The Idea of Reform in British Politics, 1829–1850*

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I

ALMOST ALL RECENT HISTORIANS of the period 1829 to 1850 habitually, and as a matter of course, describe many of its laws and its private initiatives as 'reforms'. The Reform Bill of 1832 always has a special place in their accounts, and the word 'Reform', standing alone and with a capital letter, is understood as meaning parliamentary reform; but the term is applied also without hesitation to measures such as Catholic emancipation, the Metropolitan Police Act, the abolition of slavery, the Irish Church Temporalities Act, the New Poor Law, the reduction of capital punishment, the Bank Charter Act, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Ten Hours Act and the Public Health Act; and with these laws are commonly bracketed certain changes that were not imposed by parliament, especially in education, for example the churches' campaign to build schools and Cambridge University's partial modernization of its curriculum in 1850. Some of these laws and social developments are regularly referred to as 'social reforms'. Further, 'reform' in the singular, standing on its own and probably without a capital letter, is nowadays frequently used to embrace all these laws and developments, as in E. L. Woodward's volume in the old *Oxford history of England* entitled *The age of reform*.[1] In this formulation a sub-set of generalized reform is called 'social reform'.

When I agreed to give this paper, my intention was to discuss the idea of

* Most of the text of this paper and the main thrust of its argument remain unchanged since I delivered it to the Reform conference on 27 September 1997. But in the discussion after the paper it was pointed out that I had revealed almost complete ignorance of an important strand of the discourse on reform in my period, namely that of the Owenites. I am most grateful to Professor G. Claeys and Dr E. Royle, who not only made this point but proceeded, with great generosity, to pass on to me a number of references which have enabled me to take some account of this usage. See pp. 170–2 below. I also owe thanks to Dr J. P. Parry and Professor G. Stedman Jones, who kindly read and commented on earlier versions.

[1] 2nd edn, Oxford, 1962.

reform that inspired, influenced and was embodied in these various developments, and then to consider the relationship between the idea and the reality of reform. But, as I read the sources of the period, I began to notice that, in many contexts where modern historians naturally use the word 'reform', contemporaries did not. (Whenever I use 'contemporary' and 'contemporaries' in this paper, I shall always be referring to the period between 1829 and 1850 and to persons who were alive at that time, and when I use 'modern' I shall mean 'twentieth century'.) It became apparent that the meaning of the word 'reform' had changed between the early Victorian period and the present day, not totally, but significantly, and more than I had realized. To my further surprise, I have not been able to find in the scholarly literature any extended discussion of the *idea* or meaning of reform in its application to Britain between 1829 and 1850, or indeed at other dates. I am speaking of the idea of reform in general. There exists of course a large and impressive corpus on the idea of parliamentary reform with special reference to the Reform Bill of 1832,[2] and another one on the ideas that inspired and influenced social reform.[3] What appears to be lacking is a survey of the history of the concept of reform as employed in the English language comparable with the discussion of German usage which is to be found in the article 'Reform' in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.[4] You might expect to find something in the *Encyclopaedia of the social sciences*. But the recent version of that work offers no articles on any topics falling alphabetically between 'Reference groups' and 'Refugees'. The version published in the 1930s is slightly more helpful: it contains an article 'Reformation' entirely devoted to religion, followed by a brief article 'Reformism' by H. M. Kellen. This latter piece begins reasonably enough, declaring for example that 'the reformer operates on parts where the revolutionist operates on wholes'. But it contains also this slashing passage:

> Sheer reformism [whatever that might be]... goes, as a rule, with psychopathic traits of the personality, of the kind commonly to be observed in official and volunteer censors, in spelling reformers, in professional patriots, and in similar riders of hobbies which give the impression of being compulsive.[5]

[2] N. Gash, *Politics in the age of Peel* (London, 1953); M. G. Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (London, 1973) and J. Cannon, *Parliamentary reform, 1640–1832* (Cambridge, 1973) remain fundamental. Valuable recent discussions are I. Newbould, *Whiggery and reform, 1830–41* (London, 1990) and J. Parry, *The rise and fall of Liberal government in Victorian Britain* (London, 1993).

[3] Perhaps the most compendious general account is in J. P. C. Roach, *Social reform in England, 1780–1880* (London, 1978), though, like virtually every other discussion, it shows little interest in contemporary usage of 'social reform'.

[4] O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck, eds, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (8 vols, 1972–97), v (1984), esp. pp. 340–60.

[5] R. A. Seligman, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the social sciences* (15 vols, London, 1930-5), XIII, pp. 194–5.

The best discussion that I know in English is the entry in Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, but it is only brief.[6] What I am going to try to do is to survey and characterize the idea of reform in contemporary usage and then to suggest some possible wider implications of my findings.

