LORD BROUGHAM AND THE SCIENCE OF DESPOTISM

Alex Middleton[1,2]

Abstract: Historians know that nineteenth-century British Liberals were highly exercised about the dangers of 'despotism', but little specific attention has been given to the place of the concept in contemporary political science. This article examines one of the Victorian era's most systematic comparative analyses of 'despotic' government, as conducted by the lawyer and statesman Henry Brougham, in his little-studied *Political Philosophy*. Published between 1842 and 1844, Brougham's unwieldy text aimed to educate British working men on the basic principles of politics, and at the same time to demolish Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. The article argues that Brougham's vivid treatment of the workings and effects of 'despotism' was an attempt to safeguard the Whig legacy in the face of new political threats.
Keywords: Henry Brougham, Whiggism, Liberalism, despotism, political science.

I. Introduction

From the mid-eighteenth century, as Melvin Richter has reminded us, debates about the character, operation, and merits of 'despotism' and its cognate terms became 'an integral part of political discourse throughout Europe'.[3] They played a particularly significant role in the development of Liberal politics and philosophies. Nineteenth-century Liberals founded a significant part of their identity on hostility to monarchical absolutism and authoritarian 'Caesarism', committing themselves instead to representative institutions and responsible government.[4] But in many cases, they also believed that there were settings in which arbitrary rule by enlightened cadres and individuals was entirely appropriate, principally in less developed parts of the world.[5] This would become a defining tension in European Liberalism.

Nineteenth-century Britain was especially preoccupied with questions about the dangers of 'despotism', and few studies of Victorian political ideas fail to cite some contemporary deployment of the term. Yet it is not always easy to make out what such references meant, since 'despotism' was not an easy concept to pin down. Something can be learned from work on aspects of public debate, including on British attitudes towards the form of 'despotism'

1 St Hugh's College, University of Oxford, OX2 6LE. Email: alex.middleton@history.ox.ac.uk.

2 I am grateful for comments on earlier versions of this article to Angus Hawkins, and to the anonymous reviewers.

3 M. Richter, 'A Family of Political Concepts: Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750-1917', *European Journal of Political Theory*, IV (2005), pp. 221-48, at pp. 237-8. See also P. Baehr and M. Richter, eds, *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, 2004).

4 H. Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2018), ch. 5; W. Selinger and G. Conti, 'The Lost History of *Political* Liberalism', *History of European Ideas*, XLVI (2020), pp. 341-54; W. Selinger, *Parliamentarism: from Burke to Weber* (Cambridge, 2019).

5 J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: the Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005).

which emerged from the French Revolution; on the historical narratives which celebrated Britain's repeated triumphs over 'despotic' kings and foreign powers; on Liberal and Radical uses of the term in partisan rhetorical combat; and on the rationalisation and criticism of 'despotic' rule within Britain's empire and in Ireland.[6] Historians have also examined how British writers and thinkers understood certain foreign polities which remained subject to authoritarian 'despotic' government, in Europe and further East, and how the United States appeared from certain angles as a 'democratic despotism'.[7] But it has not been common for historians to ask what Victorian Whigs and Liberals made of 'despotism' on a more abstract and scientific level: what exactly was it, how did it work, and what were its effects? Making sense of the patterns of thinking behind an idea which held so much power in nineteenth-century Britain must also involve paying attention to more sustained attempts to pin it down.

The difficulty is where to look. This is partly because 'despotism' was almost as fluid a term in the more rarefied realms of Victorian political thought as it was in mainstream debate. Most often, it meant the rule of a single individual imbued with unrestrained power. But sometimes that authority belonged to a class, an assembly, or an institution; sometimes the term signalled 'irresponsible' or compulsive power of any kind; sometimes particular forms of centralization; sometimes the subversion of due processes; sometimes foreign rule; sometimes simply harshness or cruelty. Typically it was found in contact with its various cognates, orbiting around concepts of 'tyranny', 'authoritarianism', 'arbitrary' rule or power, 'monarchy', 'absolutism', and 'dictatorship', as the context demanded; often it was qualified, as with references to 'military despotism', 'Asiatic despotism', 'plebiscitary despotism', or 'spiritual despotism'. But thanks to Montesquieu's attempt to position 'despotism' as one of

