Do you know that your Conservative Government has brought in a Bill far more Radical than any former Bill, and that it is very likely to be passed?" The answer I got was, "What stuff you talk! How can it be a Radical Reform Bill? Why, Bright opposes it!" There was no answering that in a way which a "common jury" could understand. (10)

Bagehot believed that English politics was entering a new world, and change was thus unavoidable, as the author stated in 1872:

A new world has arisen which is not the old world; and we naturally ascribe the change to the reform Act. But this is a complete mistake. If there had been no Reform Act at all, there would have been a great change in English politics. There has been a change of the sort which, above all, generates a change of generation. (4)

In reality, Gladstone and Disraeli epitomised this new generation of political leaders who, though fearing reform and its implications, knew that change was inevitable.

With the aged Prime-Minister, Lord Derby, Disraeli grabbed the opportunity of reform to boost his political ambitions and to re-establish the Conservative Party as government. Several cartoons from *Fun* portrayed Disraeli as a very cunning Jewish street merchant, selling household suffrage on the cheap, and distrusted by Gladstone, as exemplified in figure 1.



Figure 1: “Securing the Suffrage” (*Fun*, 30 March 1867, NS, 5, 29, N. 2706 d. 13)⁴

⁴ “Securing” the Suffrage (*Fun*, Series II, 30 March 1867, p. 344) available at <https://archive.org/stream/selectedillustra00lond#page/n343/mode/2up>.

Lord Palmerston, the Liberal Prime-Minister from 1859 to 1865, in a memorandum to his secretary on 15 May 1864, resisted the expansion of the franchise claiming that “a vote is not a Right but a Trust. All the Nation cannot by possibility be brought together to vote and therefore a selected few are appointed by law to perform this Function for the Rest” (Hall, McClelland and Rendall 1). The *Illustrated London News* (*ILN*) reported in 1860 that the “Liberal party is once more in a state of complete disorganisation, and that Lord Palmerston is governing and guiding the State principally by the aid of the opposition” (*ILN*, “Sketches in Parliament” 71). Besides, Palmerston’s government was more focused on foreign affairs than on reform (Leonard 125).

Both Conservatives and Liberals saw it with much suspicion, a leap in the dark, a leap of Britannia into the unknown, “but not a leap into darkness” (Read 145), as it was caricatured in *Punch* Magazine, illustrated in figure 2.

Depicting Disraeli’s face on the horse carrying Britannia, backed up by other riders, John Bright, W. E. Gladstone, and Lord Derby, *Punch*’s quite evocative and satirical words did somehow justice to the spirit of the Reform and Parliamentary momentum on such a topic:

A fine horse, a fine rider— and first of the steed —
 Caucasian Arab, they say, by his breed (...)
 And he who backs his horse, for field, course, or park,
 ten to one, finds he’s taken— a LEAP IN THE DARK. (...)
 There are fears and forebodings, BRITANNIA, for you! (...)
 He goes by BRIGHT and GLADSTONE, HUGHES, FAWCETT,
 And MILL (...)
 And— who knows what will come of this LEAP IN THE DARK?

(*Punch*, August 3, 1867, 46)

Disraeli had hoped “that it would never be the fate of this country to live under a democracy” (Read 145). Even the leaders of the reform movements, namely George Potter, leader of the LWMA, were not expecting such radical amendments, and they did not claim universal or manhood suffrage, unlike the Chartists demands of the 1830s. They would only be pleased with household suffrage and lodger franchise, even without the ballot (Coltham 171; Himmelfarb 130).



Figure 2: A leap in the dark (*Punch*, August 3, 1867, 47)⁵

3. Definitions of political citizenship during the parliamentary debates of 1866-7

Political citizenship was based on two sets of qualifications for citizenship, on the one hand, class and skill, and on the other, age and householding status (Gleadle 31). Gender was also at the centre of contention regarding the extension of franchise. In fact, the imagined Victorian society was patriarchal, imperial, virtuous, and individual where the moral self-improving man was a family caring man, devoted to evangelical domesticity, as Gleadle notes:

⁵ Cartoon available at <https://archive.org/stream/punch52a53lemouoft#page/46/mode/2up> (accessed September 14, 2016).