In the writings and speeches of the period 1829 to 1850 'reform', as now, was both noun and verb. Among its derivatives 'reformer' was common and 'reformist', with virtually the same meaning, fairly common; but 'reformism', according to the *Oxford English dictionary*, was unknown before the twentieth century, when it appeared in the context of debates within socialism.[7] 'Reform' was of course mentioned and discussed *ad nauseam* during the period, at least in certain contexts, and I have been able only to scratch the surface of the huge materials available. But I hope, on the basis of a limited selection of sources, and with the help of other scholars, to have arrived at a fair impression of contemporary usage; or at least to have reached the point where I can justifiably challenge some assumptions of modern writing.

My first and unsurprising conclusion is that, then as now, if the word was unqualified by an adjective or its context, and especially if it had a capital R, it almost invariably meant *parliamentary* reform, or at any rate constitutional reform; and people wishing to speak of other types of reform had to put an adjective in front of the word. From the time when the first Reform Bill was presented to the Commons in May 1831 the word 'Reform' often referred simply to that or to its aims and/or to its effects. I should make the obvious point that the phrase 'the Reform Bill', which has established itself permanently in the language, is an odd one. 'The Reform Bill' was never an official or accurate title. In the first place, there were separate bills for England and Wales, for Scotland and for Ireland, all of which became acts in 1832. The formula 'the Reform Bill' sometimes seems to refer to the whole package of the three acts and sometimes just to the act for England and Wales. This last, the most important and best known of the three acts, was headed 'An act to amend the representation of the people in England and Wales' — that is, 'the People' got in on the act, but 'Reform' did not — and the text talks of 'correcting divers abuses' and 'extending the Elective Franchise', but never of reform. The Scottish act of the same year has the title, 'Representation of the people (Scotland) act', and talks of amending

[6] R. Williams, *Keywords* (Glasgow, 1976), pp. 221–2. The growing literature on the use of political language in the period 1750–1850, though a stimulus to this sort of research, has not yet, so far as I know, seriously attacked 'reform'. See e.g. O. Smith, *The politics of language, 1791–1819* (Oxford, 1984); M. Weinzierl, *Freiheit, Eigentum und keine Gleichheit* (Munich, 1993); D. Wahrman, *Imagining the middle class: the political representation of class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995).

[7] It must surely have arrived a little sooner, as Williams suggests (ibid. p. 222), but in any case it is irrelevant to my paper.

that representation, but it too fails to mention reform. I have not, incidentally, found the word 'reform' in the title or text of any well-known contemporary act of parliament.

Furthermore, the struggle for the bill loomed so large in people's minds that the members of the parliamentary coalition formed by Earl Grey in 1830 between whigs of various kinds, former tories of various kinds and some Irish and radical MPs were usually designated not by the old party names but as Reformers. 'Reformer' clearly signified parliamentary reformer, supporter of the Reform Bill, rather than an advocate of reform in a general sense — though of course it is the case that persons in favour of the Reform Bill were more likely to be proponents of further changes than were its enemies, that many supporters of the bill confidently expected it to lead to other changes, and that some supported it only for that reason. It was not until after the break-up of the reforming ministry and coalition in 1834–5 that the term 'Liberal' gradually displaced 'Reformer' as the designation for the party as a whole.[8]

The understanding that 'Reform' with a capital R continued to mean parliamentary reform, especially the settlement of 1832, is also to be found in modern usage. But the proportional weight of parliamentary reform in the meaning of the word was much greater then than it is now, because, first, there were many types of what we call reform that were seldom so styled by contemporaries, and secondly, 'reform' in the singular was seldom or never used on its own to embrace the full range of reforms. On the other hand, 'reform' was used, even in talking about parliamentary reform, relatively less frequently and in a less broad sense than we would use it. The Six Points of the Chartists are all parliamentary reforms to us, but they were rarely so described by the Chartists, and then probably as 'Radical Reform'. The word 'reform' figures nowhere in their petition of 1842.[9] This is one of many contexts where contemporaries seem to be deliberately avoiding the word. They could easily do so, since they had at their disposal a vast battery of alternative words which could mean something very like reform, many of which we no longer employ in this sense. The commonest of all, I think, is 'improvement'; and Lord Briggs's title *The age of improvement*[10] is closer to the language of the period than Woodward's *The age of reform*. But here is a list of other words that I have found doing duty for what we call reform: 'amelioration', 'melioration', 'amendment', 'modification', 'correction', 'innovation', 'promotion', 'reformation', 'renovation', 'restoration', 'remedy', 'regulation', 'relaxation', 'relief', 'redress', 're-edification', 'regeneration', 'reconstruction', 'reorganization', 'restructuring'. Moving a little

[8] Parry, *Rise and fall of Liberal government*, pp. 130–1 and n. 11 on p. 353.
[9] Cf. D. Thompson, ed., *The early Chartists* (London, 1971), p. 55.
[10] London, 1959.

further away from the normal meaning of reform, there are 'repeal', 'removal', 'abridgment', 'concession', 'interference', 'intervention', and 'interposition'. Many of these words were applied to parliamentary reform, while some were appropriate only to other types of what we call reform. Here are just two examples: the Chartist petition of 1842, shunning 'reform', talks of 'amendment', 'remedy', and 'removal'; Disraeli in *Coningsby* normally treats 'reform' as something to deplore or scoff at, whereas changes that he applauds he calls 'reconstruction'.