6 For revolutionary France see Emma Vincent Macleod, 'British Attitudes to the French Revolution', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), pp. 689-709; M. Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2014); S. Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven, 2004). For ideas about absolute rule in British political history see J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981); T. Lang, *The Victorians and the Stuart Heritage: Interpretations of a Discordant Past* (Cambridge, 1995). For politics see P.J. Durrans, 'A Two-Edged Sword: the Liberal Attack on Disraelian Imperialism', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, X (1982), pp. 262-84; J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity, and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006); W. Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817-1841* (Oxford, 1979); M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford, 1995); B. Barrow, '"The Waterloo of Democracy against Despotism": Chartist Internationalism and Poetic Repetition in the *Labourer*, 1847-48', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, XLVIII (2015), pp. 511-30. For attitudes towards imperial despotism see R.W. Kostal, *A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law* (Oxford, 2005); G. Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850-1920* (Cambridge, 2010); B. Schultz and G. Varouxakis, eds, *Utilitarianism and Empire* (Lanham, 2005); J. Wilson, 'The Silence of Empire: Imperialism and India', in *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. D. Craig and J. Thompson (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 218-41; L. Benton and L. Ford, *Rage for Order: the British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800-1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); A. Middleton, 'Corruption, Despotism, and the Colonial Office, c. 1820-1850', in *The Many Lives of Corruption: the Reform of Public Life in Modern Britain*, ed. Ian Cawood and Tom Crook (forthcoming).

7 For Europe see B. Porter, '"Bureau and Barrack": Early Victorian Attitudes Towards the Continent', *Victorian Studies*, XXVII (1984), pp. 407-33; J.P. Parry, 'The Impact of Napoleon III on British Politics, 1851-1880', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XI (2001), pp. 147-74; A. Middleton, 'Mid-Victorian Liberalism and the Austrian State, 1848-1867', *History of European Ideas*, XLVI (2020), pp. 582-600; A. Middleton, 'William Rathbone Greg, Scientific Liberalism, and the Second Empire', *Modern Intellectual History* (advance access). For the East see below, n. 9. For the United States see D.P. Crook, *American Democracy in English Politics, 1815-1850* (Oxford, 1965); M. Gerlach, *British Liberalism and the United States: Political and Social Thought in the Late Victorian Age* (Basingstoke, 2001); and see also R. Saunders, 'Democracy', in *Languages of Politics*, ed. Craig and Thompson, pp. 142-67. For the wider historiography on the Victorians and foreign polities, see A. Middleton, 'Victorian Politics and Politics Overseas', *Historical Journal* (advance access).

the three cardinal forms of government, and to the increasingly widespread use of the term in the era of the French Revolution, it was very often the dominant concept through which Victorian writers chose to reflect on absolute government.[8]

The other issue in tracking down more elaborate treatments of 'despotism' in this last sense, as a synonym for absolute rule, is that the era's most celebrated political thinkers are generally assumed to have found other questions more pressing. There is a good literature on nineteenth-century British thought about 'Oriental despotism', especially that of James and John Stuart Mill, and invocations of the idea of 'despotism' in British political discourse were often intended to recall the East.[9] These arguments came to be connected with more politically urgent discussions about what 'despotic' power might and might not achieve in the hands of British (and European) imperial proconsuls, and about the corrupting effects it could exercise within metropolitan politics.[10] Between these contexts we find J.S. Mill's widely cited dictum, that despotism was 'a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement', which intellectual historians have probed in some detail.[11] But in the existing historiography, most of the best-known Victorian writers on political science and philosophy concern themselves mainly with the more 'advanced' regions of the globe, where the great problems for the age and future – and for Britain itself – included the management of parliamentary and republican institutions, the role of the state in society, the organisation of international commerce, the proper limits of constitutional liberty, and in some cases grand projects of imperial and international political federation.[12] Most historians of the 'science of politics' in nineteenth-century Britain have, as a result, treated 'despotism' as a problem which lurked on its fringes. Scholars recognise that the concept was discussed as a counterpoint and as a necessary part of wider taxonomies, but seem to assume that it did not play a central role in framing wider schemes of political thought.[13] There is

8 R. Whatmore, 'Treason and Despotism: the Impact of the French Revolution upon Britain', *History of European Ideas*, XXXIV (2008), pp. 583-6.