Many parliamentarians were invested in an evangelical domesticity, with its associated values of piety and family cares, and this intersected with a long-standing connection between fatherhood and citizenship. (Gleadle 34)

Man was regarded as the breadwinner (Rendall 120) and the moral guide of his family. If women were meant to naturally belong to the private sphere, men were entitled with the onus of public sphere. Besides class and gender, the framework which supported the construction of the potential voter also lay upon age. The idea that man should be of “full age” was part of the reform discourse. Full age meant therefore an accepted link between fatherhood and citizenship which accounted for the consolidation of the Victorian social discourse based on tradition and stability. Young males were out of the franchise because, as Kathryn Gleadle explains, they had too much independence, were too immature and, therefore, would not have the right conditions to settle down. In her words, they were: “the sexually-free bachelor; the mobile lodger; the rowing, juvenile crowd member; the unburdened, impulsive youth” (33). Raising the age of franchising would also exclude many men from citizenship (Gleadle 39). Adult single males still living in their parents’ home were not also meant to be enfranchised. The common claims in Parliament discussion regarding the age of enfranchisement endorsed married men over 25 or even 30 years of age with intellectual abilities or sufficient literacy who would be able to vote responsibly (Gleadle 36-41). Even though these measures were not implemented, the arguments revealed rather effective in the reform debate.

According to the Victorian social ethos, the idea of manliness was associated with much praised qualities like “integrity, self-discipline, rationality and public spirit” (Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism* 69). These qualities reconciled classes as the respectable working man could also merit this description. Parry states that the emphasis on manliness became part of the liberal discourse to justify the entitlement to membership of the political community. In this sense, men like John Bright or John Stuart Mill were used as examples of prominent political men to justify the idea that “an inspirational political figure did not need to be a man of property” (Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism* 70). However, the crux of disagreement lay on which working men were qualified as respectable. Skilled workers, like artisans, could also be liable to corruption and bribery.

Possession or payment of property represented though the expected condition to get the vote, and the franchise included skilled and unskilled men, scot and lot voters, and freemen. Defining these voters was also no easy task, as Lord Derby, on March 11 1867, in the House of Lords Debates, stressed: "How are we to distinguish the mechanics and artizans, and other working men who were entitled as scot and lot voters, from those who were entitled as freemen?"⁶

Nonetheless, the Second Reform Act decided that:

At present every freeholder of the value of 40s. was qualified to vote for a county, and so, in like manner, was the holder of a copyhold or a leasehold, either for the life of one person or for a period of not less than 60 years, of the annual value of £5. (Hansard Online, *Commons Debates*, March 21, 1882)⁷

Women were not included in the reform plans. The support of women's suffrage was very scarce as manhood suffrage still dominated the reform discourse. According to Jane Rendall, "citizenship for women was variously defined by campaigners for and sympathisers with women's suffrage, both women and men, like Helen Taylor and Barbara Bodichon, Jacob Bright and Charles Kingsley" (120). However, women's citizenship was still dependent on "marital status, class, ethnicity or race" which divided "the political nation" (121).

John Stuart Mill, one of the leading names in nineteenth century liberal political tradition, who had widely examined the issues of equality, liberty, and the virtues of representative government, became also known for his support of the extension of the suffrage to women, based on the principle of perfect equality: "the equals were limited to the free male citizens. (...) and no one being now left out, but an equal measure being extended to all" (*The Subjection of Women* 167). When running for a Parliamentary seat in the House of Commons in 1865, and before

⁶ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1867/mar/11/motion-tor-papers#S3V0185P0_18670311_HOL_21

⁷ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1882/mar/21/resolutions#S3V0267P0_18820321_HOC_93

the supporters of the constituency he represented, Mill made clear his conviction on the suffrage and on personal representation, more specifically on women's suffrage, as stated in the author's *Autobiography*:

I made know to them, among other things my conviction (as I was bound to do, since I intended, if elected, to act on it) that women were entitled to representation in Parliament on the same terms with men. It was the first time, doubtless, that such a doctrine had ever been mentioned to electors; and the fact that I was elected after proposing it, gave the start to the movement which has since become so vigorous in favour of women's suffrage. (*Autobiography* 274)

In fact, Mill's defence of proportional and personal representation, which he claimed remained to be made in representative government before the House and the nation (*Autobiography* 284), represent one of the most important contributions to the Reform debate. The other was the extension of the vote to all women householders (*Autobiography* 285). Mill presented a petition for the suffrage signed by a considerable number of distinguished men. The many votes his petition got in the House of Commons, including John Bright, to Mill's surprise (*Autobiography* 285), encouraged him to continue his struggle. Together with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, and then with their daughter, Helen Taylor, John Stuart Mill wrote widely in the defence of women's rights (Harriet Mill, "Enfranchisement of Women" 393-415; Mill, *The Subjection of Women*). Hence, John Stuart Mill became an active supporter of the movement for the extension of the suffrage to women, which disclosed more radicalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Helen Taylor was one of the founding members of the National Society for Women's suffrage (1867) which campaigned for women's right to vote. It had several branches across Britain and each acted independently with their own governing bodies (*Autobiography* 285). Mill became the president of the branch in London. Many other distinguished MPs, professors and others became members of this Society. The most distinguished female members included Millicent Fawcett, later to become the President of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (1897-1919), Lydia Becker, Barbara Bodichon, among others.

Mill's frankness on women's rights earned him the epithet "The Ladies' Advocate" (*Punch*, June 1, 1867, 225)⁸ and some ill-judged criticism, explored in a mocking tone in Victorian periodicals such as *Punch*, or the *London Charivari* and *Judy, the London serio-comic Journal*.

On June 1, 1867, *Punch* published several scornful cartoons and texts on the performance of Mill as the defender of the franchise for females. In the House of Commons, on May 20 1867, Mill introduced an amendment to the Reform Bill on women's suffrage. In clause 4, related to "the occupation qualification for voters in the counties" (Rendall 136), Mill suggested the replacement of 'man' by 'person' in an attempt to include property owners and qualified women. Rather sarcastically, *Punch* magazine took advantage of this slip, publishing a cartoon with Mill clearing the way for several women giving it the following title: "Mill's logic; or, Franchise for females. Pray clear the way, there, for these-a-persons" (*Punch*, March 30, 1867 129).⁹

This small mistake gave way to more comic and ironic remarks, such as this one again in *Punch*:

A certain "person" to Mr. Mill

Dear Mr. Mill

In the name of my sex, I feel bound to thank you for your argument in support of your motion for the admission of women to the franchise, though the proposal itself was not quite for my taste, either in the manner or the manner of it. If we are to be let within the pale of the constituencies, I would rather we come in under our own style and title as "women" than to be hustled thro' your wicket under the epicene disguise of "persons." (*Punch*, "A certain 'person' to Mr. Mill", 224)

⁸ Cartoon available at <https://archive.org/stream/punch52a53lemouoft#page/n247/mode/2up> (accessed 14 September 2016).

⁹ Cartoon available at <https://archive.org/stream/punch52a53lemouoft#page/n151/mode/2up> (accessed 14 September 2016).

Nonetheless, Mill is still much praised by all the time and writings he devoted to the defence of women's rights. The author, somehow, preached what he believed in. Mill believed in individual liberty and in gender equality, even though the equal and total achievement of these ends rested on fallacious premises such as the belief in human perfection. However, one must acknowledge Mill's important role in the fight for women franchise.

Despite the discussion around the concepts of class, gender, age and skill, and the restriction of property qualifications to get the vote, the consequences of the 1867 would have some political impact on the expansion of the franchise making the working class a majority of the electorate which, for some, risked the integrity and nobility of the Parliament as Thomas Carlyle feared it would happen.