To continue for a moment destructively, there are many other contexts in which I had expected 'reform' to be used and rarely or never found it. Sir George Cornewall Lewis's *Remarks on the use and abuse of some political terms*, a compilation with a high reputation in its day, has no discussion whatever of reform. Perhaps this is not so surprising in view of its other omissions, such as political parties, but the book was first published in the very year 1832.[11] I have looked again through many standard modern studies of what are now universally known as reforms — other than parliamentary. Their authors repeatedly call them so, but their quotations from contemporary sources seldom or never contain that word. This is true for example of S. E. Finer's *Life and times of Sir Edwin Chadwick*,[12] in which the author describes as reforms the changes which his subject promoted, factory regulation, the New Poor Law, public health legislation and so forth, but the sources he quotes hardly use the word. Chadwick himself rarely employed it, and the first use I have found of the phrase 'sanitary reform' is in *The Times* of 1847. The same applies to Royston Lambert on *Sir John Simon and English social administration*,[13] to David Roberts's *Victorian origins of the welfare state*[14] and to W. C. Lubenow's *The politics of government growth*.[15] In Lubenow's chapter on the New Poor Law, which he describes as a reform, he quotes no contemporary who gives it that appellation, while citing two who call it a revolution, Nassau Senior because

[11] Lewis's book has been reprinted with an introduction by C. F. Mullett (Columbia, 1970). I am grateful to one of those who came up to me after I had given my paper — I am sorry that in the *mêlée* I did not take a note of who it was — for a reference to D. Urquhart, *Familiar words as affecting the character of Englishmen and the fate of England* (London, 1855) and what amounts to its second, much expanded edition of 1856 entitled *The effect of the misuse of familiar words on the character of men and the fate of nations*. There is no entry for 'reform' in the first edition, but 'Reform and Remedy' occupies pp. 326–30 of the second. It is not so much an attempt to define reform as a violent attack on the movement for parliamentary reform: 'Reform and Remedy are terms antithetical... Reform was a delusion, and Reformers sycophants.' This no doubt represents in strident form the views of some radicals, but it seems not to merit discussion here, especially since it was published after the end of my period.

[12] London, 1952.

[13] London, 1963.

[14] New Haven, 1960.

[15] Newton Abbot, 1971. See for the next sentence pp. 39, 51.

he approves of it and Disraeli because he loathes it. The most remarkable instance I have found is J. T. Ward's *The factory movement*,[16] in which he classes the acts of 1833 and 1847, and other lesser or attempted measures, all as reforms, successful or failed as the case may be. But his numerous quotations virtually never do so. It is a frustrating characteristic of the literature that 'reform' is practically never indexed, but Ward's book is an exception: he supplies an index entry under each of the major participants, Fielden, Oastler and Shaftesbury, for their connection with 'industrial reform'. Scores of pages are cited in these entries, but on only one of them is a contemporary quoted as actually calling for 'reform'. This was the apocalyptic J. R. Stephens, who said in 1839: 'If they will not reform this, aye uproot it all, they shall have the revolution they so much dread' (p. 183). Even this reference is dubious, because it seems from the context that he might in fact have been thinking of the New Poor Law, or the situation of the poor in general, rather than of factories, as in need of 'reform'. Another activist did say in 1833: '[Factory regulation] will be [carried] by the People adopting the same means as ensured the passing of the Reform Bill, by an extensive combination of the physical and moral power of the PEOPLE' (p. 99). But that is neither to applaud the Reform Bill itself nor to identify factory legislation with reform. The most telling quotation of all is introduced by Ward with this sentence: 'Oastler urged that factory reform should dominate everything.' Yet this is what Oastler actually said: 'Don't be deceived! You will hear the cries of "No Slavery", "Reform", "Liberal principles", "No Monopoly", &c. But let your cries be — 'No Yorkshire Slavery", "No Slavery in any part of the Empire", "No factory mongers", "No factory monopolists". Thus, what Ward calls 'factory reform' is explicitly set by Oastler over against what he calls 'reform', which is seen as a deceiving, whig cry. The two organizations set up to fight for factory regulation were called the Factory Reformation Society and the National Regeneration Society. Neither *The Times* nor any of the great quarterlies published articles entitled 'factory reform', though they often addressed the problem under other headings. It cannot be accidental that 'reform' was so little used in this connection.

