

British Politics in Transnational Perspective

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Abstract

Historians have always known that nineteenth-century British politics was shaped by forces which worked across national boundaries. But there has been relatively little reflection at a more general level on the interpretative consequences of looking at British politics during this period in 'transnational' perspective. This essay asks how transnational approaches can help us make sense of nineteenth-century Britain's distinctive political experiences and explores some of the most significant ways in which British political life was affected by connections and exchanges with foreign states and empires. It notes that some international interactions mattered more than others, and that it is important to be precise about their dynamics. The essay concludes that attempts to analyse nineteenth-century British politics in isolation from its international and transnational contexts are likely to miss essential parts of the picture.

Introduction

However we date the 'long' nineteenth century in British political history, the shadow of the French Revolution of 1789 always hangs heavy across its early years, just as the global conflict of the First World War usually signals its end. The idea that British politics in this period was shaped by forces which operated across national boundaries has inevitably been a working assumption for generations of political and intellectual historians, whose books are full of acute observations about particular cross-national exchanges. But the concept of 'transnational' history is still a relatively new one (Clavin 2005; Iriye and Saunier 2009), and there have been surprisingly few attempts to think through the wider interpretative consequences of looking at British politics during this era in transnational perspective – that is to say, in a way that prioritises the movement of ideas, texts, images, people, commodities and more nebulous political forces between polities and across national borders. The effects of Britain's own empire and projects of imperial expansion on domestic politics are dealt with elsewhere in this resource, as are diplomatic and strategic questions. This essay explores how British political life was affected by interactions with foreign states and empires. It reflects broadly, thematically, and necessarily very partially, on the ways in which international and inter-imperial connections impacted upon the structures, practices and ideologies of nineteenth-century British politics.

The essay has four sections. It starts by outlining some of the political structures which affected the scope and character of the transnational influences on nineteenth-century Britain; turns to the central problem of how ideas about foreign states were constructed and deployed in British politics; looks at the political influence of foreign actors; and finally pans out to look at British participation in political activities which transcended national boundaries, including the making of empires and the production of formal political thought. The focus throughout is on the ways in which transnational perspectives can enhance our understanding of Britain's distinctive nineteenth-century political experiences, and there is no attempt to suggest that the category of 'British' history ought to be abandoned in favour of the study of endlessly complex webs of transnational influence. Some international interactions mattered more than others, and it is essential to be precise about their workings and effects. Applying a transnational lens does, however, pose challenges to more insular and exceptionalist narratives about Britain's political and imperial development.

Transnational structures

Britain occupied a unique, and widely envied, place in the nineteenth-century world. Already in the eighteenth century, the country had developed an international reputation as the leading exponent of a particular form of constitutional politics. After the end of the Napoleonic wars, with the rapid expansion of formal and informal empire and with the gathering of industrial steam, Britain acquired the rank of a dominant global power. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the scope of British economic, strategic and territorial interests overseas, and the scale of the political networks with which they were associated, meant that there were few developments in foreign politics which did not have – or at least, could not be represented as having – implications for interested groups in Britain. Foreign commentators – from Europe, to Asia, to Latin America – spent much energy on attempts to discern the secrets of Britain's industrial, imperial and political success (Selinger 2019; Gunn 2009), while Britain's status as an arbiter of global destinies meant that there were frequently compelling reasons for foreign states and actors to try to influence British policy, opinion and investment decisions.

Even in the early decades of the nineteenth century, there was a considerable degree of overlap in cultures of public political discussion between Britain, Europe (especially Western Europe) and the United States. This was partly because politics in these regions revolved around some of the same fundamental questions: the rights of monarchs, assemblies and peoples; political economy; nation- and empire-building; the duties of the state; and the state's connections with organised religion. Especially when it came to the observation of foreign politics, however, the same events often attracted parallel – sometimes intersecting – discussions in different national contexts. This was true not just of episodes of obvious world-historical significance like the French Revolution of 1789 or the American Civil War of 1861-5. The dictatorship established in post-revolutionary Paraguay during the 1820s and 1830s, for instance, was widely discussed on the basis of the same handful of multiply translated first-hand accounts in the public presses of (at least) Britain, France, Germany, Spain and the United States, with writers of different nationalities picking out many of the same themes and points (Middleton 2021c). In the 1890s, the Norwegian Arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen was lauded and depicted in similar ways across Europe and America (Jones 2021). Speeches, pamphlets, newspapers and periodicals increasingly came to circulate well beyond their original national contexts, and it is common to find nineteenth-century British commentators and leader-writers entering into spats with organs of the European and American presses, often on the basis of mistaken or disobliging claims made about Britain and its empire. The Indian Mutiny of 1857, for example, inspired a considerable amount of back-and-forth between British and Continental newspapers, as critical dissections of British policy were met with vindications of the general course of British imperial enterprise, and with attacks on other countries' colonial errors. Public political argument in Britain, in other words, was neither entirely distinct, nor entirely isolated, from that pursued overseas.

