

The Whigs, the People, and Reform

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CONTINENTAL EUROPE HAD NO WHIGGERY. It was a matter of regret both for anglophiles everywhere and for the Whig Party in England. The latter generously, but condescendingly, issued instructions on the workings of constitutional government to Spaniards and Italians, but such lessons were never well taken. They even created the term 'French Whig' for such men as Lafayette and Louis Philippe. Unfortunately, these candidates, too, failed the test. Lafayette was a general before he was a politician, while Louis Philippe relapsed quickly into press censorship and the bloody suppression of riot. Europe, of course, had aristocrats of a reforming temperament. As the friends and advisers of autocrats, they advocated change, and sometimes succeeded in promoting it. But this was not whiggery. The whigs saw reform coming from below, from a body they dubbed 'the people', not from the benevolence of kings and emperors. The whig mission, historically defined, was to lead the people in their aspirations, to make contact with them, and to give practicality to their hopes. This was whiggery, and it was specifically English.

Anglophiles in Europe wistfully regretted their loss. Madame de Staël, in *De l'Angleterre*, noted that it was 'la haute aristocratie d'Angleterre qui sert de barrière à l'autorité royale. Il est vrai que l'opposition est de plus libérale dans ses principes que les ministres: il suffit de combattre le pouvoir pour retremper son esprit et son âme'.¹ She was delighted by Erskine's claim that he personally chatted to every elector in the Westminster constituency, exclaiming 'tant il y a de rapports politiques entre le bourgeois et les hommes du premier rang'.² The Duc de Broglie was even more flattering:

L'aristocratie Anglaise honore l'humanité; c'est un imposant phénomène dans le monde et dans l'histoire; associée de tout temps aux intérêts du peuple, elle n'a jamais cessé de revendiquer les droits du moindre citoyen, aussi courageusement que les siens propres; elle a ouverte la route à la nation marche

¹ Mme de Stael, *De l'Angleterre*, ed. W. G. Hartog (London, 1907), p. 56.

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

aujourd'hui; elle a couru les mêmes chances, défendu la même course, combatta le même combat. Depuis cent cinquante ans que la victoire est gagnée, elle n'a ni deviné ni dégénéré.³

Whigs naturally assumed that such testimonials were not offered to the English aristocracy as a whole, but were rather intended for them. It was they, after all, who alone met all the conditions set out in de Broglie's encomium.

Unfortunately, the compliment could not be returned. Instead, whig writers had to point to the dire consequences resulting from an absence of whiggery in Europe.⁴ In their extensive writings on French history, for example, it became a cliché to record the sad fact that the French aristocracy had not behaved well. Lord John Russell typically observed about eighteenth-century France that 'when the people, raised by commerce and agriculture to importance, asked for the blessing of a free government, they had no leaders among the great proprietors of the land, to whose honesty and wisdom they could confide their cause'.⁵ As a result, the French Revolution, when it came, degenerated into violence and instability. Whiggery, a natural, moderating influence, was missing. Fox and his friends tried to supply the deficiency by writing directly to Barnave, Lafayette and others, but their advice was ignored. There was nothing between king and people, and so inevitably liberty and equality drowned in blood. Bagehot put the point even more bluntly: 'If France had more men of free will, quiet composure, with a suspicion of enormous principle, and a taste for moderate improvement; if a Whig party, in a word, were possible in France, France would be free'.⁶

If the French could not rise to whiggery, there was even less to hope for from the Germans, whose every instinct seemed to be for autocratic government. When whig administrations, in the 1830s, had trouble with William IV, it was attributed to the fact that he, 'like all princes, especially Germans, [was] lofty and arbitrary in his notions of Government'.⁷ By their nature, German aristocratic reformers looked for change through the agency of autocrats. It appeared that they could not countenance notions of the people or the representative institutions that might express them. When Frederick William IV visited England in 1842, bringing with him a reputation for liberal values, the whig press naturally assumed that this implied changes

³ *Edinburgh Review*, 87 (1826), p. 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 67 (1820), p. 35.

⁵ Lord John Russell, *Memoir on the affairs of Europe from the Peace of Utrecht* (London, 1824), pp. 161–2; see also Sir J. Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* in the *Miscellaneous works of the Rt Hon. Sir James Mackintosh* (London, 1846), III, p. 11.

⁶ *National Review*, 1 (1855), p. 265.

⁷ A. Kriegel, *The Holland House diaries* (London, 1977), p. 349.

offered by him to his subjects, and not a recognition of their rights. As a result, the best they could hope for was that he had come to London to see the English model at first hand, with the possibility of being converted to it.⁸ As ever, the whigs were only too happy to offer themselves as tutors. As ever, they were condescending in every sense of the word.