My final negative point concerns the phrase 'social reform'. Despite the freedom with which historians have applied it to the period, I have found no example of its use in what might be called upper-class discourse during these years. The first pamphlet in the British Library catalogue whose title contains the phrase was published in 1859 and called *Social versus political reform*. It urged that social reform should be treated as more important than the parliamentary reform bill that was before parliament at the time. Its idea of

[16] London, 1962.

social reform is clarified by its subtitle: *The sin of great cities; or, the great social evil, a national sin.* The only social problem it mentions as needing reform is prostitution. Not a word in the pamphlet suggests that the phrase 'social reform' has any other signification. According to the *Oxford English dictionary*, 'social evil' meant — and indeed still means — prostitution and nothing else. This was not entirely true even in my period,[17] but it was evidently natural to think in those terms in 1859.

II

Now I turn to the constructive side of my story. I shall begin by discussing an article published in *Blackwood's Magazine* early in 1831, evidently before the contents of the first Reform Bill were known; its title is 'Correction, Melioration, Reformation, Revolution'; and it was written by John Herman Merivale.[18] It is unique, so far as I have discovered, in that it discusses the concept of reform in general and compares it with related concepts. Despite the title, 'reform' is more frequently mentioned in it than 'reformation' and they are not really distinguished. The author claims that the four concepts of his title correspond to political options available at the moment. To 'correct' is merely to remedy some defects. To 'meliorate' or improve is to render some existing materials more useful. To reform implies belief in the existence of 'defects too deep-seated, too radically inherent, to be removed, without the previous destruction of that something to which they are attached', or that things 'are so essentially bad as to be incapable of any improvement'. It is wrong, he further claims, to use 'reform' except in the senses of 're-edification', 're-construction'. 'To reform . . . implies that there is something which has been, or must be, previously subverted.' 'Revolution', finally, involves violence and means 'total change in the fundamental laws and institutions of a nation.' What happened in 1688, therefore, was not a revolution, but presumably a reform.[19] This article appears to me exceptionally cool and objective both for its date and for the periodical it appeared in. While it would be absurd to suggest that all users of the word 'reform' had Merivale's fine distinctions in mind, I think it did have for many, especially in the early 1830s, the sense of the greatest change possible short of violent revolution. Further, the article brings out that the word still conveyed, as it

[17] I have found a work called *Social evils and their remedy* (2 vols, London, 1833), by C. B. Tayler, which recommends Christian faith as the remedy for many personal weaknesses, such as hobnobbing with trade unions.

[18] The article is in vol. 29, pp. 593–602. My authority for its authorship is the *Wellesley index of Victorian periodicals*, vol. III.

[19] See J. Burrow, *A liberal descent* (Cambridge, 1981), esp. ch. 2. This work, stimulating though it is, suffers from what seems to me the serious defect of never asking what contemporaries meant by the terms 'liberal' and 'whig'.

scarcely does now, the notion of a return to a pristine or better past. Just as successive church reforms or reformations claimed to revive the practices of the primitive church, so parliamentary reformers claimed that they wished to revert to an old system that had been less corrupt, perhaps in the late middle ages, perhaps in the reign of William III. In making these points Merivale seems to me to contribute to explaining the reluctance of contemporaries to bandy the word 'reform' about too freely, especially in contexts where the problem to be resolved was new, as with factories and the health of towns. The normal modern meaning of reform, a mere 'change for the better', without the implication that a former situation was being restored, had not yet become dominant.

Merivale seems to be thinking only of parliamentary or constitutional change. But the application of 'reform' to other fields had already begun. The titles of works in the British Library catalogue and of articles in the great quarterlies give a crude indication of this development. 'Economical reform' seems to have been forgotten by 1829. Radical reform, on the other hand, was a common expression. It is of course different in character from nearly all the other phrases I am going to cite, in that the adjective does not specify an area of reform but refers to the degree of extremism in advocating reform, meaning usually parliamentary reform. A number of articles appeared early in my period on aspects of law reform. Debate about church reform under that name dates back well before 1829, and in the early years of the period this was clearly the most frequently mentioned brand of reform other than parliamentary. 'Financial reform' is the title of a *Westminster Review* article of 1830 and an article in *Blackwood's* of the following year. But this appears to be the limit of the expansion of the term 'reform' before 1832.

It would be possible to spend a long time on the ideas behind the Reform Bill. I can hardly ignore them but, since historians have already discussed them so much,[20] I shall deal with them summarily. Almost all parliamentarians and persons of social standing regarded the measure proposed in May 1831 as, to say the least, far-reaching — radical with a small r. Its relationship to revolution was the subject of anguished discussion. Grey declared that 'the principle of my Reform is to prevent the necessity for revolution,'[21] and a large number of the bill's supporters echoed him. Brougham tried to sway the House of Lords to support the Reform Bill by urging them that this was the way to perpetuate the constitution.[22] Macaulay famously elaborated

[20] See the works cited in n. 3 above and the useful symposium on 'Political reform in Victorian England' in *Albion*, 12 (1980), esp. E. A. Wasson, 'The spirit of reform, 1832 and 1867', pp. 164–74.