There were, however, powerful forces which worked to channel and to check the influence of foreign ideas, arguments, texts and actors on British politics. These included language barriers; aristocratic traditions; racial attitudes; limits to the circulation of information; isolationist sentiment; and reflexive assumptions of British national superiority, satirised in their most entertaining form by Charles Dickens in the figure of *Our Mutual Friend*'s Mr Podsnap (Parry 2006). Much domestic political argument was framed in terms of competing interpretations of the English past, and of an exceptional national trajectory (Hawkins 2015). Just because transnational connections can be detected does not necessarily mean that they exercised political influence. Such interactions must always be understood in

terms of the roles it was possible for them to play within Britain's highly distinctive political culture and be weighed against the other forces which helped to shape British political life.

How, and how far, different figures and groups in British politics engaged with the world beyond Britain and its empire was determined by a complex intersection of political, economic, historic, linguistic, social and geographical factors. Some foreign regions and countries were the subject of sustained interest across a wide social and political spectrum; some attracted only brief flurries of attention or were of significance only to specific political groupings. There is little comparison, for instance, between the rich and continuous political encounter between Britain and France, and the ephemeral burst of Radical interest in independent northern Borneo in the late 1840s (Middleton 2010). Public attention was often pulled rapidly between different foreign developments, as events progressed and political agendas shifted. Within this morass of complexity, there are a few rules of thumb: it is unsurprising, for example, to find that cosmopolitan liberals often paid more serious attention to developments and attitudes overseas than did nationally-minded conservatives. It should be underlined, also, that very little of the transnational influence on nineteenth-century British politics can be understood in terms of the politically neutral circulation of information, ideas and people. Material about other countries was in most cases solicited or conveyed, and representations of them were constructed and diffused, by interests, parties and networks pursuing more or less conscious domestic and international goals (Ledger-Lomas 2008, 148).

British politics and politics overseas

Arguments about the internal workings of foreign polities were an integral feature of British politics throughout the long nineteenth century. They were threaded through political discourse at every level, found in different forms in the writings of public intellectuals, in the records of central and local administration, in the speeches of parliamentarians, at middle-class public meetings and on the popular platform. Such arguments ran the geographical gamut, ranging from interrogations of the causes of French Revolutions, to dissections of the growing pains of American democracy, to condemnations of the evils of Asiatic despotism, to examinations of the reasons behind the seemingly permanent instability of Spanish American republicanism. Some of this discussion was about making sense of more abstract and rarefied problems in the science of modern politics, government and empire. Some of it was genuinely practical and involved tracking the (alleged) success of foreign political experiments and innovations, with a view to suggesting borrowings or excluding possibilities. Much of it, however, was about asserting the validity of general political principles which competing parties sought to uphold at home. Loaded comparisons with foreign countries were one of the principal means by which the British political classes articulated their visions of politics, and through which they battled over how (or if) Britain ought to reform its policies, attitudes and institutions.

It is hard to think of any major nineteenth-century political debate in which such analogies and comparisons did not play a prominent role. The discourse around the parliamentary Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 was filled with references to political structures in France and the United States (Saunders 2011); arguments about Irish Home Rule in the 1880s and beyond involved looking towards the constitutional compromise recently struck in Austria-Hungary (Biagini 2007); the new shibboleth of 'national efficiency' in the early twentieth century rested on images of imperial Germany (Searle 1971). Debates around political economy and commercial policy, which did so much to define nineteenth-century politics, were premised on international examples, from the German Zollverein to American protectionism, to the 'free-trade oasis' latterly found in Denmark (Rogers 2013). This is not to mention the many pivotal political campaigns which centred specifically on political

developments in foreign countries, from the unification of the Liberal Party around a commitment to Italian (and Polish) freedom in 1859 (Beales 1961), to Gladstone's Bulgarian agitation of 1876, which propelled him back to the Liberal leadership (Shannon 1963).