9 M. Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge, 2009); C. Tzoref-Ashkenazi, 'Romantic Attitudes Towards Oriental Despotism', *Journal of Modern History*, LXXXV (2013), pp. 280-320; J. Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's* The History of British India *and Orientalism* (Oxford, 1992); L. Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford, 1994). For the pre-history see N. Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750* (Oxford, 2019), esp. chs 9, 15-16.

10 K. Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, 2010); Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016); T. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1995); M. Taylor, 'Imperium et Libertas? Rethinking the Radical Critique of Imperialism during the nineteenth century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, XIX (1991), pp. 1-23. Most of the leading later-Victorian writers on empire were more interested in history than political science, however: see Bell, *Reordering the World*.

11 J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. S. Collini (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 13-14. For Mill's analysis here see Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, ch. 5; Mantena, *Alibis of Empire*, pp. 30-9; G. Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: J.S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 103-4, 113-14; Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam*, ch. 7. Mill's dictum was cited in other major Victorian texts, including J.F. Stephen, *Liberty Equality, Fraternity* (London, 1874. 2nd edn), p. 25. See also U.S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999); B. Jahn, 'Barbarian Thoughts: Imperialism in the Philosophy of John Stuart Mill', *Review of International Studies*, XXXI (2005), pp. 599-618.

12 For the last see Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, 2020).

13 This is how 'despotism' features in e.g. the seminal S. Collini, D. Winch, and J. Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 1983).

much to be gained by looking more seriously at what Britain's leading political thinkers did with questions about 'despotism' and the characteristics of absolute power: J.R. Seeley, for one, had a particular interest in the subject.[14] Finding the most ambitious Victorian dissections of the nature of 'despotic' rule, however, also means exploring beyond the era's best-known theorists. In the process, the exercise can help us to rethink the parameters, audiences, and partisan goals of 'political science' in nineteenth-century Britain.

This article deals, as a starting point, with the elaborate comparative study of despotic regimes found in the lawyer and statesman Henry, Lord Brougham's three-volume *Political Philosophy* (1842-4).[15] Brougham's largely forgotten work was not a finely-tuned piece of theory. Written in part for an audience of working men, and dedicated to buttressing an obsolescent version of Whig constitutionalism, it was framed as an introduction to the principles of political science. Brougham did nothing by halves, however, and his text was also a passionate attack on Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. The *Political Philosophy* did not have the impact Brougham hoped for, but it was a serious intellectual project, and various aspects of its content and context would repay further investigation. This article argues that one of its main contributions to political thought lay in its attempt to break Montesquieu's grip on the concept of 'despotism', by emphasising the ways in which the dangers associated with that hateful model of government were an ever-present threat even within societies which appeared to have secured robust forms of constitutional liberty.[16] In taking this line, Brougham sought to safeguard the Whig legacy, both by encouraging popular vigilance, and by refuting (anonymous) contemporaries who identified redeeming features in arbitrary rule. More broadly, Brougham's distillation of contemporary conventional wisdoms about the necessary failings of despotic government casts important light on the theoretical scaffolding which was available to early Victorian Liberals to rationalise hostility towards absolute rule. The article's first section introduces the *Political Philosophy*, and its aims. The second part deals with Brougham's concepts of 'despotism' and absolute monarchy, before the third examines his arguments about the social and political harms caused by despotic rule.