4. "Shooting Niagara": capitulation to democracy

One of the most avid opponents to the political Reform was Thomas Carlyle who, a month after the approval of the Bill, wrote the much sardonic article "Shooting Niagara. And After?" published in Macmillan Magazine. For Carlyle, England had entered an epoch of "self-congratulation and flinging up of caps" (Carlyle 4) and was about to take the Niagara leap of completed democracy sooner than expected. But that would bring serious problems to the once noble England. Critical about the slavery question, since he disapproved the abolitionist movement in America, Carlyle opposed universal suffrage as it would be exercised by the illiterate and ungifted men, contrary to the white noble men, men of genius, as he much ironically expressed:

Divine commandment to vote ("Manhood suffrage," — Horsehood, Doghood ditto not yet treated of); Universal "glorious liberty" (...) count of Heads the God-appointed way in this universe (...); in one brief word (...) can be uttered or imagined on these points, "the equality of men," any man equal to any other," Quashee Nigger to Socrates or Shakespeare; Judas Iscariot to Jesus Christ; (...). (Carlyle 4)

For Carlyle, the working-class people were at the same social and cultural level as the slaves and coloured people. Irish people were also discriminated. During the parliamentary reform debates, other major events were

undergoing or were still very recent, such as the American civil war (1863-65), the fight for Home Rule in Ireland led by the Fenian movement, a revolutionary organisation in Ireland and among the Irish in the US, and the Jamaica question resulting from the insurrection of native people against the British. Carlyle was very critical of the American civil war outcome and of the “Nigger-Philantropists,” such as John Stuart Mill, who made part of the Jamaica Committee assigned to investigate the British Governor Edward John Eyre’s actions in Jamaica (Carlyle 19). Catherine Hall argues that this differentiated treatment was instilled in the “nationally and racially inflected” imagined world of Victorian people, of which the nation and the empire were seen separately (Hall 183). This discourse was based on the arguments of racial difference and superiority and eugenics so much promoted in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In England, Carlyle was critical of the “extension of the franchise” and presaged the threats of the enfranchisement of working class people to the British accepted axioms on liberty, constitutional government and reform: “Oh, my friends, whither are you buzzing and swarming, in this extremely absurd Manner? Expecting a millennium from ‘Extension of the suffrage,’ laterally, vertically, or in whatever way?” (Carlyle 8)

For Carlyle, “the Divine quality of liberty” should only be made indispensable to the good man, i.e. the noble man, as he is “permitted to unfold himself in works of goodness and nobleness” (Carlyle 8). To give freedom to the “bad man” is to grant him with the means to continue in ill-doing, that is, the devil, represented by the slaves and the working class, likewise to become an emancipated gentleman, is unable to act accordingly:

But that a bad man be “free”—permitted to unfold himself in his particular way, is contrariwise the fattalest curse you could inflict on him: curse and nothing else, to him and all his neighbours. (Carlyle 8)

More voting would not bring the clearance of rottenness and the solution to mendacity but the opposite, because ordinary people are not gentlemanly like:

Bring in more voting; that will clear away the universal rottenness, and quagmire of mendacities, in which poor England is drowning; let England only vote sufficiently; and

all is clean and sweet again. A very singular swarmery this of the Reform movement, I must say. (Carlyle 10)

The working-class people, illiterate and coarse did not have the necessary intellectual qualities that would lead them to progress or to the possibility of improvement, as the author highlighted:

It is not Thought, this which my reforming brothers utters to me with such emphasis and eloquence; it is mere “reflex and reverberation,” repetition of what he has always heard others imagining to think, and repeating as orthodox, indisputable, and the gospel of our salvation in this world. (Carlyle 11)

According to Carlyle, the reformers —“Beales and his Roughs”— were going too fast, reaching the Niagara rapids as quickly as possible, following the path of treason, bribery and gullibility to grasp more votes even from the common people with no power or social status (i.e. the multitude) (Carlyle 11). Edmond Beales was the national President of the Reform League created in 1864 and campaigned for male suffrage. He was also the leader of the London Park railings on 26 July 1866 which might be interpreted as a sign of extreme social unrest longing for political and social transformations. Even though this League was not as radical as the Chartist movement, it attracted former chartist sympathisers and leaders, such as John Jaffray, who signed the 1838 People’s Charter, and John Bedford Leno, “a leading London Chartist in the 1850s” (Chase 16-17) and trade unionists.