All these discourses rested on increasingly large-scale transnational movements of information and people. Arguments about politics overseas involved very healthy doses of stereotyping, reductionism, flawed assumptions and blunt misrepresentation. But in many cases they also rested on sustained reading of foreign despatches, newspapers, periodicals and novels, of an ever-expanding library of travel literature, and sometimes of the more forensic texts generated by government-sponsored researchers. All this became available to British audiences in considerably more up-to-date fashion, and in greater quantities, as time and technology moved on, and especially after the popularisation of steamships in the 1840s. Later on, the advent of the telegraph would allow even more rapid international movement of more limited kinds of information. As these changes were going on, elite British politicians and intellectuals began to indulge in increasingly extensive foreign travel – as did more of the wider British population, thanks in part to the innovations of Thomas Cook's travel agency, founded in 1841 – and in many cases forged important social and political connections overseas, especially in France, Germany and Italy. Developments in postal arrangements and transportation made it much more straightforward to sustain and intensify such relationships. The former Whig Lord Chancellor and polymath Lord (Henry) Brougham, for instance, spent his last years shuttling between Britain and the south of France, helping to establish the resort of Cannes, and eventually being buried there. International social connections developed so far that by the later decades of the nineteenth century, British politicians like Lord Randolph Churchill could be found marrying wealthy Americans (in his case at the British Embassy in Paris), a prospect which had been unthinkable a century earlier (Searle 2004).

It was frequently the case that the time spent by British politicians in foreign states had powerful effects on their political thinking and reputations. This was especially true, as so often, of the relationship between Britain and France. Many of those who witnessed the French Revolution of 1789, or who travelled to France in its aftermath, were profoundly altered by the experience (Thompson 1938). Later on, personal encounters with Paris and its (alleged) dissipation fed images of France which helped to underpin the electoral ascendancy of the mid-Victorian Liberal Party (Jay 2016; Parry 2001). Elsewhere, Disraeli's youthful travels in the Middle East stirred his sense of destiny and helped to form his political character (Richmond and Smith 1999), while A. H. Layard's election to Parliament in 1852 rested almost entirely on his celebrity as an Assyrian archaeologist (Waterfield 1963). Travels in the United States in the 1860s did much to sharpen the republicanism of Charles Wentworth Dilke, who would become one of the great opponents of the monarchy in late Victorian Britain. Similar points can be made about intellectuals: John Stuart Mill travelled widely on the Continent and conceived *On Liberty* during a sojourn in Italy and Greece. In these kinds of ways, British actors' experiences in foreign polities had significant effects on the tone and course of domestic politics in nineteenth-century Britain.

Foreign actors in British politics

This international traffic in politicians and intellectuals was far from one-way. Foreign actors of various sorts played vital roles in nineteenth-century British political life. This was true even of the most rarefied spheres of 'high' politics. The wife of the Russian ambassador, Princess (Dorothea) von Lieven, cultivated close friendships with many of the leading British politicians of the 1810s and 1820s, and exerted a powerful influence on the political intrigues of the era. The Prussian ambassador Baron Bunsen inserted himself into the

world of the British political elite to comparable effect in the 1840s. Agendas and ideas from foreign states were, in these ways, woven into the social practice of politics at the very ‘top’.

The more striking transnational connections in this respect, however, operated slightly further down the political pyramid. Thanks to Britain’s constitutional heritage, its location, its role on the international stage and its exceptionally liberal laws of asylum, the country became a particularly attractive destination for foreign political refugees (Porter 1979). The closest links here were, again, with France. Southern England saw an influx of out-of-favour French families after every great political upheaval – from royalists, to Bonapartists, to Orléanists, to Communards (Stammers 2018). Louis Napoleon, the future Emperor Napoleon III, spent several years living in London before returning to France to impose his will on the Second Republic; the later attempt on his life by the Italian Felice Orsini, which led to the fall of Lord Palmerston’s government in 1858, was planned in Britain; and the again-exiled former Emperor of the French ultimately died in Chislehurst. Many of the leaders of the European revolutions of 1848 similarly found themselves licking their wounds in Britain, with Lajos Kossuth of Hungary and Giuseppe Mazzini of Italy in particular attracting large followings on speaking tours, in which they extolled the glories of the British constitution (Claeys 1989). Distinguished foreign figures of this stature were easily integrated into London society: Mazzini, for instance, spent much time in company with Thomas Carlyle.