II. Brougham and the *Political Philosophy*

Historians do not celebrate Henry Brougham as a political philosopher. His mercurial literary, legal, and political careers, however, are heavily studied.[17] Born in Edinburgh in 1778, and educated at that city's university, Brougham's storied public life embraced co-founding the *Edinburgh Review*, leading the defence of Queen Caroline, assuming a central role in the parliamentary Whig party, serving as Lord Chancellor in Earl Grey's Reform government,

14 Seeley developed a contrast between 'organic' and 'inorganic' forms of despotism: see J.R. Seeley, *Introduction to Political Science: Two Series of Lectures* (London, 1986), esp. lecture VIII.

15 Henry, Lord Brougham, *Political Philosophy* (London, 1842-4. 3 vols), hereafter *PP*. The first volume was published anonymously, but its authorship was immediately obvious to contemporaries: e.g. *Examiner*, no. 1782 (26 March 1842), p. 196. The second and third volumes were signed.

16 The bedrock political significance of the constitution is a theme which runs through Victorian historiography, but see especially A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford, 2015); J. Vernon, ed., *Re-Reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996); Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*.

17 The main modern accounts of Brougham are R. Stewart, *Henry Brougham, 1778-1868: his Public Career* (London, 1985); R.K. Huch, *Henry, Lord Brougham: the Later Years, 1830-68: The 'Great Actor'* (Lewiston, NY, 1993); T.H. Ford, *Henry Brougham and his World: a Biography* (Chichester, 1995-2001. 2 vols); W.A. Hay, *The Whig Revival, 1808-1830* (Basingstoke, 2005). None of these pays much attention to Brougham's writing.

co-founding the Social Science Association, and campaigning extensively for law reform.[18] Brougham was among his age's most interesting 'intellectuals in politics', and possessed an extraordinarily energetic mind. He belonged in his earlier years to the much-discussed turn-of-the-century circle of 'Edinburgh Whigs', which embraced such luminaries as Francis Jeffrey, James Mackintosh, Dugald Stewart, and John Millar, and never lost the impress of their political philosophy.[19] Brougham wrote voluminously for publication for most of his life, but the sheer range of his interests – which spanned history, politics, political economy, natural science, mathematics, education, literature, classics, and theology – meant that his contribution to most fields was not sustained. The Liberal statesman and writer John Morley accused him of 'encyclopaedic ignorance'.[20] Modern studies of Brougham's scholarly work, however, more often conclude that it ought to be taken seriously.[21] Brougham has recently been described by William Selinger as 'one of the most important liberal thinkers in nineteenth-century Britain', following Boyd Hilton's earlier suggestion that he acted as 'a crucial link between Foxite Whiggism and mid-Victorian Liberalism'.[22]

Political science was among Brougham's more developed concerns. Gregory Conti has recently discussed some of his ideas about parliamentary representation, while his name is scattered across Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow's seminal study of the science of politics in nineteenth-century Britain.[23] He features in the latter work, however, less as a contributor to the art than as a member of an influential set, and proves an exception to most rules the authors outline. Collini, Winch, and Burrow cite the *Political Philosophy*, Brougham's largest single work on any subject, only as a subject of exhausted dismissiveness from contemporaries, and as a later and rather unexpected addition to the reading list for the paper on 'History and Political Philosophy' in the Cambridge Moral Sciences Tripos.[24] Burrow's later volume on the Whig tradition in nineteenth-century British political thought omits the *Political Philosophy* (and indeed Brougham) entirely.[25] Most other historians who

18 See respectively: B. Fontana, *Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: the Edinburgh Review, 1802-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), which offers a good account of Brougham's early political thought; E.A. Smith, *A Queen on Trial: the Affair of Queen Caroline* (Stroud, 1993); A. Mitchell, *The Whigs in Opposition, 1815-1830* (Oxford, 1967); I. Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform, 1830-41: the Politics of Government* (Stanford, 1990); L Goldman, *Science, Reform and Politics in Victorian Britain: the Social Science Association, 1857-1886* (Cambridge, 2002); M. Lobban, 'Henry Brougham and Law Reform', *English Historical Review*, CXV (2000), pp. 1184-1215.