[21] Quoted in Brock, *Great Reform Act*, p. 336.

[22] Quoted in E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (revised edn, Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 901.

the theme. The bill avoided giving 'any violent shock to the institutions of the country'. The constitution must be shown to have within it 'the means of self-reparation'.

> Then will England add to her manifold titles of glory this, the noblest and the purest of all — that every blessing which other nations have been forced to seek, and have too often sought in vain, by means of violent and bloody revolutions, she will have attained by a peaceful and a lawful reform.[23]

Much was said by ministers and their advocates about preserving the just role of the aristocracy, and much also about enfranchising the people, meaning the well-off and intelligent, the middle classes. The measure was certainly less radical than Radical Reformers with a capital R demanded: it did not bring household or manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, shorter parliaments, payment of members, equal electoral districts or the abolition of the House of Lords. On the other hand, any idea that the government was unwilling to make fundamental changes should be dispelled by the declaration of Jeffrey, minister in charge of the bill for Scotland, that 'no shred or rag, no jot or tittle [of the old system] was to be left' standing.[24] The bill's tory opponents said that it overstepped the bounds of reform and amounted itself to revolution, and some others who had supported it came to think it had been too extreme. Lord Fitzwilliam wrote in 1840: 'We have been through one revolution, for now that we can speak of these events historically, it is idle to call by any other name the events of 1830, 31 and 32'.[25] King Leopold of the Belgians declared to Queen Victoria in 1847 that, whereas in the 1830 Revolution in France 'they changed nothing but the dynasty, in 1832 England had abolished the very spirit of the old monarchy'.[26] For almost all the 'parliamentary classes' the Reform Bill was reform at its most extreme, teetering on the verge of revolution, perhaps actually going over the edge.

The drawing of the distinction between reform and revolution led naturally to a consideration of foreign relations and to comparisons such as Macaulay and Leopold drew between the experiences of Britain and of other countries. It was the excesses of the French Revolution that had evoked the coalition of Pitt and Portland in 1792–4 and persuaded many erstwhile reformers not to risk tampering with the British constitution, no doubt delaying reform for decades. The most conspicuous facet of the liberal toryism of the 1820s had been Britain's withdrawal from the congress system and her consequent readiness to support some rebellions against

[23] T. B. Macaulay, *Speeches parliamentary and miscellaneous* (2 vols, London, 1853), pp. 12, 75.
[24] Gash, *Politics in the age of Peel*, p. 38.
[25] J. T. Ward, ed., *Popular movements, c. 1830–1850* (London, 1970), p. 47.
[26] *Letters of Queen Victoria* (3 vols, London, 1908), II, p. 118: Leopold to Victoria, 15 January 1847, from the Tuileries. D. Southgate, *'The most English minister'... Palmerston* (London, 1966), p. 188.

established monarchs. The French revolution of 1830 had had some effect on the parliamentary reform movement in England, making moderate change look more necessary, but more containable and so less alarming. Another article in *Blackwood's*, from the second half of 1833, is of particular interest because it puts an extreme view contrary to that of the reformers, the sort of view for which the magazine was notorious, about the relation between reform and revolution in other countries. It is entitled 'Prussia, or the progress of rational reform' and was written by George Moir, an acolyte of Thomas Carlyle.[27] It takes up the theme of the reformers that only constitutional change could stave off revolution and bring improvement, an argument that they were now applying to the German situation. The author, by contrast, maintains that the revolutions that have recently occurred in German states have taken place precisely in those states where constitutions have been established and concessions made. In Prussia, on the other hand, where a wonderful series of rational reforms has been imposed from above, neither constitution nor revolution has been found necessary. The author thinks that the great error made by regimes is to allow parliaments the right to refuse taxation, 'the instrument of which popular demagogues infallibly avail themselves in order to produce a crisis'. The people are unwise to seek 'the boon of political power — fatal in general to the wearer as the robe of Nessus.' In fortunate Prussia 'the mental and moral character of her subjects' has been 'elevated' by benevolent rulers. Therefore the entire whig theory of reform was false.

This can have been the view of only a small minority in England, but something like it was prevalent among ultra-tories. Such an article helps to put into perspective the Tamworth manifesto — another topic of such importance that it cannot be ignored, and yet hardly needs further elaboration from me.[28] As is well known, at the very end of 1834, after the king had dismissed the government of reformers and put the tories, now renamed Conservatives, in power, Peel announced in this address to his constituents that he accepted the Reform Bill as a final settlement, that he was against reform if it meant 'a perpetual vortex of agitation', but in favour of 'a careful review of institutions, civil and ecclesiastical, undertaken in a friendly temper', of 'the corrrection of proved abuses and the redress of real grievances'. He spoke at length of his readiness to promote church reform in England and Ireland in so far as it tended to enhance the efficiency of the church establishment And he appealed to his own record of supporting 'judicious reforms', especially in the criminal law. Thus in his manifesto Peel espoused almost every type of reform that had so far been christened. He not

[27] Vol. 34, pp. 55–71.