The gap opened up between British and European politics by the existence of whiggery was recognized by both sides. In Europe, whiggery was either honoured or thought merely strange. Some writers struggled to find phrases that would make sense of it in their own political vocabularies. One writer could not improve on the strangled formula that whiggery was 'ni Monarchiste, ni Aristocrate, ni Démocrate. Il est, si je peux m'exprimer ainsi, Monarchi-Aristo-Démocrate: c'est en tempérant ces caractères qu'il en corrige les vices'.⁹ Across the Channel, whigs graciously accepted these acknowledgements of their own distinctive qualities. According to them, the existence of whiggery gave reform movements in England a particular tone. They would be more measured and articulate; they would be well grounded in historical precedent and in the intellectual currents of the day; and, above all, they would have a permanent presence within the *pays légal*. Change in Europe came too suddenly through revolutions or too whimsically through the chance friendships of autocrats. In England, demands for it were an enduring feature of every parliamentary session. Unfortunately, history had not bequeathed whiggery to other European peoples.

The whigs were entirely comfortable with the idea that history had given them a special role. It had made them the natural arbiters of the pace and character of reform. In conjunction with 'the people', to whom they acted as mentors, they would regulate the whole process. In elaboration, this becomes the greatest cliché, perhaps, of whig writing in the period 1789–1830. Out of office almost by definition, whigs had the time and motive to write history and constitutional theory in great quantities. It was the hobby of Fox, Russell, Mackintosh and many lesser figures. These men talked of 'the people' endlessly, defining them as those whose intelligence and property gave them the right to a public voice. They preened themselves on the close relationship between whiggery and popular movements, and sadly reflected that such a model of politics could not be found elsewhere.

Popular movements under whig direction were, by definition, safe. Protest and demands for change would be channelled into the normal workings of the English constitution. Whigs therefore had no qualms about endowing 'the people' with all kinds of rights and, indeed, with the

⁸ J. Paulmann, *Westfälische Forschungen* (1994) XLIV, p. 358.

⁹ Anon., *Lettre familière d'un whig anglais* (London, 1791), pp. 5–6.

ability to legitimize government itself. Years before the French Revolution, Richard Watson told a Cambridge congregation that,

the People are not made to swell the dignity of a Legislature, but the Legislature is every where established to promote the interest of the people . . . God forbid, that our Governors should at any time so far neglect their duties, as to make it necessary for the people to sit in judgement upon their conduct; for this verdict is usually written with the sword, and registered in blood.¹⁰

Watson's willingness to endow the people with rights up to and, apparently, including the right to resistance was echoed widely. Russell bluntly observed that, 'The Whigs look towards the people, whose welfare is the end and object of all government'.¹¹

Such was the stuff of whig sermons, pamphlets and speeches. Russell's generation, in particular, had absorbed these nostrums through their very skin. Educated at Glasgow and Edinburgh universities, he and his contemporaries had heard such didacts as John Millar rehearse the point over and over again. In his influential *Historical view of the English government*, of 1787, he set out the whig creed:

The whigs, . . . founded the power of the sovereign, and of all inferior magistrates and rulers, upon the principle of utility. They maintained, that as all government is intended for defending the natural rights of mankind, and for promoting the happiness of human society, every exertion of power in governors, inconsistent with that end, is illegal and criminal; and it is the height of absurdity to suppose, that, when an illegal and unwarrantable power is usurped, the people have no right to resist the exercise of it by punishing the usurper.¹²

Tory writers parodied this whig stance in doggerel. *Blackwood's Magazine* published a satirical poem, in 1840, which began,

Twas echo'd on hustings, in hall and in bower
Too long we've been slaves to the Crown:
The PEOPLE, the source of legitimate power,
In bumpers was pledged, though the wine might be sour,
As the toast that alone would go down.¹³

Verses such as these stung, but they are in themselves evidence of how far a belief in a special relationship with the people had become part of whig self-identification.

Such an association was vital. The people left to themselves could become

¹⁰ *Anecdotes of the life of Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff* (London, 1817), pp. 19–20.

¹¹ Lord John Russell, *An essay on the history of the English government and constitution* (London, 1823), pp. 180–1.

¹² W. C. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow* (London, 1960), p. 352.

¹³ *Blackwood's Magazine*, 47 (1840), pp. 792–3.

passionate and enthusiastic. Europe provided endless examples of what excesses the people could be driven to, if not guided and counselled. The whigs had the responsibility of 'filtering the turbid current of popular opinion through various modes of deliberation and counsel'.¹⁴ They were duty-bound to prevent 'any collision between the King and people', both checking overmighty executives, but also 'intemperate innovation' from below.¹⁵ Whigs carried the responsibility of searching the people out, of listening to just demands for change, of offering assistance. They were to manage and orchestrate reform.

To fall down on this duty carried terrible risks. The people, if unsupervised, might wander into inappropriate paths, led astray by any passing and plausible demagogue. The *Edinburgh Review*, in 1810, reminded Grey and the whig leadership of this point:

If the Whigs are not supported by the people, they can have no support, and therefore, if the people are seduced away from them, they must go after them and bring them back; and are no more to be excused for leaving them to be corrupted by demagogues, than they would be for leaving them to be oppressed by tyrants.¹⁶

In a world of Spenceans, Hampden Clubs and Orator Hunt, it was more than ever necessary for the whigs to be busy. As Francis Baring observed, whigs 'in bad times keep alive the sacred flame of freedom, and when the people are roused, stand between the constitution and revolution, and go with the people, but not to extremities'.¹⁷ It was, by historical and contemporary experience, the whig *raison d'être*. This was so obvious to John Allen, who, as Librarian at Holland House, ate and drank at whig expense for the whole of his life, that he contemptuously noted that, should his masters ever lose touch with the people, they would diminish into 'a mere Aristocracy'.¹⁸ In other words, they would simply become no better than their French or German cousins.