Carlyle foresaw the end of “Poor England” that would be transformed into a “tearful tragedy and an ignominious farce” (12). Because the society had fallen vulgar and chaotic (18), due to the new religion of free trade that brought out the “nasty cunningly varnished over” (36-37), the aristocracy, or, in other words, the industrial hero and the aristocrat by class, i.e. the men of genius, the noble few, “the inspired Gift of God” (23) revealed indispensable as they would shed some light to the roaring populaces (29).

Matthew Arnold is worth mentioning here for his valuable political and social critiques of the period in focus. Arnold stated in *Culture and Anarchy*, published in 1867, that culture was needed to maintain social order and thus avoid a state of anarchy in a time of mass democracy. Acknowledging the desire of working-class people for political trans-

formation regarding the extension of the franchise, Arnold believed that the working class was not the only class lacking the light so much needed for the attainment of perfection. This did not mean that the working-class people were not to be trusted the control of the state. For Arnold the three classes should be entrusted the governance of the country. However, for Arnold, the social machinery was out of order, as social inequality, submission to a fierce individualism in an era where wealth represented power and greatness, blind faith in machinery and trade, were the ingredients of a malfunctioning society:

(...) there are a good many people in our paradisiacal centres of industrialism and individualism taking the bread out of one another's mouths. The rough has not yet quite found his groove... (Arnold 80-81)

Fostering the spirit of bringing together all the three classes, Arnold defended that every class should try to uphold their best self instead of asserting their everyday selves and, upon reaching that condition, they could govern the country in "united, impersonal and harmonious way" (95). Arnold's idea of culture to be a collective movement was at odds with the strong sense of individualism so much sought and promoted in Victorian society. The three classes lacked sweetness and light. Unlike Carlyle's blind belief in the aristocracy as the best class to rule the country (82), Arnold held that the aristocracy, i.e. the Barbarians, was futile and sterile and, as such, lacked the light (83-85) in a period of expansion, "a time for ideas" (84). The middle class, or the philistines, endorsed by Robert Lowe as the rightful members of Parliament (82), only thought about moneymaking, machinery and trade and were ignorant of culture and arts. Therefore, this class was not "in possession of light and that here is the true seat of authority for which we are in search" (89). The working class, or the populace, raw and uncultivated, embodied the liberal national idea of individual freedom and individual self-assertion. However, to do as one pleases risked "drifting towards anarchy" (75). The working class, submissive and undeveloped, needed the vigour and experience of both the aristocracy and middle class (81, 93). Therefore, riots such as the one in London Hyde Park in 1866 stand as a demonstration of popular agitation to which the "raw and rough" working-class people "joined in in immense numbers" (81). John Bright, leader of these extra-parliamentary

reform manifestations, personified the liberal individualism that Arnold criticised (Hall 186). “The nineteenth-century version of Puritanism and provincial nonconformity” that Bright represented “endangered the nation,” according to Catherine Hall (187).

The importance of education and culture was still highly considered in Parliament during the 1867 debates on Reform. When asked about an improvement of Scotland’s representation, even though Disraeli praised “the great seats of learning in Scotland,”¹⁰ he defended the idea that the Scottish claim could not be satisfied by the sacrifice of English interests as districts in England which had grown substantially were insufficiently represented and thus needed more representation. Actually, London University would be given an MP constituency in 1867. However, he maintained that the case of Scotland was not forgotten: “I must beg the Representatives for Scotland to understand that Her Majesty’s Government, when dealing with the case of Scotland, will consider it without any foregone conclusion.” Nonetheless, Scottish universities were praised for their outstanding intellectual members and output and, evidently, Disraeli emphasized that quality in Parliament:

I have always been favourable to constituencies which, mixed with those based on the great material interests that must always form the bulk of a representative assembly, should be founded on intellect and education. (Hansard online, *Commons Debates* 1 March 1867)

Coming to accept reform and the working class vote as well as women’s vote (Fawcett 184), Bagehot also believed education represented the answer to the possible negative effects of democratisation. Education would morally guide the working class and would make it more politically competent (Fawcett 184).