[28] See esp. N. Gash, *Reaction and reconstruction in English politics, 1832–55* (Oxford, 1965) and R. W. Davis, 'Toryism to Tamworth: the triumph of reform', *Albion*, 12 (1980), pp. 132–46.

only tried to steal the whigs' clothes; he also repudiated the toryism of *Blackwood's*. If he was to be believed, reform was now bipartisan; and he did much to persuade people of his sincerity by collaborating with Melbourne's ministry in carrying municipal reform in 1835 after having secured important amendments to the government's plan.

However, the whigs, liberals, radicals and Irish MPs who made up Melbourne's following, which Russell wished to rename 'the Liberal Party', were not prepared to surrender their proprietary right to reform. The foundation of the Reform Club early in 1836 illustrates their attitude. The club was intended as a meeting-place for all supporters of Melbourne's government, and it became so; but it had been a liberal and radical rather than a whig initiative. It was called 'the Reform Club' after a previous attempt to found a 'Liberal Club' with virtually the same agenda had failed. The sole qualification for membership was to be 'proposed as a "Reformer"' (capital R and inverted commas in the original). To count as a 'Reformer' it was only necessary to give general support to Melbourne's government, to be a 'Liberal'. There was no requirement to espouse any particular measure, and of course the party leadership had laid down that the act of 1832 was the final reform of Parliament. This minimal definition of 'Reformer' remained prominent for some years, and was enshrined in the rules and decisions of the club for at least half a century. So the word 'reformer', which in 1831 had been identified with advocacy of a bold measure of constitutional reform, seemed in this usage to have been shorn of ideological content and reduced to a mere party label.[29]

It appeared that, between them, the two great parties had rendered the concept of reform so narrow or anodyne that other words were called for to describe any proposals for significant change. But there was one group that persisted in propagating the notion of continuing reform, the utilitarians and radicals who ran the *Westminster Review*. In 1833 it published a piece on 'corporate reform', in 1834 one on 'Post Office reform', then in 1835 'municipal reform', and in 1837 'military reform'. Even for this group[30] there ensued a gap of eleven years before another new brand of reform was the subject of an article in 1848 — 'road reform'! Then in 1849, vindicating the *Encyclopaedia of the social sciences*, arrived 'spelling reform'. Other periodicals yield little in the way of novelties, from the *Quarterly* only 'Liturgical reform' of 1834, and from the *Edinburgh* 'Poor Law Reform' in 1841 (which was in fact a plea not to reform the New Poor Law), and two

[29] G. Woodbridge, *The Reform Club, 1836–1978* (New York, 1978), chs I–III and Appendix III. I am most grateful to the Librarian of the Reform Club, Mr Simon Blundell, for checking the text of the 1836 rules for me.

[30] But see e.g. W. Molesworth in *London and Westminster Review* 26 (1836–7), pp. 280–318, and J. S. Mill in *Westminster Review*, 32 (1839), pp. 476–7, demanding further reform.

articles on university reform in 1849. We have to go beyond the confines of the period to find in these periodicals essays on 'administrative reform', 'sanitary reform', and 'social reform'.

The unwillingness of the two main parties to support further fundamental reform after 1832, and the limitations of even the radicals' ideas of continuing reform, go far to explain the reluctance of the Chartists to adopt the term. Their entire programme was a rejection of the notion that the Reform Bill was a final settlement. Moreover, the harshness of the New Poor Law, which had done so much to rouse their indignation against the political system, had been deliberately willed at Westminster by a combination of Conservatives, liberals and radicals, among whom some radicals were particularly prominent and dogmatic. Advocates of factory regulation, too, had compelling reasons for avoiding the word 'reform', since self-consciously reforming radicals were their most fervent enemies, and tories who disliked the Conservative reformism of Peel were their most determined friends.

There was a further, less obvious reason why Chartists and agitators for factory regulation shied away from the concept. They had to contend with another quite different discourse of reform that flourished below the level of parliament, the quarterlies and *The Times*: that of Robert Owen and his followers.[31] As early as 1823 was published *A new theory of moral and social reform; founded on the principal and most general facts of human nature; or, essays to establish a universal criterion of moral truth... and to found thereon a plan of voluntary association and order... by a friend of the utmost reform.* Many later uses of the phrase 'social reform' in much the same sense can be found. Owen and his followers insisted that they intended to proceed by peaceful reform rather than by violent revolution, but they nonetheless sought a total change in society, the establishment of property-sharing communities, 'co-operation', and universal education to create a new morality. This was the core of what they meant by 'social reform', which was seen by them and others as virtually synonymous with 'socialism'. The movement was further identified, especially by its enemies, with hostility to the family, marriage, and religion. These views were considered totally impractical and deeply objectionable by many working-class activists as well as by the 'Establishment'. An editorial in Owen's *New Moral World* of 1837, anticipating the pamphlet of 1859 already discussed, explicitly contrasted '*Political versus social reform*', but used the phrase 'social reform' in a totally different sense:

> The Social Reformer proposes to take no wealth or privileges from any individual or bodies now in existence, but to purchase, borrow, and shortly

[31] This paragraph depends on material generously supplied to me by Professor G. Claeys and Dr E. Royle. See n. 1 above.