What some whigs feared in the early nineteenth century, if indeed fear was an element in their thinking about reform, was that the people were indeed drifting away from them. The awfulness of Peterloo led Grey into momentary self-doubt. He worriedly confided to Brougham that, 'Everything is tending and has been for some time tending, to a complete separation between the higher and lower orders of Society; a state of things which can only end in the destruction of liberty, or in a convulsion which may too

¹⁴ Lord John Russell, *The causes of the French Revolution* (London, 1832), p. 197.

¹⁵ Lord John Russell, *A letter to the Rt Hon. Lord Holland* (London, 1831), pp. 40–1. See also Henry Brougham in the *Edinburgh Review*, 85 (1825), p. 234.

¹⁶ *Edinburgh Review*, 15 (1810), p. 514.

¹⁷ Quoted in J. Leonhard, *Jahrbuch zur Liberalismusforschung*, Jan. 1996, p. 34.

¹⁸ J. Allen to Sir C. Vaughan [1809], All Souls Coll., Oxford, Vaughan MSS. c9/3.

probably produce the same result'.¹⁹ Whigs debated vigorously whether they should sponsor public meetings and petitioning movements, in order to undermine Burdett and Hunt. The younger members of the party were inclined to accuse their elders of too much complacency in this respect. But all were clear that, even if tactics could be a matter of disagreement, whig duty and objectives were unchanged. The people had to be met on their own ground.

Recent history suggested vigorously to the whigs that their immediate antecedents had more than fulfilled this obligation. The events of 1688 were still the model for the whigs of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, still the precedent to follow. It was the supreme example of whigs leading the political nation into constitutional and religious reform. All tory involvement in the establishment of William and Mary on the English throne disappeared into historical fog. Whigs of Russell's generation claimed 1688 as their own. Lord Albemarle, publishing Rockingham's memoirs in 1852 had no doubt of this:

It need hardly be stated that it was to a small body of wealthy landed proprietors that the country is indebted for the Revolution of 1688; that it was *for* the people, and not by the people, that the great measure was accomplished; that both at the time, and afterwards, the nation at large were passive spectators of the struggles made and making in their behalf.²⁰

It was a matter of self-congratulation for the whigs that the whole undertaking had not been 'effected by an indignant and enraged multitude, but was slowly prepared by the most virtuous and best informed amongst the higher and enlightened classes of the people'.²¹ The passing of a century and more did nothing to diminish its value as a lesson to be learnt, and then put into practice. A whig pamphleteer of 1819 was still of the view that, 'The Revolution of 1688 is considered by all wise and eminent statesmen, and by the great mass of the people of this country, as an example of singular value and importance'.²²

After 1688, examples multiplied in whig minds of occasions on which whigs had acted on behalf of the people, and increasingly in active collaboration with them. Whig history was always special pleading, and never more so than in this respect. Tory and radical historians were often aghast at whig claims, but the whigs themselves never doubted. After 1688 came the great crises of the eighteenth century. Richard Watson was proud of the fact that

¹⁹ Grey to Brougham, 25 Aug. 1819: H. Brougham, *The life and times of Henry, Lord Brougham* (Edinburgh, 1871), II, pp. 342-3.

²⁰ Lord Albemarle, *Memoirs of the Marquess of Rockingham and his contemporaries* (London, 1852), II, pp. 92-3.

²¹ Anon., *A short defence of the whigs* (London, 1819), p. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

John Wilkes, while criminal in his manipulation of a 'senseless popularity beneath the notice of genuine Whiggism', was yet recognized by the whigs as the champion of a just cause.²³ It was a matter of distinction that whigs had been prominent in movements to relieve religious dissidents and to emancipate slaves. In America, in India, even in Poland and Corsica, whigs had spoken and written in support of popular causes.

Above all, their performance in the 1790s was worthy of all praise. Whigs of the early nineteenth century never tired of intoning the glories of the martyrology of those years. According to this myth, the people, by petition and organization, had tried in these years to call for change. Pitt's government responded with all the brutality of the law. In response, whigs did what they could to help the victimized. Thomas Erskine defended Hardy and Tooke in their trial free of charge. Fox, Sheridan, and others gave character references for Arthur O'Connor. Fox also had supper with Muir and Palmer in the hulks on the evening before their transportation to Australia. Whigs saved the lives of some radical leaders and symbolically showed solidarity with others. Famously, in 1798, Fox joined Tooke and other radicals at a dinner where the famous, or infamous, toast of 'Our Sovereign Lord the People' was given.