John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (92-93) warned about the dangers of the tyranny of opinion which renders the masses mediocre. For Mill, “if the agents of government, or those who choose the agents, or those to whom the agents are responsible (...) are mere masses of ignorance,

¹⁰ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1867/mar/01/question-10#S3V0185P0_18670301_HOC_72

stupidity, and baleful prejudice, every operation of government will go wrong" (*Essays on Politics and Society* 390). The only solution to this problem was education so that individual progress could be achieved. Robert Lowe shared the same position and defended that "from the moment that you intrust the masses with power their education becomes an absolute necessity" (Heffer 412).¹¹

Despite defending the increase and protection of individual liberty, Mill's utilitarian belief made him endorse the actions of the state for the sake of individual progress. "The worth of the state should, in the long run, be the worth of the individuals composing it" as the author stated in *On Liberty* (131). Therefore, Mill supported state interference in education sustained on the utility principle and the idea of progress. Even though he feared a tyrannical control of state over general education as it would be tantamount to uniformity of opinion and to the annulment of the mind, he maintained that the masses should be instructed to get the necessary skills and tools to develop both at spiritual and professional levels. Therefore, according to Mill: "Education makes a man a more intelligent shoemaker, if that be his occupation, but not only by teaching him how to make shoes; it does so by the mental exercise it gives, and the habits it impresses" (*Inaugural Address delivered to the University of St. Andrew* 218).

The idea of educating the masses at a spiritual level to make them more virtuous and respectable and thus less prone to violence was in line with the "Whig tradition of inclusive constitutional reform and state activist" (Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism* 73). According to Parry, the Liberal John Russell:

(...) tried to take up reform in 1849, 1851, 1854 and 1860 in order to restore his reputation after the Radical criticism that he had received since 1846, to vindicate the evolutionary Whiggish model of the British constitution against the Chartist alternative (...). When he became Prime Minister again in 1865, he committed himself to Reform, not only for those reasons, but also to make the Liberal party a proper

¹¹ Robert Lowe, Speech on the third Reading of the Reform Bill, House of Commons, 15 July 1867. apud Heffer (*High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain*).

party again, and to galvanise Parliament, inactive in the early 1860s, to a general policy of legislative activity on educational, Irish and social issues, as in the 1830s. (Parry 73)

However, the democratisation of education could nonetheless represent a major setback in the expected social balance of the period which was led by both the opulent aristocracy and materialistic middle class.

For Carlyle, if democracy shot Niagara, that is, if democracy succeeded, the aristocracy would be in danger of losing its privileges and all the potentialities of governing, of leading and coercing in the name of a nobler good, as the most vulgar people could actually do, namely emancipated black people:

See, I have scores or scores of "colonies," boa-constrictors, rattlesnakes, Parliamentary Eloquences, and Emancipated Niggers ripening towards nothing but destruction; one of these you shall have, you as vice-king (...). (Carlyle 19)

Carlyle was not alone in this position against more representation in Parliament. As *Punch* reported, the topic "Reform" was tantamount to disagreement: "On reform, the Parliamentary Lion was once more roused, and roared tremendously." The issue was widely discussed in the House of Commons and Mr. Roebuck, an MP, *a propos* the debate on borough suffrage and whether the payment should be made compulsory, shared the same fears as Carlyle: "In the course of the debate Mr. Roebuck observed that he did not see the country handed over to ignorance and vice, which would rule if the Rabble came in, and we were going to let in the Rabble" (*Punch*, "Punch's essence of Parliament" 3).