> repay, the materials for creating new wealth for themselves and society at large. The Political Refomer proposes to abolish the privileges and distinctions now possessed by the most powerful portion of our fellow countrymen — to take and keep all the wealth they can under the system of individual accumulation, their aim being not to create new wealth, but to insure, according to their notions, the more equal distribution of that already in existence[32]

Whether radicals and Chartists would have accepted this categorization may be doubted, but most of them certainly wished to keep their distance from the Owenites. In particular, the pre-emption by the latter of the designation 'social reform' for their own programme would seem for a long time to have ruled out its use by other groups whose aims were different. A usage similar to that of the Owenites is to be found in French socialist writing,[33] at least by the 1840s, and it was in a work about French socialism by Lorenz Stein that the term *Sozialreform* was first used in German in 1850, again in a Utopian socialist spirit.[34] 'Social' had to shed this socialist identification — to be 'neutralized'[35] — before it could be employed, in conjunction with 'reform', to refer either in general or in particular to piecemeal measures concerning such matters as public health, housing, and the provision of amenities.

III

Three works that appeared in 1850 are of special significance in illustrating both the degree to which the application of reform had expanded and the limits of that expansion. The first was the second volume of Harriet Martineau's *History of England during the thirty years' peace, 1816–1846*, the volume relevant to my period. In it she wrote of 'the noble series of reforms' carried by the 'whig' governments of the 1830s (p. 79). She counted the New Poor Law as a reform since its aim 'was to restore the principle and revert to the operation of the Law of Elizabeth' (p. 89). She called Edwin Chadwick's work for public health an 'enterprise of reform' (p. 711), and spoke of the repeal of the Corn Laws as a 'great reform of policy' if 'an inferior order of reform' to the act of 1832 (p. 685). Factory legislation, of which she disapproved, was not honoured with the name of reform. Some of

[32] *New Moral World*, III, 24 June 1837, p. 285.

[33] L. Reybaud, *Études sur les réformateurs ou socialistes modernes: Saint-Simon, — Charles Fourier, — Robert Owen* (2 vols, Paris, 1844–5) both uses the phrase 'réforme sociale' himself and finds it in Fourier (vol. I, p. 413). I am grateful to Professor G. Stedman Jones for telling me of this book.

[34] L. Stein, *Geschichte der socialen Bewegung in Frankreich von 1789 bis auf unsere Tage* (3 vols, Leipzig, 1850), esp. I, pp. cxxiv–cxxxi. Cf. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, V, p. 355.

[35] See G. Claeys, '"Individualism," "socialism," and "social science": further notes on a process of conceptual formation', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 47 (1986), pp. 81–93. Professor Claeys kindly sent me a copy of this article.

these usages seem to be new, though in the spirit of the *Westminster Review*. She seems never to have used 'reform' in the singular for the whole range of such measures, or to have spoken of 'social reform'.

The second work of 1850 that I wish to cite is Carlyle's *Latter-day pamphlets*. The book amounts to a denunciation of reform as normally understood:

> Poor old Genius of Reform; bedrid this good while; with little but broken ballot-boxes, and tattered strips of Benthamite Constitutions lying around him; and on the walls mere shadows of clothing-colonels, rates-in-aid, poor-law unions, defunct potato and the Irish difficulty — he does not seem long for this world.

What is needed is 'not a better Talking-Apparatus but a better Acting-Apparatus', 'an infinitely reformed Governing-Apparatus', 'expurgating Downing Street'.[36] Carlyle evidently regards the Reform Bill as the core of the word's meaning, but various other measures as related to it, though not, apparently, the Factory Acts, the repeal of the Corn Laws or the Public Health Act. He plainly thinks he has invented the notion of large-scale administrative reform.

The third work is far less well known. It is a brief article in the radical Joseph Barker's periodical *The People* entitled 'The comparative usefulness of different classes of reformers', which salutes all those who work for reform of any kind, whether to build schools, lecture-rooms or reading-rooms, to promote temperance, or to agitate for financial or parliamentary reform.[37] J. F. C. Harrison used it to exemplify the enlargement by this date of the meaning of 'reform', and Barker is certainly remarkable in grouping such a wide range of good works under that name, including many that did not involve legislative changes. Even so, it is striking how limited the range is by later standards — there is no reference, for example, to housing, medical provision or pensions — and, though Harrison quotes the article under the heading 'Social reform in Leeds', Barker himself does not use the phrase.