All this came at a cost. Whig association with radicals allowed their opponents to accuse them of being irresponsible revolutionaries, and, in their kind remarks about Americans and Frenchmen, unnaturally un-English. Fox and many of his followers had little or no experience of government. Their careers were frosted. Whig doctors could not find patients, nor whig lawyers briefs. They were sometimes at loggerheads with their families, and sometimes disinherited. Yet they never abandoned the duty to talk to radicals and to suggest amendment. In the next generation, the Hollands made a point of inviting Burdett and Hazlitt to dinner. Such invitations were not always accepted, but at least they were persistently offered. According to whig hagiography, the party paid dearly for its contacts with the people and its representatives, but never allowed this to divert it from its well-defined mission. Typically, in 1795, the Whig Club passed a declaration which bravely reaffirmed that, 'The Constitution of Great Britain is established on the consent and affection of the People, and can only rest, with dignity and safety, on those genuine foundations of all social authority'.²⁴ There was courage here, as well as historical calculation.

After all, contact with the people was not simply a matter of speeches and philosophizing. There was also stink, public insobriety and familiarities that

²³ *Anecdotes of the life of Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff*, p. 34.

²⁴ *Declaration and form of association recommended by the Whig Club* (London, 1795), p. 2.

shocked foreign visitors. Sometimes, whigs complained that they were asked to put up with a great deal for very little recompense. When Holland protested about the radicals' 'ingratitude & distrust towards the Whigs',²⁵ he was merely rehearsing a theme that permeated the writings of his party. Yet they persevered. The people at election times took whigs away from their palaces in the West End of London and marooned them in small country towns. The Bessboroughs, for example, enjoyed great influence in St Albans if they chose to keep it up, but the social cost was high. Hertfordshire is not too far from Piccadilly, but Lady Bessborough's letters suggest a gulf that went beyond mere geography:

My brother sent to me to beg I would come here to do civilities for him, but more to attend a morning ball and visit some freeholders' wives, whom he wanted to please. Conceive being dress'd out as fine as I could at eleven o'clock in the morning, squeez'd into a hot assembly room at the Angel Inn, cramming fifty old Aldermen and their wives with hot rolls and butter, while John and Fred danced with the Misses, playing at fourpenny Commerce and tradille, and then visiting all about the gay town of St Albans. Can you boast of any thing to surpass this?²⁶

Whig men were manhandled by the people, and whig women kissed the people's lips. The Duchess of Devonshire and Lady Caroline Lamb drank with the people, and outdrank the people, in alehouses. They were jostled and freely addressed. When Lady Granville was confronted by a man who asked after her husband's health with the words, 'G. d—n you, how is Granville today?', she had to admit that, 'it is difficult to meet this sort of fire and spirit in conversation with any degree of success'.²⁷

Inevitably, cartoonists took full advantage of the spectacle. There was an irresistible fascination in watching people, whose every instinct was for social exclusion, mingling with the crowd because history had given them a duty to do so. At the same time that whiggery rolled out more and more social barbed wire, in terms of dress, accent and style of living, to ward off intruders, they not only trumpeted the rights of the people, but also engaged in mutual backslapping. The humour in the situation was all too obvious, and not least to the whigs themselves. In December 1829, Sydney Smith, for example, wrote to Lord Bathurst as follows:

My next door neighbour is dead, so much the better for he was a perfect devil — but he has left his estate . . . to a little linen draper in a very small town

²⁵ British Library (BL) Add. MSS 51738, f. 22, Holland to Caroline Fox, 3 Nov. 1806.

²⁶ Lady Bessborough to G. Leveson Gower [1794]: *Lord Granville Leveson Gower* (London, 1916), I, pp. 98–9.

²⁷ Lady H. Granville to Lady G. Morpeth, 11 Oct. 1811: F. Leveson Gower, *The letters of Harriet, Countess Granville* (London, 1894), I, p. 23.

in Dorsetshire; and my merchant of linen has 8 grown up sons all brought up to low professions, and they are all coming to live here. What can this be but a visitation of Providence for my Whig principles? This is indeed a severe dose of the People.²⁸

Nevertheless, Melbourne, in the difficult years 1830–4, regularly contacted Burdett and Place to ask them to keep their followers within bounds. Negotiations were no doubt helped by the fact that Place had once been his tailor. Allegedly, Melbourne still owed him money. There was much to be wondered at when social Brahmins actually encountered the people they idolized in print and oratory, but such meetings nevertheless took place. They seemed to have few European parallels.

In fact, whigs were historically condemned to take the people seriously. Ancestor worship was an integral part of their creed. They surrounded themselves with the iconography of great, historical missions, in which their families had taken leading parts. As a French admirer was instructed:

L'histoire déposait en sa faveur. Dans leurs chartres et actes publics, ils voyoient, non les *titres et preuves* de leur liberté... mais ils voyoient les démarcations du Gouvernement légitime tracées par la valeur et la prudence... Le généreux courage, qui s'étoit toujours sévi contre la tyrannie, les animoit. Le sang dont il avoit arrosé la plaine et l'échafaud ne s'effaçoit pas.²⁹