The franchising of the masses brought the issue to the front and also some Liberals who supported representative government feared the ignorance of the common people who would be liable to corruption and vice. The problem of corruption was in fact a very serious issue that concerned parliamentarians. The new middle class of entrepreneurs and merchants, wanting to make their way in society and politics, were accused of taking advantage of their wealth and therefore of buying off their seat in Parliament. Parry emphasises the idea that the reform debate did not centre on the binomial aristocracy and democracy, but a third highly influential force had to be considered, that is, the power of commercial wealth or plutocracy (Parry, *1867 and the Rule of Wealth* 46). Both

aristocrats and merchants were at the same level as they were the great monopolists of power and property. It became then urgent to legislate against corruption.

Kathryn Rix contends that the question of corruption and the great expense of the electoral process were approached during the Reform Bill debates. However, the Election Petitions Act would only be approved in 1868. This represented a legal attempt to tackle corruption and bribery and the great cost of elections. Nonetheless, the Reform debates urged the approval of this Act as this “was part of a wider reform settlement” (Rix 65-66). Despite the governments’ attempts to strive for “electoral purity,” this still remains a major concern not only in Britain but in every democratic nation as a way to maintain the necessary system of checks and balances that the British constitution demands to impose, as Bagehot pointed out (Bagehot 280).

5. Conclusion

Despite the Whig historians’ attempt to make the Liberals as “the legitimate parents of the act” by “redesigning history to conform the Liberal myth” to an image of progress and reform (Himmelfarb 118-119), the 1867 Reform Act had more limited consequences than the ones normally stated, and the politics remained deeply aristocratic. Conservatives and Liberals as well as many radicals were fearful of the consequences of Disraeli’s proposal. Bagehot argued that the Conservatives could not oppose it as they were obliged to accept it due to the discipline of the party. The “intelligent Liberals,” as they had a tradition of proposing reforms, could not disappoint the electorate in their constituencies based on the argument “that it was too democratic.” As for the Radicals “asking for years for household suffrage were much more surprised than pleased at the near chance of obtaining it, (...) but they never expected to get it” (Bagehot 10-11). In truth, the 1867 Reform Act granted the vote to all householders in the boroughs and to lodgers who were able to pay a £10 rent a year or more. In the counties, it gave the vote to landowners and tenants with small portions of land and to adult men freeholders or copyholders of property worth £5 per year, or to ratepayers occupying property for at least one year at the cost of £12 per year. Seats were distributed from small towns to the growing industrial towns or

counties, like Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, and Manchester. However, the distribution of seats was very limited and it still revealed insufficient to “redress” the gap between population and representation (Smith 194).

Universal suffrage was still far from its completion due to political, social, and moral obstacles associated with class, gender, age, skill, and race. Nevertheless, Britain had finally capitulated to democracy even though a lot was still left to be done. Immediately after the approval of the Second Reform Act, the parliamentary debate on reform continued as there were still doubts pending regarding enfranchisement. Issues related to the distribution of the seats, corruption, and bribery, for example, were still some common fears. On June 24, 1867, Sir Roundell Palmer, a Tory MP, proposed some amendments to the Act related to the type of property that should be made clearer. Palmer assumed that:

(...) it was intended that property should give a vote for counties, not for boroughs. No one would believe that it was ever intended by the Reform Act to give a vote for land in boroughs, whatever was the character of the building upon it, or that a cow-shed should give a vote. It was an abuse which had grown up under the Reform Act, and experience proved that it had become a systematized abuse. (Hansard online, *Common Debates*, 24 June 1867)¹²

During the debate, Disraeli reminded the Committee that:

(...) this land was as much occupied in the borough as a house was occupied, and they ought not to be quarrelling about whether the buildings on it were worth £3 or £5. The law had made the land a portion of the borough, and therefore the question was not whether the building or the land was a cow-shed or not, but whether the person who occupied it within the borough ought to have a vote. (Hansard online, *Common Debates*, 24 June 1867)¹³

¹² http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1867/jun/24/committee-progress-june-21#S3V0188P0_18670624_HOC_82

¹³ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1867/jun/24/committee-progress-june-21#S3V0188P0_18670624_HOC_82