Foreign actors did not just come to Britain to regroup. In many cases, they also sought to influence British policy. This was often a rational and sometimes an unavoidable pursuit, given Britain’s global political and moral influence. Throughout the long nineteenth century, ministers holding foreign and imperial portfolios faced constant direct lobbying by diplomats, factions and interest groups from overseas. To take just one example, London in the 1810s was thronged with delegates from rebellious Spanish America, including the celebrated ‘Liberator’ Simón Bolívar, striving to secure British recognition and sponsorship for their new states. In this case, as in many others like it, the Spanish American agents formed associations and networks with British writers and politicians sympathetic to their cause, amplifying but also modifying the arguments with which they had arrived. Campaigns to influence Britain’s behaviour on the international stage often owed significant debts to transnational connections and intersections of this kind.

These influences, moreover, did not just operate behind closed ministerial and administrative doors. There were also strenuous efforts by foreign agents to manipulate British ‘public opinion’ – a force which, from the 1820s, increasingly came to be understood both at home and abroad as the ultimate arbiter of what the British state did (Parry 1993). All sorts of political battles were conducted by partisans of competing foreign causes within the organs of British educated opinion. In the years after the 1848 revolutions, for instance, Austrian and Hungarian polemicists engaged in a running conflict in the British press in defence of their respective imperial and national causes, and in support of their states’ diplomatic lobbying efforts (Frank 2005). In the lead-up to and during the American Civil War, similarly, expatriate partisans of both the North and the South played major roles in public rhetorical battles aimed at securing British sympathy and support (Tuffnell 2020). When the Austrian Archduke Maximilian (a Habsburg) was, somewhat unexpectedly, preparing to take up the throne of Mexico in the early 1860s – on the invitation of the Emperor Napoleon III, who had invaded the country – he despatched agents to insert articles in the British press and to get up public meetings of (seemingly) enthusiastic British businessmen, in the hope of attracting formal support from Lord Palmerston’s government (Dawson 1935). British attacks on Belgian colonial atrocities later on in the nineteenth century were met with a similar campaign to sway opinion in the other direction. As this suggests, nineteenth-century ‘British’ commentary on international affairs sometimes responded to political imperatives which were not solely British or were not British at all.

Transnational political entanglements

In other ways, too, the goals pursued by political actors in Britain became entangled with those of counterpart groups overseas. Anti-slavery activism was a case in point. Especially after the abolition of British colonial slavery in 1833, the campaign against slavery elsewhere in the world – most prominently the United States, but also Cuba, Brazil and later on East Africa – became a vigorously transnational enterprise, with speakers, intelligence, texts and arguments shuttling around the Western world (Huzzey 2012). Popular anti-slavery orators like the Englishman George Thompson found enthusiastic audiences in the United States from the 1830s, while the American former slave Frederick Douglass achieved considerably greater celebrity on his travels around Britain and Ireland in the 1840s, also seeing his autobiography translated into French and Dutch. As these examples suggest, British and US abolitionism in particular became bound together in an intricate network. Comparable dynamics – and some of the same arguments – were also at work in Britain's efforts to spread the doctrines of free trade across the globe. British agents of trade liberalisation, most famously the Benthamite John Bowring who was at work between the 1830s and the 1860s, toured the world, enlisting local collaborators and building networks with a view to tearing down tariff barriers in a huge variety of different national contexts (Todd 2008). American protectionists in the second half of the nineteenth century insisted that the British were engaged in a secret free-trade 'conspiracy' against the United States' interests, a notion which was widely canvassed in periodicals and newspapers in both countries (Palen 2016).

The linguistic and cultural affinities which connected Britain and the United States, sometimes expressed in the language of 'Anglo-Saxonism', also gave rise to even more ambitious transnational political projects. The decades around the turn of the twentieth century saw the growth of a movement, on both sides of the Atlantic, which advocated for the political consolidation or even the unification of Britain and the United States. This cause was taken up by international celebrities of the order of Andrew Carnegie and Cecil Rhodes, as well as a much more numerous band of journalists, businessmen and novelists, who wrote and campaigned back and forth between Britain and the United States, adopting and adapting one another's rhetorical strategies. They met with limited success: but this was a distinctive form of transnational political campaigning, driven by a political vision which sought to reconceptualise national boundaries in the service of larger civilisational goals (Bell 2021).