Contemporary politics became the vindication of martyred ancestors. In writing a biography of William, Lord Russell, Lord John Russell acknowledged that, 'it cannot fail to be gratifying to the feelings of a descendant of Lord Russell to record the actions of so worthy an ancestor'.³⁰ So prominent was this family in the securing of English liberties that a birth was a matter of great rejoicing, not only in a personal sense, but also because 'the manufacture of Russells is a public and important concern'.³¹ Beside the Russells always stood the Cavendishes, with a pedigree no less dramatic, that was recorded in a poem entitled *Chatsworth*:

A line illustrious, thy retreats have known,
In whom the HERO, STATESMAN, PATRIOT shone,
Whose Virtue, Wisdom, Honour, Genius, Birth,
Display'd their great hereditary worth.
These are the rays which so conspicuous shine,
And shed their glory, o'er great DEVON'S line.
By these alone, distinguish'd we can see,
The titled Slave, from the Nobility:
Such are the barriers plac'd by Reason's hand,

²⁸ A. Bell, *Sydney Smith* (Oxford, 1980), p. 150.

²⁹ Anon., *Lettre familière d'un whig anglais*, pp. 15–16.

³⁰ Lord John Russell, *The life of William Lord Russell* (London, 1820), preface.

³¹ H. Mackey, *Wit and whiggery* (Washington, 1979), p. 25.

From Anarchy to guard their native land,
 When tyrant Pow'r, or fierce tumultuous Rage,
 Would stain with war and blood th' historic page.³²

Lesser whigs, with no historical endowments, nevertheless claimed the past in other ways. Erskine christened his son Hampden,³³ and was not alone in doing this. After Fox's death in 1806, more boys were given the names Charles James than was perhaps strictly necessary. Toasts at Whig Club and Fox dinners never failed to link the diners with their political ancestors. All whig epitaphs placed the honorand in a long line of heroes who had defended the rights of the people against tyrants. It was an apostolic succession older than the Christian. Chatsworth's garden was adorned by busts of Aristeides and Socrates, as well as Fox and the fifth Duke of Devonshire. Visitors to Holkham in Norfolk were similarly instructed about the owner's place in history. Four panels decorate a magnificent lobby. They depict the deaths of Socrates and Germanicus, the entry of Cosimo di Medici into Florence, and the signing of Magna Carta at Runnymede. In the last, the figure of King John has the face of William IV, while those of the barons standing around have the features of the members of the 1830 government. No words could more eloquently express the whig trusteeship of reform and constitutional change.

The opponents of the whigs were breathless with indignation at their claims that they had, for centuries, taken the hand of the people in the cause of reform and constitutional propriety. Pittites and Tories allowed whigs a history, but not one that they would have relished. Socrates and Aristeides disappeared from view. Instead, a spoof play published in *Fraser's Magazine* had three witches giving political instruction to Lord John Russell. Chanting the slogan,

The monster of discord with faction is big
 Which is christened Reform by its father, the Whig

they then conjured up the shades of Tiberius Gracchus, Catiline, Bonaparte and Oliver Cromwell by the way of offering models of behaviour. To make the point more firmly, they then turned Russell into Cromwell, as cartoonists had Fox in the previous generation.³⁴ Whig association with the people was nothing but ambition mounted on popularity. Sometimes the ruse succeeded, and a Bonaparte or Cromwell could build arbitrary government in the people's name. Sometimes it failed, and the Gracchii would then be torn apart by the people whose claims they trumpeted. To anti-whig writers, the whole spectacle was unedifying and unnatural.

³² Anon., *Chatsworth: a poem* (London, n.d.), p. 20.

³³ Bodleian Library (Bod. Lib.), Oxford, MS. Eng. Misc., e 888 f. 40.

³⁴ *Fraser's Magazine*, 3 (1831), p. 496.

Disraeli was not alone in accusing the whigs of being so free with their favours that they effectively had put themselves outside the nation. They were beyond legitimate, political consideration. This patronage of demagogues was to be set alongside their friendship for Irish and American rebels and for French revolutionaries. By perverse instinct, they had 'tried to hoist the tricolour and to cover their haughty brows with a red cap'.³⁵ As a natural minority within politics, whigs had desperately searched out allies anywhere. Mongrel-coupling was their inevitable fate. According to *Blackwood's*, in 1825,

Ever since the days of Fox, our Whig and other friends of the 'liberal system' have been addressing themselves principally and almost exclusively to the lower orders. They have passed by the better classes — the educated people — in scorn and have called upon the poor and the ignorant — the *uneducated people* — to decide on the most intricate constitutional questions, and the most complicated matters of general policy.³⁶

The Reform Bill of 1832 was a case in point. Only an alliance with radicals would give them a parliamentary majority. Reform was the price of such an alliance, and so the whigs became reformers. As Disraeli bluntly put it: 'in the present instance they became sincerely parliamentary reformers, for by Parliamentary reform they could alone subsist'.³⁷

It was an horrendous spectacle to tory eyes. Whiggery's excursions into the gutter, its unrestrained *nostalgie de la boue*, left it besmirched and defiled. David Robinson, one of the most effective anti-whig propagandists of the early nineteenth century, made this point often:

That man, be he the most rigid of Tories, must have a heart formed of very strange materials, who can now look at Whiggism, and not compassionate its wretchedness. The blooming damsel who shone forth in so much fascinating loveliness in 1688, sacrificed her virtue in the French Revolution, and her subsequent adventures and present condition prove that she had drunk the cup of misery which seduction offers, even to the very dregs. She fell successively to the blandishments of Buonaparte, of the Radicals, of the Liberals, of the Carbonari, of the Benthamites, of any sooty body, and she is now sunk so low as to be rejected by all.³⁸

Such writers characterized the new government of 1830 as the whig coalition with Captain Swing.³⁹ The whig association with the people was bogus from beginning to end. It did not spring from a genuine or well-intentioned wish to promote change, but rather from a wish to end years of proscription at any

³⁵ B. Disraeli, *The Runnymede letters* (London, 1936), II, p. 46.

