THE IMPACT OF NAPOLEON III ON BRITISH POLITICS, 1851–1880

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NAPOLEON BONAPARTE'S nephew Louis Napoleon was elected President of the French Republic in December 1848. Faced with an obstructive Legislative Assembly, he mounted a *coup d'état* in December 1851 and restored universal suffrage in a new constitution, which was ratified overwhelmingly by plebiscite. The Second Empire was born when another plebiscite in November 1852 granted him the title of Emperor. Napoleon III presided over France until her defeat by Prussia in September 1870 drove him from power and into exile in England, where he died in 1873.

This paper is not about Napoleon III but about the effect of his rule on British politics. It argues that British reaction to him, and to French and European politics more generally, had a profound influence on domestic mid-Victorian political culture. In the 1850s and 1860s, British politicians, the media and public opinion were at their most self-confident about Britain's stability and economic success. They attributed these achievements largely to Britain's constitutional arrangements, which they contrasted pointedly with those in operation on the continent. France was invoked particularly frequently as an example of a badly structured polity. I want to argue that, primarily through this comparison, British national identity became sharply defined in political debate. But another crucial component of national self-confidence was Britain's apparent ability to influence European affairs. Ironically, this depended on maintaining an informal alliance with Napoleon III and France. This created great ambiguity in the response to the Second Empire, which was heightened by the desire of the City and most commercial opinion to cultivate good relations with Napoleon in order to ward off the threat of war and to exploit economic opportunities in France. So it is important to bear in mind that by no means all British reactions to Napoleon III were negative ones. A number of intellectuals,

[1] Professor Derek Beales and Dr James Thompson commented helpfully on an early draft of this paper.

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for example, suggested that Britain had much to learn from the French.[2] Nor did Napoleon, thrice an exile in Britain, wish to antagonise her. But my argument is that the negative views of him were the ones that mattered most in politics. In particular, stereotypes of Napoleonic France were very important in explaining why mid-Victorian politics were dominated not just by the Liberal party but by a particular type of Liberalism, emphasising constitutional, moral and patriotic issues. So one sub-theme of the paper is that historians of British politics can benefit from placing their subject in a wider European context – and that the European context was at least as important in shaping British public debate at this time as the imperial and global context.

There are four stages to my argument. I start by exploring the reasons for British suspicion of France before the advent of the Second Empire. Then I consider the specific additional criticisms made of Napoleon's regime after 1851, and the fears expressed about it. Third, and at greatest length, I look at the impact of these criticisms on British politics from 1851 to 1870. Finally, I consider briefly the way in which political debate after Napoleon's fall in 1870 continued to be influenced by the concepts and fears that I have discussed. Each of these stages is divided into two parts. The first part assesses the situation in foreign and defence policy; the second looks at more purely domestic issues. By making this division I aim to bring out more clearly the paradox that a successful British foreign policy usually depended on co-operation with the French but that a leitmotif of British domestic politics was simplistic opposition to 'continental' constitutional habits.

I

At a diplomatic level, the relationship between Britain and France was necessarily dominated by their age-old rivalry and recent prolonged warfare. Palmerston did not doubt that France's greatest goal was 'the humbling of England, the traditional Rival of France, and the main obstacle to French supremacy in Europe and all over the world'.[3] Most of Britain's European influence was exercised in the Mediterranean, where France was her major threat. In Spain in the 1830s and again in the East in the 1850s, a military alliance with France was undertaken as much to prevent her gaining undue advantage in those areas as to

[2] Matthew Arnold is perhaps the best example. It is also important to point out how profoundly some liberals and radicals disliked the increased respect which Napoleon III received from society, business and the press after the 1860 Commercial Treaty – a dislike that was caustically expressed in A.V. Dicey, 'Louis Napoleon: 1851 and 1873', *Fornightly Review*, 13 (Jan.–June 1873), 197–204.

[3] 1863: R. Millman, *British Foreign Policy and the Coming of the Franco-Prussian War* (Oxford, 1965), 116.

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check Russia. Similarly it was the French threat to Northern Italy as much as the Austrian presence there which determined Britain's Italian policy for over twenty years. On top of these strategic anxieties there was a distinct latent psychological fear of French aggression and indeed invasion. This was the legacy of the intense wartime propaganda of the 1800s which warned that Napoleon Bonaparte's invading French mobs would sweep away private property, individual freedom and Protestant religion in an orgy of criminality and uncontrolled animal passion.[4] British public life in the 1850s was dominated by men over whose youths the Bonapartist shadow had fallen.

Despite this instinctive suspicion, however, Britain needed informal understandings with France in order to have the influence in international politics that the public and press expected. Palmerston argued that Britain should choose her allies according to the damage that they could do her in war, and that co-operation with France was the only way to prevent her from 'realising her vast schemes of extension and aggression'.[5] Moreover, French support was a counter-weight to the influence of the 'Northern' or 'Eastern' autocracies, Russia, Austria and Prussia, which would otherwise dominate the continent diplomatically and ideologically. And in the Mediterranean it was important for the British fleet not to be at odds with both France and Russia. All in all, when France was an ally, as in the Spanish Civil War of the 1830s or the Crimean War, Britain might hope to cut a dash in Europe, but otherwise not.[6] Disraeli described Anglo-French concord as 'the key and corner-stone of modern civilization'.[7] Advocates of that concord did not always go unchallenged in British policy-making, but until the 1860s theirs was the dominant official view.

Yet the difficulty of maintaining this pro-French policy can be seen once we turn to consider British public perceptions of French domestic politics. In early and mid-Victorian England, the major continental regimes were very commonly seen as autocratic, heavily centralised and – owing to the presence of large standing armies – militaristic. Representative assemblies and local authorities seemed to have little power. Secret police activities, restrictions on press freedom, and the dominant position of an intolerant (usually Catholic) priesthood ensured

[4] S. Cottrell, 'The Devil On Two Sticks: Franco-Phobia In 1803', in *Patriotism: The Making And Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. R. Samuel (3 vols., 1989), I, 267–8.

[5] M. F. Urban, *British Opinion and Policy on the Unification of Italy 1856–1861* (New York, 1938), 355–6; D. F. Krein, *The Last Palmerston Government: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, And The Genesis of Splendid Isolation* (Ames, Ia, 1978), 21–2.

[6] Clarendon, 1864, in J. K. Laughton, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Henry Reeve* (2 vols., 1898) II, 103.

[7] 9 Feb. 1858, *Hansard*[*'s Parliamentary Debates*, third series], 148, 1060. See also W. E. Gladstone, 'Germany, France, and England', *Edinburgh Review*, 132 (Oct. 1870), 574.

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that political and religious liberty was at a discount.[8] In contrast, the general perception, at least among the propertied classes, was that the British Crown was accountable to a parliament which was always on guard against high taxes and military aggrandisement. Crown and parliament both operated within a venerable framework of laws and conventions. Local authority powers were extensive and jealously defended; so were religious toleration and personal and press liberty. At one level or other, political participation – citizenship – was extensive and seemed to give great strength to the regime. Liberties were underpinned by general acquiescence in the rule of law. By the early 1840s, these assumptions were ingrained in British parliamentary argument. There is, of course, a major issue as to how far extra-parliamentary radicals accepted them, and with what qualifications.

However, the point to stress is that the events of the 1840s intensified this sense of British constitutional distinctness and made it the most significant element in political constructions of national identity over the following twenty years – in the process blunting the radical challenge.[9] Britain's self-confidence as an economic power was enhanced by the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the remarkable global dominance attained by British manufacturing products in the 1850s and the spread of responsible government in the white settler colonies at the same time. These developments seemed to demonstrate the benefits of free trade, a libertarian constitution and a Protestant religion encouraging individual responsibility. The European revolutions of 1848 left the British political system largely unscathed but produced a continent split between the forces of repression and republicanism. It became commonplace to praise Britain's political achievement by contrasting it with the reinstatement of autocratic government in most major European states after 1848.[10] *Punch* published two cartoons, 'John Bull showing the foreign powers how to make a constitutional plum pudding' and 'There is no place like home', which graphically illustrate this sentiment.[11]

France occupied a particularly central role in British perceptions of the constitutional failings of the continental regimes. Though the Eastern powers appeared more monolithic in their absolutism, they

[8] B. Porter, '"Bureau and Barrack": Early Victorian Attitudes towards the Continent', *Victorian Studies*, 27 (1983–4), 407–33.

[9] On the radicals, see G. Claeys, 'Mazzini, Kossuth, and British Radicalism, 1848–1854', *Journal of British Studies*, 28 (1989), 225–61.

[10] See e.g. S. Laing, *Observations on the Social and Political State of the European People in 1848 and 1849* (1850); *Manchester Guardian*, 1851, quoted in A. Briggs, *Victorian People: a Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851–67* (Harmondsworth, 1965 edn), 57–8; Palmerston, 25 June 1850, *Hansard*, 112, 443; Albemarle, 3 Feb. 1852, *Hansard*, 119, 5–6; H. Reeve, 'Earl Grey on Parliamentary Government', *Edinburgh Review*, 108 (July 1858), 272.