19 Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, p. 84.

20 Michael Lobban, 'Brougham, Henry Peter, first Baron Brougham and Vaux', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

21 See recently C.D. Pearce, 'Lord Brougham's Neo-Paganism', *Journal of the History of Ideas* LV (1994), pp. 651-70; W.D. Sockwell, *Popularizing Classical Economics: Henry Brougham and William Ellis* (Basingstoke, 1994), part I; J. Bord, *Science and Whig Manners: Science and Political Style in Britain, c. 1790-1850* (Basingstoke, 2009).

22 Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, p. 112; B. Hilton, *English Historical Review*, CIII (1988), pp. 996-8, p. 998. See also B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 188-9.

23 G. Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019), which does not cite the *Political Philosophy*; Collini et al., *That Noble Science*.

24 Collini et al., *That Noble Science*, pp. 57-8, 345-6. For Lord Acton's criticism of the *Political Philosophy* see G.E. Fasnacht, *Acton's Political Philosophy: an Analysis* (New York, 1953), esp. p. 197.

25 J.W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1988). Brougham fails to make the cut also in Sandra Den Otter, 'The Origins of a Historical Political Science in Late

have noticed the text – few enough – have dealt with it in no more than a glancing fashion.[26] Mark Francis and John Morrow note that Brougham was the author of 'the only large-scale political philosophy produced in England during the first half of the nineteenth century', and that he 'clung tenaciously to a notion of balance in the constitution': but they suggest that he was 'an anachronism', because 'constitutional history had supplanted political philosophy'.[27]

Francis and Morrow put their finger on one reason behind the low historiographical profile of the *Political Philosophy*. An equally important one is that Brougham is often considered to be past his best by the 1840s, bitter about his exclusion from front-line politics, and unhinged enough to have faked his own death in 1839.[28] Another is the work's structural eccentricity, with unexpected asides and passages of autobiography setting it apart from more sober studies. Perhaps the most important, however, is that the text did not aim to compete at the highest levels of Victorian intellectual culture. The *Political Philosophy* was issued under the auspices of, and funded by, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK). Founded by Brougham and other educational reformers in 1826, the organisation was created to disseminate cheap, 'useful' publications to working- and middle-class audiences less able to access post-elementary education.[29] Part of its purpose was to combat the less wholesome productions of the radical presses, but for most of its lifespan the SDUK skirted around the tricky subjects of politics and religion, staying on the safer ground of science and geography.[30] Its reforming and secular leanings, however, made it a target of vigorous criticism in the Tory press. By the early 1840s the Society's finances were troubled, with subscribers down to the dozens, and it was wound up in 1846.[31] Brougham's *Political Philosophy*, then, was published by a declining organisation, which was not known for sponsoring works on politics, and directed at a diminishing readership.

Victorian and Edwardian Britain', in *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880*, ed. Robert Adcock, Mark Bevir, and Shannon C. Stimson (Princeton, 2007), pp. 37-65.

26 It is mentioned in V.E. Starzinger, *The Politics of the Center: the* Juste Milieu *in Theory and Practice, France and England, 1815-48* (Charlottesville, 1965), esp. ch. 2, and in D.P. Crook, *American Democracy in English Politics, 1815-1850* (Oxford, 1965). For a closer political-scientific examination of one aspect of the *Political Philosophy*, however, see C.D. Pearce, 'Lessons for Liberalism: Lord Brougham's Philosophy of Italian Politics,' *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*, IV (2009).

27 M. Francis and J. Morrow, *A History of English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1994), p. 23. Brougham's thought in relation to parliamentary reform was discussed in Crane Brinton, *English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1933); but he attracts only a passing mention in G. Stedman Jones and G. Claeys, ed., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011).

28 Joseph Parkes called him 'an insane man' in a letter of 1838: Joseph Parkes to Richard Cobden, 29 Dec. 1838, quoted in Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838-1846* (London, 1958), p. 39. For the faked death see Lobban, 'Brougham'.