³⁶ *Blackwood's Magazine*, 17 (1825), p. 534.

³⁷ Disraeli, *Runnymede*.

³⁸ *Blackwood's Magazine*, 16 (1824), p. 540.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 (1831), pp. 962–3.

price, even that of handing over power to the worst kind of demagogues and populists.

What made matters even worse, in tory eyes, was the sheer incongruity of whigs and radicals side by side. Whiggery was a caste system of great depth and complexity, and yet it caroused with the gutter. Tories bitterly noted that:

aristocratic feelings...in the Whigs...created an anomaly, and involved, if ever traced fairly up to their source, two contradictory and hostile principles. A proud and exclusive temper, a demeanour somewhat haughty and reserved, a devotion to the interests of particular families, a great deference to the accident of birth, were scarcely reconcilable with that extreme attachment to the spirit and practice of the democratic parts of our government which they so loudly proclaimed.⁴⁰

At the same time that whigs commented adversely on the low social origins of a Canning or Peel, they were apparently happy to consort with the rabble. For tories, this eclecticism was bewildering and more than a little unfair. It also created doubt about the whig definition of 'the people'. They claimed that the term referred to the country's intelligence and property, but could this be believed if they also disparaged the middle classes and chose to spend their evenings in taverns?

Tories trying to make sense of this behaviour could only grind their teeth at the stupidity of it. Whigs seemed incapable of understanding that, following the line they did, they must in the end bring about their own demise. The people must inevitably destroy aristocracy sooner or later. In private, they talked 'the most haughty and conservative language', and expatiated on 'the imminent danger to the holders of property', but in public all was different:

listen to these Whig aristocrats on the hustings, or at public meetings; you will hear nothing but the necessity of yielding to public opinion, the growing importance and vast intelligence of the people, the irresistible weight of their voice, the paramount sway which they have acquired in the Constitution.⁴¹

The absurd incongruity of it all was staggering. According to the tories, whigs were quite right to see fellow-feeling in Lafayettes and Talleyrands, aristocrats who had made a lively contribution to the destruction of the system that had nourished them. It was matter for the novelist as well as the politician. Trollope, in *Phineas Finn*, was moved to describe 'as gallant a phalanx of Whig peers as ever were got together to fight against the instincts of their own order in compliance with the instincts of those below them'.⁴²

⁴⁰ Sir J. Walsh, *On the present balance of parties in the state* (London, 1832), p. 22.

⁴¹ *Blackwood's Magazine*, 35 (1834), p. 79.

⁴² A. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, ch. 10.

Some Tories credited Whigs with the belief that they could regulate the pace of change, and indeed that they could apply the brake if it went too far or too fast, but this was self-deception. W. C. Roscoe angrily referred to 'the childish way in which the Whigs say they can give a large impetus to democratic tendencies and stop them when they choose'. It made him 'long to whip them like foolish little boys'.⁴³ The penetrating intelligence of Tocqueville had reached the same conclusion, if in a more measured way. By 1835, he thought that the people had the Whigs by the throat:

For a century and a half the Whigs have played with the British Constitution, they believe that the game can continue, but the machine is worn and should be handled with discretion. They have talked of equality and freedom at a time when the people had a vague instinct, not a clear practical idea of these two things; they used it to come to power, and then left society almost in the state in which they found it. This experience of the past deceives them, and they believe they can do the same thing in a century when these same conceptions of freedom and liberty have taken clear shape in the idea of certain laws. After all the *Whigs* are only a fragment of the aristocratic party; they have long used democracy as a tool, but the tool has become stronger than the hand that guides it.⁴⁴

On this analysis, Whig cooperation with the people was only sustainable while popular demands lacked clarity and self-consciousness. Once these qualities were in place, Whiggery was redundant. Poignantly, Lord John Russell must have entertained a similar opinion when he privately confessed to a close friend that he feared that the Reform Bill would destroy the Whig Party.⁴⁵

There was much truth in the Tory description of the Whig cavortings with the people. It was indeed a strange spectacle, and Whiggery would have no place in a democratic future. But to argue only this is to miss the essential point. Even if Whig values were at a discount by 1850 or 1886 or 1914, they had, in the crucial years between 1760 and 1832, been of supreme importance. English radicalism, had, to some extent, been influenced in its tactics and views by the mere existence of Whiggery. The English radical always had friends, real or pretended, at the very heart of the political elite. He had no reason to feel marginalized, or that his cause would not receive a parliamentary hearing. Counterfactually, if no Whig party had existed, it is surely possible to argue that a straight fight between Orator Hunt and Lord Eldon, or even Robert Peel and Francis Burdett, would have been altogether much

⁴³ W. C. Roscoe to R. H. Hutton, 1859: Anon., *Poems and essays by the late William Caldwell Roscoe* (London, 1860), p. 64.