[11] *Punch*, 15, 267, 23 Dec. 1848, and 16, 27–30, 20 Jan. 1849.

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John Bull showing the foreign powers how to make a constitutional plum-pudding. Punch, 23 December 1848.

were more distant, less familiar and less immediately threatening. Nothing contributed more to the British sense of political achievement than, firstly, the French Revolution of 1789, and secondly, France's continual oscillation thereafter between monarchy or empire on the one hand and revolution and 'anarchy' on the other. It was not just 1789 and 1799, but 1830, 1848, 1851, 1870 and 1871 which ensured that the British public remained so smug about the quiescence of their own regime. Powerful images, for example from Carlyle's *French Revolution* (1837) or Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors (permanently housed in London from 1835), underlined the contrast. The two centrepieces of the Chamber of Horrors were a real guillotine from Paris, and Marat – described in the programme as that 'execrable wretch' – after being stabbed in his bath, while there were also death-heads of the 'sanguinary demagogue' Robespierre and the king and queen.[12] This was truly an anti-revolutionary exhibition.

There was no shortage of punditry discussing the reasons for French political instability, and a consensus emerged that the problem was the over-centralisation of power. The lack of vigorous local political structures, the destruction of the old aristocracy and the despotism of

[12] *Biographical and descriptive sketches of the distinguished characters which compose the ... exhibition of Madame Tussaud and sons* (1844), 27–8.

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Bonaparte meant that there was a severe shortage of intermediate institutions between the state and the individual.[13] The Revolution had greatly reduced the clergy's sphere of influence, weakening the sense of morality, while changes to property law encouraged a selfish individualism rather than the mutual dependence engendered by the English trust system.[14] The French people lacked experience and education in self-government.[15] They could be distracted by material bribes, sensation or talk of military glory, and failed to see through utopian dogma. So parties stood for power either on abstract and unworkable general principles or by appealing to the average avaricious Frenchman's lust for national grandeur and the seizure of property. French politics were thus dominated by passion rather than reason and by the clash of irreconcilable economic principles. Intolerant of despotism, the French were unsuited to freedom; instability was inevitable.[16]

II

What impact did Napoleon III's rise to power have on these assumptions about, on the one hand, France's role in Europe and on the other, her constitutional instability? The dominant British view was that his regime would stand or fall depending on whether he could revive his uncle's glory. His domestic position was necessarily insecure; like all emperors, he could prosper only by pursuing an assertive and successful policy abroad.[17] The sensual tastes of the French public would also demand action, and this would destabilise Europe. Ultimately he was bound to want, and need, to avenge the great humiliation of Waterloo by turning to attack England. His sphinx-like silences, and his colourful past, added to the alarm of the liberal and conservative establishments: Prince Albert said that he was 'a walking lie' – 'once a conspirator, always a conspirator'.[18] It was impossible to tell what he was planning,

[13] *Punch*, 15, 266, 23 Dec. 1848; Gladstone, 'Germany, France, and England', 576–80; J.H. Hippisley, 'The Realities of Paris', *Westminster Review*, 17 (Jan. 1860), 59; H. Reeve, 'France', *Edinburgh Review*, 133 (Jan. 1871), 1–32.

[14] H. Reeve, 'France', *Edinburgh Review*, 133 (Jan. 1871), 16–20.

[15] Sarah Austin, 1848, in J. Ross, *Three Generations of Englishwomen: Memoirs and Correspondence of Mrs John Taylor, Mrs Sarah Austin, and Lady Duff Gordon* (2 vols., 1888), I, 218.

[16] Laing, *Observations*, ch. 7; *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, VIII, ed. N. St. John Stevas (1974), 183; George Eliot, 1870, in C. Campos, *The View of France from Arnold to Bloomsbury* (1965), 50; D. Duncan, *The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer* (1908), 155; J.C. Morison, 'The Abortiveness of French Revolutions', *Fortnightly Review*, 14 (July 1873), 41–53.

[17] As the *Times* put it, imperialism needed to demonstrate 'perpetual youth and strength': 13 Jan. 1873, 9. For Bagehot s view in 1867, see *Collected Works*, VIII, 175.

[18] Urban, *British Opinion*, 128, 358.

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except that his goals were personal and dynastic advancement rather than the good of the nation. He was willing to use the language of the Rights of Man and the human brotherhood to advance his personal purposes in Italy – to the horror of conservatives – but at the same time most radicals did not believe that someone so despotic, and so dynastic in his ambitions, could be genuine in speaking that language.

Thus suspicion of Napoleon's foreign policy was endemic in Britain. British attitudes to the domestic basis of Napoleon's regime were equally strongly held. Commentators had three major causes for complaint against his system. These produced a powerful stereotype that lasted, in most cases, until the end of his reign.

The first criticism was of the oppression and violence on which Napoleon's power seemed to be founded, especially because of the *coup d'état* of December 1851. At the time of the *coup*, Palmerston, most of the political elite, and many businessmen welcomed it as the best chance for France to recover stability. But the killings passed into legend, often in grossly exaggerated form. For example, A.W. Kinglake's history of 1863, *The Invasion of the Crimea*, recycled the widely believed stories of deliberate mass shootings, torture, transportation and starvation. It rather pedantically identified 'nine kinds of slaughter', suggesting that up to 50,000 may have been killed, as against the soberer estimates of a couple of hundred.[19] (Kinglake, incidentally, had a personal grudge against Napoleon, who, when living in exile in England, had stolen his mistress.) At the time of the *coup*, there was particular shock that fourteen people were shot when hiding behind a carpet that only a few months previously had been admired by the queen herself at the Great Exhibition. Like many who had friends in the Parisian intelligentsia, Dickens never forgave 'the cold-blooded scoundrel at the head of France – or on it',[20] and his *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) can be seen as a commentary on the dehumanising effects of French state oppression. There was a similarly horrified reaction in England in 1858 to the news that Montalembert had been arrested and tried for publishing a pamphlet which praised English institutions and political culture at the expense of French ones. Napoleon seemed to have no respect for constitutional traditions or press and personal liberties.

A second source of English concern about Napoleon's regime was

[19] A.W. Kinglake, *The Invasion of the Crimea; its Origin, and an account of its Progress Down to the Death of Lord Raglan* (8 vols., 1863–87), I, ch. 14, esp. 277, 282. See also e.g. M.S. Hardcastle, *Life of John, Lord Campbell* (2 vols., 1881), II, 299.

[20] 14 Jan. 1852, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. G. Storey *et al.* (11 vols. to date, Oxford, 1965–99), VI, 575. Dickens and his admirers were greatly offended when in December 1858 a photograph of him on display in a Paris shop was removed by the authorities who, looking at the less than attractive man, thought that it was a wicked caricature of Napoleon III: *ibid.*, VIII, 576 n.3.

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that, while oppressive, it was based on universal suffrage; his appeal to the mob allowed him to crush educated criticism. *The Times* commented that 'with all its purple and gold the Imperial Government was heir to the Communistic notions of the Red Republican regime', while Brougham remarked: Napoleon is 'still a socialist in practice'.[21] This combination of autocracy and democracy seemed to symbolise the historical peculiarity and problem of French politics and marked imperialism out as an example to avoid.

This was all the more so because of the third complaint against the Second Empire, the moral corruption of the regime and its destabilising effect on French character, which was already prone, as we saw, to self-indulgence and money-worship. Napoleon's power seemed to rest on unscrupulous flatterers; there were too few men of 'public virtue'.[22] His government gave favours and lavish contracts to businessmen and stockjobbers, something that was particularly distasteful to landed or intellectual English critics of the growth of commercialism. Taxpayers' money was wasted on superficial embellishments to the capital. Such extravagance did not promote solid prosperity; the unrestrained and impatient materialism of the Parisians created a culture of conspicuous consumption, of 'luxury and profligacy', and their city became the 'paradise of the *nouveau riche* and the *demi-monde*'.[23] Because France was so centralised, depraved Paris – described by Freeman as 'a collection of shops and stuck-up people, with the Tyrant's house in the middle'[24] – set the cultural tone for the country. Luxury, mixed with egalitarian ideology, 'brutified' the public sphere and destroyed discipline in the army.[25]

Most commentators took the view that the failings of Bonapartism were ultimately caused by its obsession with the advancement of one man and his dynasty. The system of 'personal rule' was unchecked, arbitrary and self-indulgent; it lacked principle, scruple and public spirit; it spawned materialism and false national pride.[26]

[21] *The Times*, 10 Jan. 1873, 7–8; Brougham, 1859, in Laughton, *Reeve*, II, 23.