A fourth utterance of 1850 is more typical of normal usage:

> It has always been the fate of advocates of temperate reform and of constitutional improvement to be run at as the fomenters of revolution. It is the easiest mode of putting them down; it is the received formula... Now there are revolutionists of two kinds in the world. In the first place there are those violent, hot-headed and unthinking men who fly to arms, who overthrow established Government, and who recklessly, without regard to consequences, and without measuring difficulties or comparing strength, deluge their country with blood

[36] T. Carlyle, *Latter-day pamphlets* (London, 1888), pp. 59, 78–9, 198.

[37] *The People* (Wortley nr. Leeds, 1849–51; reprinted Westport, Conn., USA, 1970), 2 (100), pp. 378–9. Cf. J. F. C. Harrison, 'Social reform in Victorian Leeds: the work of James Hole, 1820–1895', *Publications of the Thoresby Society, Monographs III* (Leeds, 1954), p. 42 and his *The early Victorians, 1832–1851* (London, 1971), p. 152.

> and draw down the greatest calamities on their fellow-countrymen... But there are revolutionists of another kind; blind-minded men, who, animated by antiquated prejudices, and daunted by ignorant apprehensions, dam up the current of human improvement until the irresistible pressure of accumulated discontent breaks down the opposing barriers, and overthrows and levels to the earth those very institutions which a timely application of renovating means would have rendered strong and lasting. Such revolutionists as these are the men who call us revolutionaries.[38]

This was Palmerston in the *Civis romanus* speech, defending himself against a powerful parliamentary attack on his interfering and hectoring foreign policy. The quotation reminds us again that the notion of reform was not in British minds applicable only to Britain. It is also a fine expression of the whig or liberal attitude to domestic reform, concerned essentially with constitutional questions. This kind of rhetoric continued to serve Palmerston well until he died in office in 1865. Many more years had to pass before the predominance of this approach was seriously challenged by the notion that social reform — in a sense still, it seems, unknown to the language in 1850 — was what mattered most in British politics.

IV

Does it matter that the word 'reform' was used in this period in ways rather different from what historians have suggested? I do not believe that the word is the action. I do not think it unreasonable for historians to explain the past with concepts not available to contemporaries. I speak as one who has done exactly that for this period. But I do think that they — and I — should have been more aware of contemporary usage. If it be true that contemporaries did not think of what we call factory regulation as reform and did not have the modern concept of social reform, then these are significant points that historians need to keep in mind. They can, for example, be related to, and they reinforce, the computations of W. O. Aydelotte which showed that, in the Commons during the 1840s, voting on constitutional and ecclesiastical issues followed one pattern, and voting on what we call social questions quite another.[39] If the semantic rift shows that there was a wide intellectual rift to be crossed between constitutional measures and social legislation, if the upper classes by and large just could not see the regulation of factories or even the repeal of the Corn Laws in the guise of reforms, and if there was no acceptance as yet of a generalized notion of reform such as we have, covering

[38] Quoted in Southgate, *'The most English minister'*, p. 57.

[39] E.g. 'The disintegration of the Conservative Party in the 1840s: a study of political attitudes' in A. Aydelotte, G. Bogue and R. W. Fogel, *The dimensions of quantitative research in history* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 319–46.

social as well as constitutional change, then these are additional reasons for the mutual incomprehension of liberals and Chartists, not to mention Owenites. Much later Disraeli was still bridling at Parliament so much as discussing social questions: 'We are a Senate', he declared, 'not a vestry.'[40] Might it be the case that only the word 'reform' — perhaps also 'concession' — triggered the full rhetoric of 'reform to stave off revolution', 'reform that you may preserve'? Did Liberal grandees, members of the Reform Club, perhaps need the concept 'social reform' to be invented in order to justify social legislation to themselves? It seems to me that it would be well worth while pursuing the meaning of 'reform' beyond 1850.

Things were, however, changing in our period. The notion of reform was being widened in certain directions. Professor Stedman Jones has brought back into currency the notion, widespread and important at the time, that it was the repeal of the Corn Laws which persuaded many of those disillusioned by the Reform Bill that Parliament was capable of acting in the interests of the poor and unenfranchised.[41] Fittingly, Macaulay himself ratified the deal when he told the electors of Edinburgh at the election of 1852 that Britain had been saved from the ruin other countries had experienced in 1848–9 by 'two great reforms': Russell's of 1832 and Peel's of 1846.[42] It was one of Lorenz Stein's main contentions that there must be absolute clarity about what 'social reform' meant, if there was not to be disappointment and discontent among the proletariat.[43] But the British case suggests that consensus can be assisted by broadening, conflating — even, to use Dr Mitchell's verb, muzzying — the meanings of words.

[40] Quoted in P. Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism and social reform* (London, 1967), p. 267. I am grateful to Professor Smith for help on this point.

[41] G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of class* (Cambridge, 1983), esp. pp. 167–8, 177–8.

[42] Macaulay, *Speeches*, II, pp. 388–93.

[43] See n. 35 above.