⁴⁴ J. Mayer, *Journeys to England and Ireland* (London, 1958), p. 80.

⁴⁵ Lord John Russell to Melbourne, 9 Sept. 1837: Public Record Office (PRO), Russell MSS., 30/22/2F XC 10466, f. 73.

less decorous. It is no disgrace in a party to have once done good service, but then to be made extinct by a change in the political climate. When the moment came, whigs exited gracefully.

Mischievously, from a whig viewpoint, radicals too often echoed some or all of these tory criticisms. Being unpleasant about whigs was an essential aspect of the phenomenon known as tory radicalism. Though whigs and radicals had, by 1830, at least fifty years of co-operation in lobbying and voting, the latter rarely showed the gratitude the former expected. In 1836, J. S. Mill brutally concluded that whigs 'were accepted by the Reformers as leaders because they offered themselves, and because there was nobody else'.⁴⁶ Clearly, whigs were useful in the sense of providing money and expertise, but there was always a feeling among radicals that they should be kept at arm's length. No radical, according to Hazlitt, should become 'a dangler after lords', and all of them should beware of 'the painted booths of the Whig Aristocracy'.⁴⁷ He himself sedulously declined dinner invitations for fear of contamination.

By 1841, after the experience of the Grey and Melbourne governments, many radicals gave whiggery up as an ally from whom real results could be expected, but this sense of distance was being expressed by the *Westminster Review* as early as 1824. James Mill there noted that,

vague phrases, though of no service to the people, are admirably suited to the purpose of the Whigs; which is, to please the people, just as far as is consistent with not alarming the aristocracy. A well-turned rhetorical sentence asserting popular supremacy, is expected to be grateful to the ears of many among the people . . . But if they require anything tangible — if they ask what they are to get by this boasted sovereignty, it calls them radicals and democrats, who wish for the annihilation of property, and the subversion of the social order.⁴⁸

Alongside instances of whig helpfulness were memories of whig hauteur. In the 1790s, Horne Tooke was defended against Pittite persecution, but he was rejected as a running mate for Fox in the Westminster election of 1796. Melbourne was fond of Brougham and made him one of the executors of his will, but none of that led him to think him a fit member of a cabinet. The self-abasement required as the price of whig friendship was often too hard to learn.

Like so many tory critics, radicals accused the whigs of using them to win power only. Once in office, they forgot all radical claims, and settled down to some serious patronage-grazing. Sir William Molesworth observed that although the whigs 'had professed the most Radical doctrines and given the most democratic votes', and although they 'had been placed in power by

⁴⁶ Leonhard, *Liberalismusforschung*, p. 37.

⁴⁷ W. Henley, *The collected works of William Hazlitt* (London, 1902), vii, p. 376.

⁴⁸ *Westminster Review*, 1 (1824), p. 506.

the cry of union of reformers', they had almost immediately restricted politics to the distribution of 'emoluments'.⁴⁹ Joseph Parkes, fuming at the inactivity of the Melbourne government, denounced the whigs as 'an unnatural party standing between the People and the Tory aristocracy — chiefly for the pecuniary value of the offices and the vanity of power. Their hearse is ordered'.⁵⁰ Radical figures born within whiggery, like Grey's son-in-law Durham, were neutralized by being sent off to St Petersburg or Ontario. Radical leaders born outside the caste had not the slightest chance of ever being accepted within it. It seemed that whig words were welcoming and offered much. Whig government produced little or nothing.

Like tory critics again, therefore, radical writers accused the whigs of turning hypocrisy into art. They spoke of the rights of the people, but could be shocked by any low-born pretension. In 1820, a certain Dick Spooner announced his intention of standing for Warwickshire. The news sent the Lyttelton family into panic. A Birmingham manufacturer might possibly be accepted as the representative of a borough constituency, but it was out of the question that such a man should offer himself for a county seat. This was 'Brummidjam impudence'. It raised the possibility that the traditional knights of the shire were to be overtaken by men with 'plated spurs'.⁵¹ The whig offer to help and guide the people was made on the understanding that the people should not take initiatives themselves. This did not necessarily cast doubt on the sincerity of the whigs in wishing to help, but these were terms that radicals and reformers found unacceptable. Roebuck, in 1835, believed that 'reform would never go boldly forward until the Whigs had been pushed back among the Tories, since, after all, they were but a modified offshoot of the Tories'.⁵² Accordingly, radicals joined tories in denouncing whiggery as deceitful and only ambitious for office. To both groups, politics would have been so much less fuzzy if whiggery had not existed. But it did exist, and it had to be taken account of. Its presence gave British politics a unique dimension.