[22] *The Times*, 11 Jan. 1873, 8; Gladstone, 'Germany, France, and England', 578.

[23] A. Hayward, 'The Personal History of Imperialism in 1870', *Fraser's Magazine*, 2 (Nov. 1870), 638–9; Marquess of Salisbury, 'Political Lessons of the War', *Quarterly Review*, 130 (Jan. 1871), 261; Dicey, 'Louis Napoleon'.

[24] 1861: W.R.W. Stephens, *The Life and Letters of Edward A. Freeman* (2 vols., 1895), I, 295–6.

[25] A.V. Kirwan, *Modern France: its Journalism, Literature and Society* (1863), 356; Hayward, 'Personal History of Imperialism', 640; W.R. Greg, 'Suum cuique: 'The Moral of the Paris Catastrophe', *Fraser's Magazine*, 4 (July 1871), 127.

[26] Kirwan, *Modern France*, vii; F. Greenwood, 'Louis Napoleon', in *The Napoleon Dynasty; or, History of the Bonaparte Family, by the Berkeley Men and Another* (1853); *Spectator* and *Times*, 1870, quoted in D. Raymond, *British Policy and Opinion During the Franco-Prussian War* (1921), 74. Of course, some Englishmen applauded the notion of strong leadership by a Carlylean

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The need to secure dynastic survival led to a concentration on foreign adventure and prestige as a distraction from domestic taxes and oppression, but an expensive external policy further disrupted trade and increased expenditure, thus requiring ever more desperate throws of the foreign policy dice: this was the 'relentless logic of a false position'.[27]

'Personal rule' and the 'assertion of absolute force over others', at home and abroad, was what the mid-Victorians usually meant when they used the word 'imperialism'.[28] This was the antithesis of the widespread participation in a political community that secured stability and strengthened man's moral integrity. Much of the British commentary on Napoleon's regime took the form of a comparison with the most famous of Empires, the Roman Empire, the decay of which was generally blamed on materialism, decadence, public extravagance and the pursuit of false glory. Of course Victorian attitudes to ancient Rome were very ambivalent. Rome was credited with practical genius and the spread of law, civilisation and Christianity to distant lands, and many classically educated mid-Victorians saw the British as the modern Romans in those regards.[29] Indeed, Palmerston's most famous oration, on the Don Pacifico debate in 1850, exploited the comparison. But this was not to say that Britain's external policy should emulate Roman imperial practice, and it is a sign of the innate anxiety that such practice might poison British life that Palmerston's critics in that debate immediately twisted his 'civis Romanus sum' allusion so as to suggest an alarming empathy with a 'conquering race' and 'an exceptional system of law'.[30] Criticisms of Napoleon III's domestic and Mexican

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moral hero. However, Carlyle and his followers despised Napoleon III more than most: e.g. L. Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* (3 vols., 1903 edn), I, 334, 336.

[27] See Salisbury in 1860 and 1871: P. Smith, *Lord Salisbury on Politics: A Selection from his Articles in the Quarterly Review, 1860–1883* (Cambridge, 1972), 129–30; 'Political Lessons'.

[28] R. Lowe, 'Imperialism', *Fortnightly Review*, 24 (Oct. 1878), 458.

[29] See e.g. Lady Eastlake, 1858, quoted in J. Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford, 1987), 64.

[30] Gladstone, 27 June 1850, *Hansard*, 112, 585–6. Gladstone admitted that he was not opposed to the idea that Britain had a 'duty' on occasion to exercise influence to encourage the development in other countries of 'institutions akin to those of which we know from experience the inestimable blessings'; rather, he objected to doing so in a spirit of arrogance and national pride, and in opposition to the 'principles of public law' (*ibid.*, 582). This, in Gladstone's eyes, was the difference between an English and an imperial policy. Palmerston, however, had argued that intervention of one sort or another was the norm for major powers, so Britain was merely standing up for her interests and principles. Palmerston's use of the Roman comparison was presumably intended to imply no more than that Britain should be ready to act as an arbiter of justice as she defined it. However, he was distinctly sympathetic, by generation and upbringing, to the propagation of classical cultural values in public life – as is shown, among other things,

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policy drew heavily on imperial Roman comparisons; during the Montalembert affair the *Daily Telegraph* called him 'the Tiberius of the Tuileries'.[31] And several writers pointed out that the French, like the Romans, had an insatiable desire to dominate and conquer Europe and 'give law' to it.[32] One author, in 1861, argued that England's policy should be 'the working out, on the large field of European history, of that protest against imperialism, political and sacerdotal, on which the constitution of England has been built'.[33] In other words, despite their glorious past services to Europe, the contemporary legacy of the Roman Empire and its child the papacy was a negative one: the continued influence of Caesarist secular practices and Ultramontane ecclesiastical power.[34] In state and in church affairs, a small group of men placed themselves above the law and wielded excessive influence over the lives and thoughts of peoples. As the first country to declare national independence against this system, England's mission was to demonstrate to European public opinion the advantage of political and ecclesiastical self-government.

III

What effects did Napoleon's European policy have on British politics? In the dozen years after 1848, public self-confidence at Britain's ability to shape foreign affairs grew to an all-time high. This was partly because of the beneficial political and economic circumstances outlined earlier, but also because of the disarray of the Eastern powers and the unrivalled opportunities that this threw up for British naval and diplomatic assertiveness – particularly in the Crimea, China and Italy. In addition, the British claimed most of the credit for, and much of the advantage from, the substantial lowering of tariffs in most parts of Western and Central Europe throughout the 1860s. But in all four of these instances, British achievement was crucially dependent on the goodwill of Napoleon III. France supplied the bulk of the soldiers necessary to win the Crimean War, and bore the brunt of the casualties. French diplomatic and military support helped Britain to victory in

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by his doughty defence of a classical design for the Foreign Office. Incidentally, both he and Gladstone compared the Second Empire to Augustan Rome, neither very censoriously: see F. C. Palm, *England and Napoleon III: A Study in the Rise of a Utopian Dictator* (Durham, NC, 1948), 171, and L.A. Tollemache, *Talks With Mr Gladstone* (1898), 118.

[31] *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 Nov. 1858, 4.

[32] E. A. Freeman, *General Sketch of European History* (1872), 351, 365; Freeman, 'The Panic and its Lessons', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 24 (May 1871), 2; Hayward, 'Personal history of imperialism', 637.

[33] A. H. Louis, *England And Europe: A Discussion of National Policy* (1861), 353.

[34] *Ibid*, 349.

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China in 1857–8. It was Napoleon III who ended the stalemate on the Italian question in 1859, setting in motion the train of events that was to create an Italian state respectful of the British constitutional legacy and open to British naval and commercial influence. And it was Napoleon's willingness to sign a commercial treaty with Britain in 1860 which made it necessary for other European countries to make similar agreements among themselves in the following few years.

Despite Napoleon's assistance in all these respects, British public debate in the 1850s was dominated by vehement distrust of his practices and ambitions. This was usually expressed with strident national self-confidence, as in the *Saturday Review*, which made its name and that of its young polemicists like Harcourt in the process. Occasionally, however, panic took over. Napoleon's *coup* of December 1851 sparked off an invasion scare, exacerbated by anxiety at the recent development of steam-powered ships which potentially threatened Britain's naval superiority. The scare led directly or indirectly to the fall of two British governments in 1852, Russell's Whig ministry, when its militia bill was criticised as inadequate, and then the minority Conservative government, in December 1852, after increases in defence expenditure made its budget unattractive. Those – mainly Liberals – who regarded the ending of the Crimean War in 1856 as premature, leaving Russia free to oppress her subject peoples, tended to blame Napoleon for it. Then, in 1858–9, there was a second, longer-lasting crisis. After an attempted assassination of Napoleon planned by Italian patriots living in England, French colonels urged their government to take action against the dens of conspirators across the Channel. This created alarm in the English press, which was fuelled by the completion of the enormous naval base at Cherbourg, and by the building of the first French ironclad battleship. In February 1859 the minority Conservative government announced an increase of naval spending in response to this and the developments in Italy, where Napoleon was fomenting Piedmontese challenges to Austrian rule in Lombardy and Venetia. Austria declared war on Piedmont in late April and Napoleon placed 200,000 men in Italy in eight weeks. This created a crisis in the City of London, led to the formation of volunteer corps up and down the country and contributed to the fall of the Conservative government in June 1859.