Other amendments which disqualified people accused of bribery were stated. Using the example of Barnstaple borough where corruption prevailed, a Bill for disenfranchising the corrupt voters was also introduced. In the same context, on 30 July 1867 the Marquess of Clanricade, a Tory MP, proposed the addition of a clause that provided “that no person who, after the passing of the Act, shall become a freeman of any city, town, or borough, shall be entitled as such to be placed on the register, saving the rights of existing freemen” (Hansard online, *Lords Debates*, 30 July 1867).¹⁴

This clause would prevent vote malpractices as it was based on the assumption that a freeman brought up in habits of corruption would be more easily contaminated and prompted to follow the same behaviour. Therefore, the “new” freemen should not be admitted into the constituency. However, despite the creation of “a Commission into Corrupt Practices at Barnstaple, where the freeman qualification existed,” this had little result and great expense to the country, as Hugh Fortescue, Third Earl Fortescue and Liberal MP, highlighted (Hansard online, *Lords Debates*, 30 July 1867). Nonetheless, enfranchised electors should be worthy of the possession of the vote, not only because they had some property, but also because they were not liable to corruption. The price to pay for electoral misconduct would be disfranchisement (Hansard Online, *Lords Debates*, 30 July 1867).¹⁵

The Reform Acts that followed, in 1884-5 and 1918, would bear in mind these concerns with corruption and bribery. Consequently, the Secret Ballot Act would then be approved in 1872. Parliament continued increasing the scope of enfranchisement, becoming thus more democratic and representative, even though most women were still excluded until 1928.

The different positions that we have highlighted make us understand what was at stake at the time regarding suffrage and the ballot. The principles of individuality and equality, so highly praised by John Stuart Mill

¹⁴ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1867/jul/30/committee#S3V0189P0_18670730_HOL_51

¹⁵ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1867/jul/30/committee#S3V0189P0_18670730_HOL_51

under the scope of the Liberal predicament, were at the agenda of Victorian politics, but they faced many hurdles as there were still many doubts about the expansion of the franchise. Both Whigs and Tories, before and even after 1867, did not intend to further extend the vote as Parliament would lose its aristocratic stance. Moreover, Carlyle feared the danger of the ignorance of the working-class that would stain the virtuous and aristocratic House of Commons. His position was endorsed not only by many Conservatives but also by some Liberals, such as Arnold and Bagehot. When supporting the 1867 Reform Bill, Disraeli saw an egotistical opportunity to promote himself and his party. However, the two main political participants in the reform struggles, Gladstone and Disraeli, apart from the many political differences and rival positions, became somehow united in the reform issue as none denied Britain's need for parliamentary change when faced with the unavoidable shifting social and political status quo.

In an attempt to answer Carlyle's questions: once democracy is achieved, what comes next? What does one need to do to maintain it? our answer is as follows: democracy cannot be taken for granted as it is always subject to obstacles such as greed and self-gratification. Therefore, it needs constantly to be put to the test. On the one side, people who vote should be aware of the importance of the act and, on the other, the people who represent us in Parliament should be the ablest, the most intelligent and selfless men and women who would resist corruption and vice, concerns that also disquieted the Victorians.

The struggle for overcoming the obstacles to democracy continues and both the Parliament and the Members of Parliament (MPs) should have that responsibility, as the late Labour MP, Michael Meacher,¹⁶ also stated in 2014: "the gravy train rolls on, reaching ever-more sickening heights of greed, selfish gratification and disregard for the ever-deeper miasma of poverty that disfigures our country" and therefore:

MPs should be judged by how far they strip away these obstacles to democracy to open up the channels for the popular will to be reflected throughout the Parliamentary process. (Meacher n.p.)

¹⁶ Michael Meacher (1939-2015)—Labour MP for Oldham West and Royton.

Notwithstanding the impossibility of levelling equality and liberty to the same measure, one can and should pursue the maximum of these values so important for individual self-preservation and individuality.

To conclude, the Reform Act of 1867 represented the beginning of the end of “Old England,” with a predominantly aristocratic Parliament, which Carlyle so much celebrated. Despite property restrictions, it paved the way for a more inclusive and democratic Parliament in Britain.

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