Britain's projects of imperial expansion and government were also, in important ways, transnational (and trans-imperial) enterprises. From the late eighteenth century, Continental Europeans served across the empire in all sorts of capacities – from soldiers to scientists to settlers – though they remained largely under British direction, and in many cases became highly Anglicised (Conway 2017). Americans, similarly, were heavily involved in industry, commerce, engineering and other activities in British imperial territories (Sexton and Hoganson 2020; Sexton 2021). Where British colonies found themselves in proximity to those of other transoceanic empires, for instance where the British and French presences in Africa came into contact, there were frequently informal exchanges of information and personnel, and in certain cases deliberate administrative collaboration. Some historians now describe these kinds of interactions under the heading of 'co-imperialism' (Thomas and Toyé 2017). On all these fronts, the picture varied wildly in different parts of the British imperial world, with the intermittent attempts of the imperial administration to assert certain general principles rarely getting far (Lester et al. 2021). For present purposes, the significance of these considerations is simply that when we talk about the impact of the empire and of colonial developments on British domestic politics, we are talking about an imperial project which owed significant debts to people, ideas and practices which had crossed national and

imperial borders. The same can be said of British political engagement with the regions of the globe which fell under the heading of ‘informal’ empire, most prominently Latin America, though this is a subject which has only recently started to be investigated seriously (Iglesias-Rogers 2021).

A similar point can be made about nineteenth-century British political thought, which is unintelligible if transnational influences are not taken into account. This is especially true when dealing with canonical figures like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. Historians continue to debate how far the texts produced by writers of this order informed practical political behaviour, and more recent interpretations tend towards minimising their role (Middleton 2021a). But whatever their influence, it is clear that the leading political thinkers in nineteenth-century Britain developed their ideas in dialogue and often in direct correspondence with foreign counterparts. Thomas Carlyle’s political and social thought owed considerable debts to Germany; John Stuart Mill was deeply invested in intellectual movements in France; Jeremy Bentham exchanged ideas with a very wide network of international contacts, in Europe and beyond; while France’s Alexis de Tocqueville corresponded in detail with numerous members of the British intelligentsia. Nineteenth-century historians, similarly, whose work had profound implications for political thinking and argument in Britain, drew extensively on texts, frameworks and methods from other countries, not least Germany (Bennett 2019). There is room to argue about precisely how far these influences shaped the character of British political thought. But it is clear that virtually all the most celebrated nineteenth-century British attempts to theorise about the workings of politics, and about the duties of the state, owed debts of some kind to international exchanges.

Conclusion

The sketch offered here has only scratched the surface of the transnational perspectives which might be brought to bear on nineteenth-century British politics. Little has been said, for instance, about the political experiences or impacts of the various immigrant and diasporic communities in Britain, which grew significantly in size over the nineteenth century (Panayi 1995). The cultural, religious, social and literary contexts within which formal political activity took place all had their own transnational dimensions, which need to be investigated. And sharply different pictures would certainly emerge if a more radical transnational methodology were adopted, in which Britain is decentred analytically, and treated as one node among others within wider international webs and networks (Potter 2007).

Even keeping Britain and the British political classes at the centre of the frame, however, important consequences follow from looking at British politics in transnational perspective. Nineteenth-century Britain’s political structures and experiences, thanks to the country’s history and its place in the world, were in many ways very distinctive. But precisely because of Britain’s exceptional global status and ambition, British politics was unusually open to an unusually wide range of foreign influences. Arguments, campaigns and correspondences which operated across national boundaries, and movements of people, texts and ideas between Britain and foreign states, were all part of the fabric of political life in nineteenth-century Britain. Historians have plenty of work yet to do in pinning down the political significance of all these phenomena, because students of modern British politics have long been less eager than their Continental counterparts to think in connected and comparative ways (Pedersen 2002). Enough has been said, however, to suggest that attempts to analyse nineteenth-century British politics in isolation from its international and transnational contexts are likely to miss significant parts of the picture.

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