Politically there were two major casualties of these panics of 1852 and 1859. The first were the Cobdenite radicals who had seemed poised for great influence after the Repeal of the Corn Laws. They were damaged for two reasons: their association with the cause of peace at a time of anxiety about defence, and the ease with which their opponents could accuse them of an anti-patriotic commercialism. Napoleon's *coup* and the fear of French attack dealt a severe blow to

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Cobden's attempt to turn the retrenchment issue into an effective radical cause.[35] Radicalism lost its way, while its opponents were able to cast Cobdenites and Peace Society men as scapegoats for Britain's vulnerability. Alarms were voiced that a preference for taxpayer benefit over national virtue and honour had infected British public life in recent decades and weakened Britain's ability to cope with the autocratic continental threat. The 'commercial classes' were blamed – though in fact politicians of all shades were responsible for the emphasis on tax and tariff cuts since 1815 and the lack of interest in army or navy reform, and in this they undoubtedly reflected public opinion. The Peace Society, revivified in 1848, took years to recover from this negative publicity of 1852–3, as the invasion scare was followed rapidly by the Crimean crisis.[36] Some of the journalists and military men who did most to work up the panic were consciously engaged in an ideological and moral crusade against commercialism. For example, Henry Reeve of *The Times* justified his scaremongering writings by arguing that 'this nation is a good deal enervated by a long peace, by easy habits of intercourse, by peace societies and false economy'.[37] Though no scaremonger, Disraeli emphasised from now until his death the damage done to a patriotic foreign policy by the dominance of 'the commercial principle' in English public life.[38]

But the other casualties were the Conservatives, who were very unlucky that their only brief tenures of office in the twenty years after 1846 occurred during periods of high tension with France. The invasion scares of 1852 and 1859 ruined Disraeli's attempt to formulate budgets that would forge a compromise between town and country interests, draw the sting from the fiscal issue and rid the Conservatives of their sectional and backward-looking protectionist image. Instead, by removing Disraeli from office, the scares gave Gladstone the chance to gain the political prize for a new mid-Victorian fiscal compromise in his budgets of 1853 and 1860, the foundation of his political success.[39]

[35] M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847–1860* (Oxford, 1995), 216–18.

[36] D. Nicholls, 'Richard Cobden and the International Peace Congress Movement, 1848–1853', *Journal of British Studies*, 30 (1991), 351–76.

[37] Laughton, *Reeve*, I, 251–3. Though critical of the *Times*'s fervour, Clarendon could only agree on the need to 'rouse our countryrnen from the apathetic habits and utilitarian selfishness engendered by a long peace': *ibid.*, I, 258. Similarly in 1859–60 it was easy to accuse the Cobdenites of 'un-English' attitudes because of their advocacy of a speedy passage for the French commercial treaty at a time when Napoleon III seemed to be using the treaty to try to divert attention from his annexation of Savoy. Hence the storm over Bright's provocative declaration to the Commons, 'Perish Savoy'. For Manners' speech on this, see Urban, *British Opinion*, 404. For Ruskin's criticism of comtnercial non-interventionists in Italy, see *ibid.*, 208–9.

[38] J.P. Parry, 'Disraeli and England', *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), 716–23.

[39] *Ibid.*, 711–12.

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In both 1852 and 1859, the Conservatives had to increase defence estimates substantially – by £800,000 in 1852 and £1m in 1859. Though Disraeli was a vigorous advocate of cheap defence and good relations with Napoleon III, other Conservatives, especially from an older generation or military backgrounds, overruled him, with the crucial support of Prime Minister Derby. They did so partly because the panics were founded on the perception that parliamentary government was vulnerable in the face of continental autocracy; therefore a weak government found it particularly necessary to over-compensate by a show of defensive vigour.[40] In 1852, the case for increased defence spending was also strengthened by the emotion surrounding the funeral of the duke of Wellington, the great Conservative chief and vanquisher of Bonaparte.

In 1859, the Conservatives had another problem as well, the Italian question. Liberals came together in opposition to Conservative foreign policy because, despite internal differences on how far to *intervene* in favour of Italy, they could agree that the Conservatives' partiality to Austria was endangering Britain's neutrality and position in Europe, and risked a descent into war.[41] The Conservatives had declared too strongly their sympathies for the status quo, for the autocratic Europe of 1815, and thus had encouraged Austria to think that she could attack Piedmont without triggering British anger.[42] But they had also not been forceful enough in warning Napoleon against entering the war.[43] In consequence they looked unpatriotically weak and anti-liberal. In this respect, again, the Conservatives were the victims of bad timing, as the signing of the treaty of Villafranca by Austria and France in July 1859 showed. This treaty appeared to reveal Napoleon in his true colours as an autocrat who shared with Austria the concern to prop up the pope and the forces of reaction in Italy, suppressing liberty.[44] As a result, the new Liberal government had the chance, for the first time in years, to encourage Italian liberalism without playing into the hands of Britain's rivals there. Italy became an ideal issue for Liberals, allowing them to combine national assertiveness with the defence of self-government, and to marry a commitment to constitutional liberalism with a triumphant hostility to France, Austria and the papacy.

[40] See e.g. Sir H. Maxwell, *The Life and Letters of George William Frederick Fourth Earl of Clarendon* (2 vols., 1913), I, 350; Laughton, *Reeve*, II, 13.

[41] See various speakers (e.g. Bury, Palmerston, Bright, Russell) in the debate on the Address, 7, 9, 10 June 1859, *Hansard*, 154, 98, 193, 297.

[42] Urban, *British Opinion*, 190–1.

[43] Lord Stanmore, *Sidney Herbert Lord Herbert of Lea: A Memoir* (2 vols., 1906), II, 166; A.I. Dasent, *John Thadeus Delane Editor of 'The Times': His Life and Correspondence* (2 vols., 1908), I, 310.

[44] See, for example, the cartoon, 'Free Italy (?)', in *Punch*, 37, 37, 23 July 1859.

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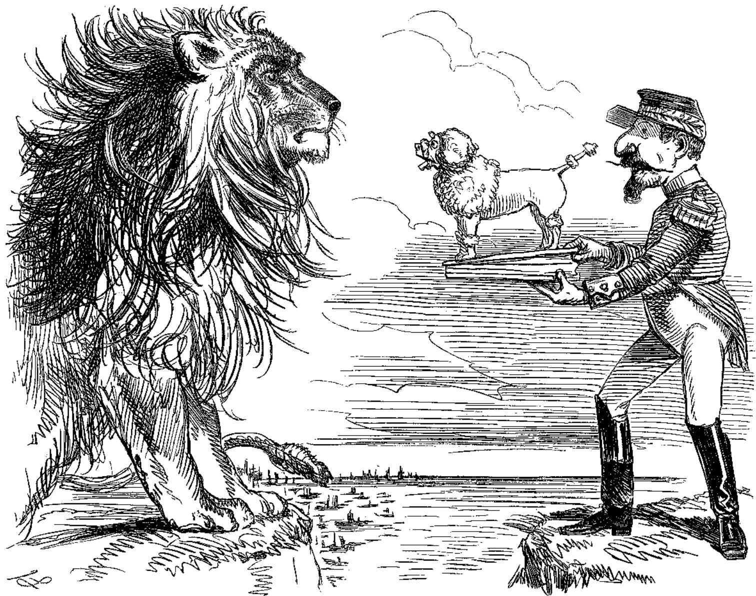

Bow-wow!! Punch, 19 November 1859.

Thus the events of 1852 and 1859 benefited mainly the Liberals, and in 1859, under Palmerston, they began fifteen years of Liberal dominance of British politics. Palmerston's new government benefited from three policies in particular – the strong show of vigorous support for Italy discussed above, and two others, an active defence programme, and a Commercial Treaty with France designed to demonstrate good relations between the two powers. Though all three policies emerged only after some internal controversy, each proved capable of cementing a broad party and public coalition.

Palmerston's self-consciously patriotic defence policy embraced naval expansion, dockyard fortifications and subsidies to the volunteers. There was broad agreement in favour of naval expansion, specifically technological innovation: four more ironclads were planned in November 1859, to make six in all. This would restore supremacy at sea and make it clear to Napoleon that it would be suicidal for France to attempt to challenge that supremacy. Confidence soon returned that the naval race had been won.[45] Keeping Napoleon in check in this way

[45] M.J. Salevouris, *'Riflemen form': The War Scare of 1859–1860 in England* (New York, 1982), ch. 5. Napoleon's annexation of Nice and Savoy in March 1860, though a slight embarrassment to the government in other ways, was of great political benefit in fomenting popular feeling in favour of extensive defensive preparations.