29 The literature on the SDUK is large, but on Brougham and/or the *Political Philosophy* specifically see F.A. Cavenagh, 'Lord Brougham and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge', *Journal of Adult Education*, IV (1929); J.N. Hays, 'Science and Brougham's Society', *Annals of Science*, XX (1964), pp. 227-41; H. Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education* (London, 1965), esp. p. 200; R. Ashton, 'Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

30 These subjects could, of course, be political too: see I.J. Barrow, 'India for the Working Classes: the Maps of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXXVIII (2004), pp. 677-702.

31 'Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge: Address of the Committee, 1st June, 1843' *PP*, II, pp. 1-11.

All this has obscured the fact that the *Political Philosophy* was an incredibly ambitious study, and in many ways a pioneering one. Brougham claimed in his conclusion to the work to be retrospectively 'appalled' at the boldness of his project.[32] It took him years of sustained effort, with portions of the text dating back at least to 1835.[33] It was massive in scale, occupying three lengthy volumes, and more than 1,600 pages. And it promised to offer something that no extant work had (ostensibly) managed: a 'full, yet popular, explanation' of 'the whole of Political Science', which steered clear of any hint of partisan bias.[34] What this meant was not self-evident, since there was no settled consensus in the 1840s on where the parameters of 'political science' actually lay. Brougham framed the subject as the branch of moral philosophy which dealt with man as a member of society.[35] But it was, he insisted, an experimental as well as a theoretical discipline, and properly conducted it allowed for safe practical inferences to be made.[36] Brougham set out to show that close analysis of the coalescence and operation of polities could explode the seductive abstractions which had disfigured so much so-called 'political science' throughout its modern history.[37]

Brougham's ideal version of political science had several branches, including political economy, jurisprudence, and international law.[38] His focus in the *Political Philosophy*, however, was on what he called 'the Comparative Anatomy of Government'.[39] The three volumes of the text dealt in turn with the great divisions of government as Brougham saw them: respectively monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy and 'mixed' government. Within individual volumes, chapters on general problems were interspersed irregularly, but the organisation was predominantly state-by-state. Examining foreign constitutions, Brougham argued, was both a way of improving men's understanding of their own systems, and of raising their minds to the Creator responsible for humankind and its moral nature.[40] He disclaimed any desire to use comparison between countries as a means of mitigating defects in the government at home; indeed he suggested that it was important to pin down flaws in

32 *PP*, III, p. 405.

33 *PP*, I, p. 216.

34 *PP*, I, pp. 31-2; II, pp. v-vi; III, p. vii.

35 *PP*, I, p. 2.

36 *PP*, I, pp. 4-5.

37 Brougham dismissed the idea of asserting general maxims without regard to circumstances: *PP*, I, p. 71. He would later admit, however, that the French Revolution of 1848 created problems for the *Political Philosophy*'s scheme: Lord Brougham, *Letter to the Marquis of Lansdowne, on the Late Revolution in France* (London, 1848), pp. 4-5; F.B. Smith, 'Great Britain and the Revolutions of 1848', *Labour History*, XXXIII (1977), pp. 65-85, esp. pp. 69-70.

38 *PP*, I, pp. 9-10. It did not include the 'Law of Nations' as commonly understood, which for Brougham involved a mistaken conflation of domestic and international matters.

39 *PP*, I, p. 14. Comparative anatomy had more progressive political implications than its competitor science, functional anatomy: see Boyd Hilton, 'The Politics of Anatomy and an Anatomy of Politics, c. 1825-1850', in *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950*, ed. S. Collini, R. Whatmore, and B. Young (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 179-97, esp. p. 186. Brougham's approach to the problem had something in common with that pursued much later in James Bryce, *Modern Democracies* (London, 1921. 2 vols).