Reform in the 1830s, therefore, had a special character, because it was under whig management. Tocqueville, trying to describe the nature of change in England, was reduced to discussing political moods. The whigs, he wrote, 'have instincts rather than definite opinions in favour of reform; they let themselves be carried along without resistance by the spirit of the age which goes that way . . . they keep marching day by day without knowing too much

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 26 (1837), p. 153.

⁵⁰ J. Parkes to F. Place, 2 Jan. 1836, quoted in W. E. S. Thomas, *The philosophic radicals* (Oxford, 1979), p. 289.

⁵¹ W. H. Lyttelton to Lady S. Lyttelton, 16 Oct. 1820: H. Wyndham, *The correspondence of Sarah Spencer, Lady Lyttelton* (London, 1912), p. 230.

⁵² Mayer, *Journeys*, p. 84.

about where the road they follow will end'.⁵³ What he should have gone on to say was that these 'instincts' were the product of a particular history, and not chance or random products of a particular situation. For decades, whigs had claimed to lead the people. The idea had become part of their self-identification, and it carried them along in the Reform Bill debates. Many cabinet ministers were the most reluctant of reformers, but they justified their votes by reference to prescription. Grey asserted that reform must come because it was in accordance with 'the wants and wishes of the people'.⁵⁴ Sir James Mackintosh urged his fellow whigs to 'do now what our forefathers, though rudely, aimed at doing, by calling into the national councils every rising element in the body politic'.⁵⁵ Melbourne, who personally disliked change of any kind, was always moved, paradoxically, by vague feelings that the people desired this or that, which factor, in his mind, decided any matter.⁵⁶ He was far from being alone in following a line of politics that directly contradicted his own preferences. History dictated them. When Grey retired, in July 1834, Samuel Rogers properly put his career into historical focus:

Grey, thou hast served, and well, the sacred cause
That Hampden, Sydney died for. Thou hast stood
Scorning all thought of Self, from first to last
Among the foremost in that glorious field.⁵⁷

The Reform Bill debates rehearsed long-standing themes. Tories continued to marvel at whigs acting against their own instincts and interests. Radicals continued to complain that whig sympathy was never genuine, and never enough. It seemed, they insisted, that the whigs, 'in making their party professions of identity with the people . . . were afraid of being taken by the people at their word'.⁵⁸ No account of 1832 was more grudging than Sir William Molesworth's. The whigs

had long been excluded from office, and had connected themselves most intimately with the people, they frequently gave utterance to the most liberal opinions, and for a considerable period had advocated a reform in Parliament: to the amazement of all, to the regret of many of them, by a strange combination of events, they found that their demand was complied with.⁵⁹

There is much truth in this description, but Molesworth should have added that, given every qualification he might make, reform did take place and under whig patronage.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ E. A. Wasson, *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), p. 460.

⁵⁵ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, III, p. 549.

⁵⁶ *Parl. Hist.*, 7 (1831), pp. 1177-86.

⁵⁷ P. W. Clayden, *Samuel Rogers and his contemporaries* (London, 1889), II, p. 101.

⁵⁸ *New Monthly Magazine*, 32 (1831), p. 160.

⁵⁹ *Westminster Review*, 26 (1837), p. 157.

In August 1810, Lord John Russell, who had largely grown up at Holland House, was yet again given a lesson in whiggery by Lord Holland himself. He was told that it was 'essential in a good Whig' that he should have 'a certain disposition to Reform of Parliament and no alarm at it if the present mode be found to be inadequate to ensure the confidence and enforce the will of the people'.⁶⁰ Forty years later, Bagehot took up the idea that whiggery was 'a disposition':

In truth Whiggism is not a creed, it is a character. Perhaps as long as there have been certain men of a cool, moderate resolute firmness, not gifted with high imagination, little prone to enthusiastic sentiment, heedless of large theories and speculations, careless of dreamy scepticism; with a clear view of the next step, and a wise intention to act on it; with a strong conviction that the elements of knowledge are true, and a steady belief that the present world can, and should be, quietly improved. These are the Whigs.⁶¹

No doubt, men of this disposition could be found in every European country. Unfortunately, the predisposition to foster change had not been channelled, by historical convenience, into association with the people. Too often they had, instead, promoted their aims as the friends and servants of autocrats. Whiggery, by contrast, detested a single focus of power. Rulers were to be feared more than the people, who thereby became allies. Whiggery, as a disposition, contributed greatly to the character of reform, and determined its shape and nature. Whigs expressed this purpose with a pleasing lack of self-consciousness. In 1796, Joseph Jekyll reported to Lord Lansdowne that Erskine was correcting and polishing addresses coming out of Thelwall's meetings. He went on proudly to approve this behaviour, because, by it, 'we shall quench their revolutionary Projects — by moulding and moderating them to general political Purposes'.⁶²

⁶⁰ Holland to Lord John Russell, 13 Aug. 1810: R. Russell, *The early correspondence of Lord John Russell* (London, 1913), I, p. 137.

⁶¹ *National Review*, 1, (1855) p. 262.

⁶² J. Jekyll to Lord Lansdowne, 14 Nov. 1796, Bod. Lib. MS Film 2004, f. 76.