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was a genuine and paramount strategic and diplomatic necessity, but it also brought Palmerston great domestic political benefits. He could consolidate his image as a patriotic leader of a broad-bottom government, someone above domestic faction. And it allowed him to find an issue on which to demonstrate his superior reading of English public opinion to that of Gladstone, his chancellor, and Cobden. This was the issue of dockyard fortifications, which Palmerston felt would convince Napoleon of the foolishness of challenging Britain's naval might. After months of resistance, Gladstone had to agree to a four-year fortification programme and increased military estimates.[46] Palmerston airily told the queen that 'it would be better to lose Mr Gladstone than to run the risk of losing Portsmouth or Plymouth'.[47]

The other attractive Liberal policy stance was to claim that British activity in Europe would now concentrate on the peaceful promotion of liberal principles in politics and economics. Having decisively strengthened its defences, the government could seek good relations with Napoleon – without which British influence in Europe would be difficult to exert. The Commercial Treaty of 1860 was a demonstration to domestic opinion that the Anglo-French alliance was an alliance with a particular purpose: to spread the gospel of free trade and commercial intercourse to more benighted parts of Europe. *Punch* showed the schoolmistress Dame Cobden teaching little Napoleon, in shorts, how to spell the word 'F-R-E-E'.[48] Napoleon's embrace of free trade increased his popularity in the City, and suggested to the more supercilious Englishmen that he was willing to accept English tutelage more generally.[49]

Domestically, the emphasis placed on the Commercial Treaty and its effects had two benefits. First, the financial developments pleased Gladstone, Cobden and their followers and helped to prevent a disruption of the Liberal coalition on the defence issue. Second, the suggestion that British commercial and political ideals were slowly penetrating the continent, as a result of British influence in Italy and the sequence of most-favoured-nation trade treaties after 1860, was very useful because it prevented overt tension within the Liberal party on the issue of intervention abroad. There was still continuing scope for disagreement between non-interventionists and those who hoped for a reconstruction of Europe on the basis of constitutional liberalism. But a confidence emerged among Liberal pundits that the spread of

[46] E.D. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855–1865* (Cambridge, 1991), 99.

[47] H.C.F. Bell, *Lord Palmerston* (2 vols., 1966 edn), II, 262.

[48] *Punch*, 38, 37, 28 Jan. 1860.

[49] For example, the *Daily News* remarked of the passages on the Papacy in Napoleon's New Year letter of 1860 that he 'takes a liberal, statesmanlike, and we may add, thoroughly English view of the whole question': Urban, *British Opinion*, 348, 351.

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Britain's distinctive political and economic values would be met with less and less resistance from the conservative powers, and that constitutional government and free trade would slowly triumph without the need for expensive wars.[50] It was politically very convenient that international and economic circumstances allowed this optimism to survive until after Palmerston's death in 1865 – despite the ominous failure to work well with Napoleon during the crises of 1863 and 1864.

The Liberals, then, gained enormously from Napoleon's European policy. They were the beneficiaries of the optimism about Britain's global influence which Napoleon's assistance facilitated, they developed a patriotic language in response to his apparent challenge, and then the waning of the challenge added still further to British self-confidence. In the early 1860s, with national defence apparently secure, European tariff barriers crumbling before the British commercial advance, and a liberal Italy breaking the bonds of despotism, that self-confidence seemed highly justified.

IV

Napoleon III also cast a significant shadow in Britain because of the ability of politicians to exploit fears that domestic public life might become contaminated by continental, and particularly Bonapartist, values. The French example was seen as something to avoid because it would both jeopardise British constitutional practices and encourage immorality, specifically materialism. There was already, independently, great anxiety about the spread of materialism in British life, not surprisingly, since Britain had traditionally looked to Protestantism and a public-service aristocracy to supply moral leadership but was now an intensely and increasingly commercial society.[51] In such a context, the threat of a *cultural* invasion from across the Channel – from France in particular but the continent in general – created great alarm about an erosion of British morals, just as concern about a *military* invasion spawned fear of material destruction. These cultural fears had effects on political debate in four areas which I shall examine in turn. They did not just affect the Liberal party, but my argument will be that they crucially shaped the approach and tone of mid-Victorian Liberalism.

[50] J. S. Mill, 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention', *Fraser's Magazine*, 60 (Dec. 1859), 766–76; W. R. Greg, 'Principle and No-Principle in Foreign Policy', *National Review*, 13 (July 1861), 241–73; A. H. Layard, 'England's Place in Europe', *Saint Paul's: A Monthly Magazine*, 1 (1867–8), 275–91; M.E.G. Duff, *A Glance Over Europe: Being an Address Delivered at Peterhead on the 19th December 1867* (Edinburgh, 1867), 57.

[51] See J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986), 31; *Disraeli, Derby and the Conservative Party: Journals and Memoirs of Edward Henry, Lord Stanley 1849–1869*, ed. J. Vincent (Hassocks, 1978), 175.

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Moreover, they helped to unite a coalition that was divided on major issues, by demonstrating that those who differed on those issues nonetheless had common objectives.

The first theme was the importance of defending the British Constitution against continental threats to it. Specifically, Palmerston implied that in Britain parliament, and ministers accountable to parliament, checked the potentially overbearing influence of monarchs. He took care that the press knew of his foreign policy differences with Victoria and especially Albert. Favourable newspapers portrayed Palmerston defending British and liberal interests against domestic opponents at Windsor who favoured the continental autocrats. His dismissal as foreign secretary in December 1851 was widely blamed on the interference of the Court.[52] His resignation from the government in 1853 generated a vigorous press campaign suggesting that his brave policy on Russia was being blocked by Albert, the culmination of a long history of the latter's unconstitutional and destructive interference in domestic politics.[53] In 1859, a number of papers printed letters from correspondents apparently alarmed that the Court, dominating a weak and complaisant minority Conservative government, would take Britain into the Italian war on Austria's behalf.[54]

As the beneficiary of widespread suspicion about Albert's 'Germanic' allegiances, Palmerston could paint himself as a vigorous defender of constitutional liberalism, despite his lukewarmness towards further parliamentary reform, and he sought by this means to reassure Reformers and to marginalise the Reform cry. This was playing exactly the same game as his mentor Canning had played in the 1820s in setting himself up as the liberal opponent of the Holy Alliance and George IV's cottage coterie.[55] Self-satisfaction at Britain's apparent stability and prosperity in contrast to Europe further diminished the urgency of Reform. Though much of the contrast was directed at autocracy in general, the ease with which Napoleon, specifically, exploited universal suffrage to entrench his despotism strengthened the case of those who opposed major franchise changes.[56] Moreover, the invasion scares of 1852 and 1859 effectively killed the Reform campaigns of 1848–51 and 1857–9. One line of Tennyson's famous anti-French poem of 1859,

[52] K. Martin, *The Triumph of Lord Palmerston: A Study of Public Opinion in England before the Crimean War* (1963 edn), 70–1.

[53] R. Williams, *The Contentious Crown: Public Discussion of the British Monarchy in the Reign of Queen Victoria* (1997), 100–2, 161–4.

[54] Urban, *British Opinion*, 207.

[55] J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993), 39–41.

[56] E.g. Wood's views, 1853, quoted by Disraeli and Russell in *Hansard*, 124, 84–5; R. Lowe, *Speeches and letters on Reform* (2nd edn, 1867), 147, 163; (1853) Hardcastle, *Campbell*, II, 299–300, 312.

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'Riflemen form!', ran 'Better a rotten borough or so than a rotten fleet and a city in flames!'[57] Of course, many Liberals remained adamantly committed to Reform; hence its rapid re-emergence after Palmerston's death in 1865. But the chauvinistic constitutional quiescence of Palmerston's era continued to influence Liberalism, first in moderating the scope of the party leadership's Reform proposals of 1866 and 1867, and secondly in weakening radical thinkers' interest in French political ideas and gradually strengthening their view that the 'Anglo-Saxon' constitutional virtues of the United States were those from which Britain could most profitably learn.[58]

The second cause which many mid-Victorian Liberals were anxious to defend also stemmed from the celebration of the unique success of the British Constitution. This was the emphasis on maintaining the vigour and freedom of local, municipal and voluntary activity. The rhetoric of local independence, self-government and laissez-faire was at its most potent in British politics in the 1850s and early 1860s. It contributed to a number of setbacks for state-sponsored social reform: the General Board of Health was abolished in 1858 and Russell's resolutions for an education rate were comprehensively defeated in 1856. Much of the parliamentary discussion on such issues concentrated on the importance of avoiding 'un-English' legislation which would betray patriotic values in favour of continental over-centralisation.[59] Haussmann's reconstruction of the Parisian boulevards was used by metropolitan radicals such as Ayrton as a justification for opposing, successfully, many of the proposals for expensive new public building and road projects in London.[60]

Perhaps the best example of enthusiasm for English voluntary activity was the volunteer movement, which grew rapidly to about 120,000 men between the summer of 1859 and the autumn of 1860.[61] Admiration for the volunteer corps was based on the fact that it seemed so English –

[57] See also Clarendon, 3 May 1859, in *'My Dear Duchess': Social and Political Letters to the Duchess of Manchester, 1858–1869*, ed. A.L. Kennedy (1956), 56. Elcho, a keen volunteer and equally keen Adullamite, argued against the need for Reform in 1865 from his experience as a colonel in a working-class volunteer regiment: C.J. Kauffman, 'Lord Elcho, trade unionism and democracy', in *Essays in anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain*, ed. K.D. Brown (1974), 189.

[58] See Goldwin Smith, 'The Experience of the American Commonwealth', in *Essays in Reform* (1867), and H. Tulloch, 'Changing British Attitudes towards the United States in the 1880s', *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), 825–40.

[59] J. P. Parry, 'Past and Future in the Later Career of Lord John Russell', in *History and Biography: Essays in Honour of Derek Beales*, ed. T. C. W. Blanning and D. Cannadine (Cambridge, 1996), 159–60.

[60] See Ayrton's parliamentary speeches, and M. H. Port, 'A Contrast in Styles at the Office of Works: Layard and Ayrton: Aesthete and Economist', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), 151–76.

[61] H. Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force: A Social and Political History, 1859–1908* (1975), 15.

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in a variety of ways. To many, its attraction was that it sprang from initiatives within the local community, by gentry, employers, university students or philanthropists; it was the very opposite of a threatening standing army maintained by overbearing taxation imposed by a centralised state. Meanwhile, the heartier spirits could agree with *The Times* that the movement fitted the manliness and athleticism of the national character: the newspaper contrasted plucky English youth with 'the students of a French Lycée, strolling two and two along the Quartier Latin, and playing dominoes over their lemonade; or the pupils of a German professor, who accompany their instructor during the holydays in a botanical ramble'.[62]

The volunteer movement had an attractively inclusive appeal that was capable of uniting political groups who differed on other issues. For example, it won supporters from both camps in the foreign policy debate, interventionists and isolationists. Effective national self-defence would help to protect Britain from the instability created by dynastic rivalries and political turbulence on the continent.[63] It would guard against the threat of invasion but also keep defence expenditure down and frustrate militarist scaremongers, something particularly important to radicals.[64] The movement was inclusive also in the sense that men from all classes and political traditions were able to appreciate its social effects. Some radicals liked the republican symbolism of working-class men being trusted to bear arms to defend their community, and a number of volunteer corps modelled themselves on Garibaldi's Redshirts. The Liberal MP George Melly hoped that the movement would train people to habits of self-government and thus to 'a real Liberalism'.[65] But at the same time it strengthened respect for the military life and in many cases demonstrated the continuing importance of hierarchy in English society. Representatives of the local gentry often put themselves at the head of corps, allowing middle-class volunteers to enjoy the privilege of estate hospitality. Young aristocrats who were to play a large part in Liberal cabinets in future – such as Ripon and Spencer – were particularly prominent in the movement, and wanted it to unite the social classes in a common patriotism. So did the Christian Socialists whom these young Liberal aristocrats often admired. Tom Hughes, for example, hoped that it would 'bind the nation

[62] *Ibid.*, 11.

[63] T. Hughes, 'The Volunteer's Catechism, with a Few Words on Butts', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 2 (July 1860), 192.

[64] *Ibid.*; W.H.G. Armytage, *A.J. Mundella 1825–1897: The Liberal Background to the Labour Movement* (1951), 29.

[65] Though he felt that it would also strengthen Conservatism in parliament: *Journals and Memoirs of Stanley*, 164.

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together again' after the money-grubbing of recent years had weakened social ties and higher aspirations.[66]

These arguments demonstrate how far the mid-Victorian Liberal party was from being simply a manufacturing party – how important propertied leadership and concerns about character were to its sense of purpose. One anxiety often expressed in mid-Victorian politics was that the moral fibre of the English citizen must be protected against enervation and decadence, and this concern to defend particular moral values was the third area in which mid-Victorian Liberalism could develop a strongly patriotic tone by making continental comparisons. As we saw, there was a long-standing tradition of associating French culture with sensuality, profligacy and effeminacy, and a tendency to define the character of the ideal Englishman in terms of opposition to it – in terms of character, Protestant virtue and individual responsibility. The satirist Wilkie Collins shrewdly observed at this time that 'the morality of England is firmly based on the immorality of France'.[67] This was reflected in contemporary works of historical fiction, not just *A Tale of Two Cities* but also, for example, Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* (1866), the story of the last English rebellion against the greedy, lawless but disciplined post-Conquest Norman tyranny.

But two dangers for Englishmen to beware were commonly perceived. One was that the more philistine of the upper classes, the potential leaders of England, would be tempted by the sensuality of Paris, which, as Carlyle succinctly put it, was 'nothing but a brothel and a gambling hall'.[68] Looking back in 1870, Queen Victoria regretted the effects of 'horrid Paris' on the morals of her sons – with good reason – and concluded that Napoleon's 'frivolous and immoral court did frightful harm to English society'.[69] The other danger was that the 'intensity of our commercial energy' would make the British middle and working classes especially vulnerable to the adoption of 'demoralizing' habits like the 'French Sunday'. If the law allowed businessmen to open their shops and theatres on Sunday, their urge for profit would make them unable to resist the idea, thus exploiting their workmen, disrupting their own family life and diminishing the place for reflection, religion and culture in society.[70]

In other words, the battle against continental morals was also a battle

[66] 'Volunteer's Catechism', 193.

[67] To Dickens: R. Gibson, *Best of Enemies: Anglo-French Relations since the Norman Conquest* (1995), 225.

[68] R. Christiansen, *Tales of the New Babylon: Paris, 1869–1875* (1994), 17.

[69] *Your Dear Letter: Private Correspondence of Queen Victoria and the Crown Princess of Prussia 1865–1871*, ed. R. Fulford (1971), 300.

[70] W. Arthur, *'The People's Day': An Appeal to the Rt. Hon. Lord Stanley MP Against his Advocacy of a French Sunday* (fifth edn, 1855), 14–15, 37.

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against the potential sin in the British themselves. This battle was an attractive cause to many mid-Victorian Liberals, who undertook political crusades in defence of moral values which the crusaders regarded as fundamental to the English character and which were being threatened by continental vice or aristocratic complacency at home. The Administrative Reform Association (1855) and later the Bulgarian agitation were examples of such movements which had a clear patriotic dimension. Protestant Dissenters, though not the only participants in such crusades, were often central to them and increasingly influential in Liberal politics more generally; the intensity with which they manifested their Englishness is a subject worthy of further study. Each campaign of this sort was necessarily divisive, and indeed potentially at odds with the dictates of party loyalty, so it would be wrong to suggest that they strengthened the Liberal party in the short term. What they did, however, was to channel religious and patriotic earnestness into the political arena in a way that contributed markedly to the strength of purpose of many provincial Liberals.

A good example of this kind of patriotic campaign is that against the Contagious Diseases Acts. These Acts (of 1864, 1866 and 1869) made possible the compulsory hospitalisation, inspection and detention of prostitutes in garrison towns who were suspected of carrying venereal disease. The regulation of prostitution was well-established in France and Prussia, and the Acts owed a great deal to the admiration in army, medical and social science circles of the effects of regulation on public hygiene and military efficiency in those countries. The extension of the system to eighteen towns, in 1869, was the catalyst for the intensely fought crusade against the Contagious Diseases Acts led by Josephine Butler, which was finally successful in the 1880s. This campaign is much discussed in modern historiography as an assertion of women's equality before the law, and rightly so. But it was an attempt to secure that equality in face of a threat, a 'Continental system of legislating on behalf of vice and against women',[71] which had 'found a footing in our land'. The campaigners against the legislation insisted that it violated the basic principles of the English Constitution, by denying an equal moral and legal standard for men and women. The repealers argued that 'the Napoleonic system' removed guarantees of personal security for women, put their freedom and reputation in the hands of the police, and threatened to brutalise them. At the same time, state regulation of prostitution made 'the path of evil...more easy to our sons'. And it deprived individual citizens of the duty to patrol moral standards themselves, thus weakening the sense of individual responsibility and

[71] J. L. Paton, *John Brown Paton: A Biography* (1914), 133. Paton was Principal of the Congregational Institute.

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humanity without which a virtuous polity could not exist. An 'evil thing' was 'threatening our land', and 'a practical repentance' was necessary from parliament and government.[72] In other words, their leaders saw such campaigns as patriotic struggles for the soul of England.

Confidence in the superiority of British political and moral values led naturally into the fourth and final element of the mid-Victorian Liberal worldview that I want to mention – the vision of the white settler colonies, and to some degree, the United States, as agencies which could assist 'English' ideas to play a dominant part in the progress of the world. It was in the 1840s and early 1850s that the British political elite began to display unmistakable signs of confidence about the stability and prospects of the settler colonies, a confidence manifested particularly in the policies of constitutionally minded Whigs like Russell and Grey after 1846 and in the views of the younger Colonial Reformers like Buller and Gladstone.[73] It was increasingly argued that the energy and enterprise of the English character could develop the natural resources of the vast colonial and American territories, but that some form of self-government was essential if these settlers were to become 'true citizens' of 'British communities'.[74] Between 1846 and 1853, the principle of representative government was established in most of the settler colonies in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Cape. This was stimulated by a number of local factors, of course, but the process was greatly facilitated at Westminster by the pronounced contrast between the success of constitutional, religious and economic liberalism in Britain, and the autocracy, protectionism and civil strife of the continent. The colonies were to be exemplars of English rather than continental practices. This conception of them continued to be very commonplace.[75] Indeed, when a panic about overpopulation and unemployment in Britain re-emerged at the end of the 1860s, there was much interest in these schemes to encourage emigration to the empire, since these would bring the double benefit of assisting the spread of the English race throughout the world and avoiding the alternative, an 'inhuman' and 'immoral' restriction on the propagation of English stock by the 'French vices' of birth control.[76]

[72] *Josephine E. Butler: An Autobiographical Memoir*, ed. G.W. and L.A. Johnson (Bristol, 1909), 88–90, 94–6, 113–24.

[73] J. M. Ward, *Colonial Self-Government: The British Experience, 1759–1856* (1976), 232.

[74] Lord John Russell, in *ibid.*, 241; R. Koebner and H.D. Schmidt, *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840–1960* (Cambridge, 1964), 69–71; D. Steele, *Lord Salisbury: A Political Biography* (1999), 17–18.

[75] Reeve, 1852, in Laughton, *Reeve*, I, 261; Thring, 1865, in Koebner and Schmidt, *Imperialism*, 81; Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, 218–19; Forster, 1875, in *The Concept of Empire: Burke to Attlee 1774–1947*, ed. G. Bennett (1953), 260.

[76] E. Jenkins, 'Two Solutions', *Fraser's Magazine*, 3 (Apr. 1871), 451–6.

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But this confidence about the role of the colonies was very far removed from 'imperialism', indeed was often perceived as its opposite. England's mission was for the cause of freedom, celebrating libertarian ideas and individual enterprise, in contrast to a self-aggrandising, overbearing state- or dynastic-driven imperialism like Napoleon III's.[77] In the 1850s and 1860s there was general confidence at home in England's world role *because* it was defined in terms of the dissemination of her constitutional and moral values. This meant that domestic discussion of the future of the empire could remain crucially vague on major issues: how much territorial expansion the empire required, how British power over natives should be exercised, whether 'representative government' would naturally lead to independence, whether the United States was a threat to the empire or an informal part of it.[78] This vagueness allowed Liberals whose instincts were hostile to the formal extension of empire to co-operate with those whose views were to become very different.

In all these four ways, then, comparison between Britain and the continent helped mid-Victorian Liberalism to develop a strongly patriotic appeal, focused on 'English' constitutional and moral values – and to blunt internal differences on substantive policy issues. In arguing this, I am *not* saying that these appeals were consciously shaped by any individual leaders, and in particular I am not saying that Palmerston himself should be credited with much of the direction of the party over which he presided. Indeed, Palmerston was not always popular with his coalition or indeed with the public at large. Some Liberals and radicals regarded his foreign policy as mere bluster.[79] At times, his pursuit of good relations with Napoleon lost him support, most obviously during the Orsini affair of 1858, when he was accused of surrendering the liberties of Englishmen to please a foreign despot – even of planning to 'annex' Britain 'for police purposes to France'.[80] In 1858, as during Napoleon's wartime state visit to England in 1855, a number of radicals claimed that Palmerston's eagerness to do Napoleon's bidding symbolised autocratic sympathies in the British as well as the French government.[81] Palmerston's lukewarmness towards parliamentary reform obviously played an important part in these tensions.

Palmerston's contribution to the success of mid-Victorian Liberalism

[77] See e.g. Russell, in Koebner and Schmidt, *Imperialism*, 93.

[78] On the problem of the USA, see the difference of opinion between Dilke and Froude: Koebner and Schmidt, *Imperialism*, 87, 99.

[79] For Harcourt, see e.g. M.M. Bevington, *The Saturday Review 1855–1868: Representative Educated Opinion in Victorian England* (New York, 1941), 64–5.

[80] Urban, *British Opinion*, 103; *Letters of Dickens*, VIII, 522.

[81] Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, 291–300; M. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English radical politics, 1848–1874* (Cambridge, 1993), 177–86.

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was less significant but still important. The fact that political debate, explicitly or implicitly, centred on a comparison between 'Englishness' and continental practices played to his strengths. In an era in which patriotism, in all its manifestations, was the major bond between Liberals, Palmerston, 'the English mastiff', was without doubt the best representative of that patriotism. He was the most suitable leader because he appeared to be the most above faction, the symbol of England and the best interpreter of her constitutional and international mission. His coalition was divided on many issues, but the constant comparisons with Napoleon and France assisted very greatly in keeping it together, by subordinating these divisions to a frequently unquestioning emphasis on the points of patriotic agreement.

V

The final part of this paper considers the very different situation caused by the French defeat in war and the fall of Napoleon III in September 1870. The changed state of affairs in Europe meant that 1870 was a watershed in British politics as well.

First, the enfeeblement of France by Prussia dealt a great blow to Britain's influence in European affairs. Isolated in Europe, she could not prevent Prussia from taking Alsace and Lorraine, or Russia from deneutralising the Black Sea. So Gladstone could not project the same patriotic aura as Palmerston. Indeed his government acquired a reputation for inglorious parsimony in defence expenditure. Gladstone and several other ministers drew the rational conclusion from the collapse of the Second Empire that British naval spending could, if anything, fall.[82] But the service ministries and much of the press campaigned against economy, exploiting anxiety at the awesome technological power of the German politico-military machine, and at the informal alliance between the three Eastern autocracies. Europe now appeared torn between efficient Prussian militarism, the bloody 'socialism' of the Commune and a resilient papacy; unsurprisingly, therefore, optimism at home about the triumph of English constitutional and commercial principles in Europe waned dramatically, and there was a panic about the inadequacy of British defence in spring 1871. Though the panic died away, criticism of 'blinkered' commercialism did not. Gladstone's plans for further defence and tax cuts continued to be frustrated by opposition within the cabinet, and the consequence was that the government badly lost direction.

Similarly, the effect of the European tensions of 1870–1 on domestic politics was to bring out the ideological divisions within the Liberal

[82] *Collected works of Bagehot*, VIII, 65.

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party that had been checked under Palmerston. The efficiency of Prussian centralism demonstrated the benefits and problems of state intervention; the excesses of the Commune added further to fears about the effects of 'democracy'; the quarrels between the papacy and the continental secular powers increased the difficulties of governing Ireland. I aim to argue elsewhere that these debates paralysed Gladstone's first government and made it impossible to devise an effective policy on which Liberals could fight the 1874 election.[83]

In these two ways, then, the European crisis of 1870–1 wrecked the Palmerstonian Liberal coalition and contributed to the Liberal defeat in 1874. But the Liberal party experienced a remarkable resurgence in the late 1870s; Victorian constitutional and moral Liberalism was to enjoy an Indian summer. The reason for this is quite simple. The Liberals desperately needed another Napoleon III. And they found one in Disraeli.

It is nearly forty years since the publication of the best discussion of the Liberal criticism of the 'imperialism' of Disraeli's government of 1874–80, a discussion that deserves more attention than it receives.[84] My aim here is to show that the criticism drew deeply on the traditions of mid-Victorian Liberalism that I have outlined, and for that reason became a cry of real substance for the party.

The Liberal criticism of the Disraeli government, and specifically its foreign policy, started from the basis that Disraeli, like Napoleon, was a 'conspirator', an unprincipled adventurer. That is to say, he was motivated by a desire for personal fame and self-advancement from a lowly position, rather than by a firm grasp of the constitutional and moral values that defined an English patriot – the values that an upper-middle class Englishman could have acquired from the public school and university education which Disraeli lacked. (In other words there was a substantial amount of class, racial and religious snobbery in these Liberal judgements.) Disraeli did not understand that an *English* attitude to her global responsibilities was the reverse of 'imperialist'. England's European interests lay with peace, 'necessary and inevitable progress' and other common objectives of the continent.[85] But in 1878 Disraeli and Salisbury instead concluded a secret agreement with despotic Turkey, alienating the other powers. This low manoeuvre gained Britain the worthless territory of Cyprus, by 'force and fraud', and involved a 'most hazardous' extension of British responsibility in Asiatic Turkey.[86]

[83] There is also some material relating to these two paragraphs in J. Parry, 'Gladstone, Liberalism and the Government of 1868–74', in *Gladstone Centenary Essays*, ed. D.W. Bebbington and R. Swift (Liverpool, 2000), 94–112.

[84] Koebner and Schmidt, *Imperialism*, ch. 6.

[85] M. E. Grant Duff, *Foreign Policy* (1880), 16.

[86] Lowe, 'Imperialism', 462–4.

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Then at the Congress of Berlin Disraeli consistently supported 'the side of servitude, of reaction, and of barbarism'.[87] Between 1877 and 1879 he sought military glory for its own sake, roused the spectre of war with Russia, and then engaged in one with Afghanistan, talking of pursuing 'natural boundaries'. This policy, disguising the 'deficiencies of the Government' with a 'shabby ... war spirit' was in 'servile imitation of the Imperialism of the Second Empire', and similarly threatened eventual nemesis by over-extending national responsibilities.[88] The less scrupulous Liberals had no hesitation in arguing that the other driver of Disraeli's foreign policy was money – as befitted a Jew.[89] Disraelian imperialism could be compared to the decadence of the Roman and the Second Empires, in that great power was surrendered to financiers and their private interests. This conclusion was particularly apparent from the purchase of the Suez Canal shares in 1875, and the enormous commission given to the Rothschilds – old friends of Disraeli – who arranged it (over £150,000 in all for a loan of £4m for three months).[90] Liberals also argued that the government's drift towards interference in Egypt had been influenced by bondholders who sought the maintenance of their interest payments after the bankruptcy of 1875.[91] Vested interests distorted policy to selfish ends, while government recklessly frittered away the money given it in trust by taxpayers – in the teeth of a depression, thus prompting the warning that Rome's greatness had been crushed by excessive taxation.[92] Liberals, then, could raise the old cry of retrenchment and combine it with alarm about the growth of 'plutocracy' in English society.[93] The 1880 election was won on a tide of indignation at the way in which Conservatives had besmirched British political life.

Moreover, Liberals criticised Disraeli's tendency towards 'personal government' or 'personal rule' at home.[94] Disraeli was accused of neutering parliament, first because his Conservative majority was apathetic and acquiescent, secondly by regularly obstructing Liberal domestic reform proposals, and thirdly by his willingness to bypass it altogether – most famously when the government transferred Indian army troops to Malta at a time of great tension with Russia in spring 1878, claiming that

[87] W. E. Gladstone, 'England's Mission', *Nineteenth Century*, 4 (Sept. 1878), 561–2.

[88] Harcourt, *Hansard*, 243, 767–8, 13 Dec. 1878.

[89] A. S. Wohl, '"*Dizzi-ben-Dizzi*": Disraeli as Alien', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995), 375–411.

[90] N. Ferguson, *The World's Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild* (1998), 822–4.

[91] See e.g. the debate initiated by Goldsmid, 11 Aug. 1879, in *Hansard*, 249, 681 (one of several).

[92] Lowe, 'Imperialism'.

[93] For Gladstone and Lowe on plutocracy, see e.g. W.E. Gladstone, 'The County Franchise and Mr Lowe Thereon', *Nineteenth Century*, 2 (Nov. 1877), 554.

[94] E.g. Jacob Bright, 1878, in Williams, *Contentious Crown*, 132.

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this did not require the authority of parliament. To deploy forces of the Crown in Europe without the consent of the Commons betrayed a fundamental Whig principle of 1688–9.[95] It also reminded Liberal critics not only of Napoleon's gesture politics but also of the subject races which provided Rome's military strength in her decadence.[96] Disraeli was accused of subverting other English constitutional traditions too – by his flattery of the court and apparent subservience to it. In particular the Royal Titles Act of 1876 – known to be the queen's personal wish – made her Empress of India, bestowing on her a foreign title which seemed to demonstrate the imperial claim to be above the law rather than the respect for free institutions which was expected of a modern constitutional monarch.[97] The queen's displays of partisanship, notoriously her visit to Hughenden in December 1877, added to Liberal complaints. Moreover, Disraeli's foreign policy seemed to pander to the acquisitive thirst of a jingo mob. The creator of household suffrage in 1867 made no attempt to teach the people he had enfranchised the 'lessons of self-denial and self-restraint' which had traditionally conserved England's global strength – let alone to found his policy on Christian conceptions of morality. The Conservatives were 'the materialists of politics'.[98] 'Imperialism' or 'sham-caesarism' seemed an apt description of a system in which influence was exercised by an alien conspirator, a class-bound Court, a selfish plutocracy and an unrepresentative, un-Christian, spendthrift mob rather than by rational public debate and a respect for freedom.[99] Disraeli's habitual 'depreciation of Parliamentary institutions' threatened to erode the basis of England's greatness, the 'habit of self-government', and to make a great empire 'little'.[100] As Gladstone said at Midlothian, 'what we are disputing about is a whole system of Government'.[101]

VI

Hugh Cunningham once suggested that from the late 1870s 'patriotism and Conservatism became firmly linked'.[102] I, however, wish to argue that the 1880 election saw a clash between two visions of patriotism,

[95] Hartington 20 May 1878, *Hansard*, 240, 264.

[96] See e.g. the remarks in *The Spectator*, cited in N. Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1997), 230; Harcourt, 20 May 1878, *Hansard*, 240, 335.

[97] J.W. Pease, 20 Mar. 1876, *ibid.*, 228, 313.

[98] Grant Duff, *Foreign Policy*, 50–3; Gladstone, 'England's Mission', 569–70.

[99] It was partly to make this political point that Liberal backbenchers led the protests against the idea of a memorial to the Prince Imperial in Westminster Abbey, 'the national Valhalla', and blocked it: 8 Aug. 1879 and 16 July 1880, *Hansard*, 249, 531 and 254, 698.

[100] F. Seebohm, 'Imperialism and Socialism', *Nineteenth Century*, 7 (Apr. 1880), 727; Gladstone, 'England's Mission', 584.

[101] W.E. Gladstone, *Midlothian Speeches 1879*, ed. M.R.D. Foot (Leicester, 1971 edn), 50.

[102] H. Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism', in *Patriotism*, ed. Samuel, 1, 75.

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and that the crushing Liberal victory at that election demonstrated the continuing supremacy of the primarily constitutional conception of Englishness that I have stressed in this paper – a set of constitutional and moral values with which the Liberals had been associated for thirty years and that united a remarkable range of people in 1880, from Robert Lowe and the Whig peerage to radicals and Dissenters.[103] The Liberals stood for the revival of constitutional propriety, parliamentary government, financial accountability and a rational foreign policy. They stood for the extension of decentralised government by breaking the control of a narrow class over the counties, and for land and parliamentary reform in order to prevent the threat that a French-style deferential peasantry would return a powerful unthinking Conservative bloc. And they stood for the articulation of a moral conscience on a variety of issues ranging from temperance to prostitution. The year 1880 was not, as is sometimes said, a new departure for the Liberal party but the beginning of the end of a long and successful tradition.

The party fell apart in the 1880s, essentially because circumstances at home, in Ireland and abroad ensured that Liberals could no longer agree on how to apply these constitutional and moral assumptions to key questions of government in any of these areas. That decline of a common Liberal philosophy is closely related to a much bigger trend in the 1880s, the ebb of national self-confidence about the superiority of British constitutional arrangements relative to other European countries. It was no longer so easy to claim that Britain had found the secret of domestic political harmony when Irishmen were bombing in London and murdering British politicians in Dublin. It was no longer so easy to emphasise the sense of shared national citizenship when Britain now suddenly had one of the least democratic franchises in Europe. It was no longer so easy to claim that free trade and British commerce would achieve a peaceful conquest of Europe, when American imports were rising to flood-level proportions and the European powers were busily building up their tariff walls. It was no longer so easy to take pride in the lack of state intervention in education, housing and health when economic growth and political stability could not be taken for granted.

I would suggest that constitutional definitions of national identity were no longer so astonishingly effective after the 1880s – though it is important to recognise that they continued to resonate at many points in British politics, and arguably still do. It is a moot point whether the predominant way of defining national identity shifted, in the 1880s and

[103] Though the party could unite, it was, once again, for different reasons. While the majority probably saw the Conservatives as the target, some radicals followed Harrison in seeing the 'imperialist' enemy as the whole 'military and commercial aristocracy of England', who had been implementing a policy of conquest and force against native peoples for a generation: 'Empire and humanity', *Fortnightly Review*, 27 (Feb. 1880), 295.

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1890s, from the constitution to the empire and indeed to what is often called 'imperialism'. That is arguable, but merits more careful investigation. My concern in this paper has been to stress that British national identity between 1850 and 1880 was not much celebrated by reference to the empire as such, and certainly not by reference to 'imperialism', but was conceived overwhelmingly in terms of the glory of the English constitution and its effects on national character. This can be fully seen only if British politics is presented in some sort of European context. That is not to say that it was necessary for Napoleon III to exist in order for Englishmen to celebrate their constitutional superiority. Many of the prejudices aired in the 1850s derived from political and economic comparisons between Britain and the continent that would have been made in any event. Nor was the constitutional definition of national identity a recent invention. Rather, it was embedded in collective experiences and myths reaching far into the past; that was why it was so widely held, and so effective as a political language. The significance of Napoleon III's presence on the international scene was that it provided a set of very potent images and stereotypes which allowed mid-Victorians to confirm the assumptions that they had a series of powerful reasons for holding anyway. In doing so it shaped the politics of a generation.

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