40 *PP*, I, p. 12. Comparison, for Brougham, was 'the very highest enjoyment of all that scientific investigation affords': I, p. 215.

arguments used to defend other political systems, precisely in order to promote vigilance about invalid contentions in favour of Britain's own.[41]

In reality, the *Political Philosophy* was neither comprehensive nor consistent. In many cases it focused arbitrarily on particular countries as exemplifying particular forms of political order; its examinations of the social effects of different types of government were uneven; and certain problems were dealt with much more fully and originally than others. Some contemporary reviewers were puzzled about where Brougham had sourced his information, given the inconsistent quantities of referencing.[42] Others noted that the sheer length of the work rendered it inappropriate for men whose time was largely taken up with handicraft and manual labour.[43] Its style did not help matters, with Brougham known to be 'tautologous, verbose, diffuse, and prolix' as a writer.[44] The economist Nassau Senior suggested in the *Edinburgh Review* that the fundamental problem with the *Political Philosophy* was that it compressed into one treatise the material of three, running together conceptions of 'political science' that were analytically distinct. In dealing at once with the history, theory, and art of politics, it blended narrative, philosophical exposition, and positive precept, and this impaired its continuity and cohesion.[45] There was little more interest among contemporaries than there has been among historians in what the text aimed to accomplish, politically and intellectually.

The *Political Philosophy* is best understood as one of the early nineteenth century's most elaborate defences of the English constitutional order. It sought, first, to teach submission. Written in part in the midst of the Chartist disturbances, the *Political Philosophy*'s opening chapters were devoted to demonstrating that open resistance to even the most abhorrent regimes was liable to make matters worse rather than better, and that in almost all cases acquiescence and gradualism were to be preferred to revolutionary subversion.[46] That, for Brougham, was the great lesson of the first French Revolution of 1789.[47] His early chapters also argued, however, that in an advanced society like Britain's, habits of obedience could be cultivated only by the diffusion of correct knowledge about the principles of political science: hence the need for the work.[48] At a time when discussions about the levels of political education appropriate for non-electors remained highly charged, this was in itself a challenging political claim.

---

41 *PP*, I, pp. 214-15, 362. David Craig has pointed out that the inner workings of the British constitution were not widely understood in the nineteenth century: David Craig, "The Crowned Republic? Monarchy and Anti-Monarchy in Britain, 1760-1901," *Historical Journal*, XLVI (2003), pp. 167-85, at p. 177.

42 E.g. *Examiner*, no. 1782 (26 March 1842), p. 196.

43 *Athenaeum*, no. 750 (12 March 1842), pp. 224-5; *Spectator*, no. 835 (29 June 1844), p. 616.

44 'Lord Brougham's Pamphlet on the French Revolution', *Examiner*, no. 2124 (14 October 1848), pp. 659-60, p. 660. Brougham's wayward style was widely commented on by contemporaries: see e.g. the journal of the Anti-Corn Law League's remark that '[t]he precise nature and extent of Lord Brougham's responsibility for his words is, we believe, still an open question with the psychologists': *The League*, III, no. 122 (24 January 1846), p. 258. I am grateful to Robert Saunders for this reference.

45 [N. Senior], 'Lord Brougham's *Political Philosophy*', *Edinburgh Review* LXXXI (1845), pp. 1-46, pp. 1-3.

46 *PP*, I, ch. 1.

47 *PP*, I, p. 471.

48 *PP*, I, pp. 16-30, 80-3.

The second step in Brougham's attempt to prise working men out of the hands of agitators was to make the case, through a survey of the structural failings in all the other forms of government historically available, for the 'immeasurable superiority' of Britain's political order.[49] The work was organised to build towards the extended account of the development of the 'admirable' British constitution which formed the centrepiece of the third volume.[50] That account was, in the context of the 1840s, becoming thoroughly old-fashioned. It continued to rest on the language of 'mixed' and 'balanced' government, in a way shaped by eighteenth-century Whig priorities, and did not pay much attention to efforts to rework the theory of the British constitution since the Reform crisis.[51] At a time when conservative and radical critiques of Whiggism were starting to run together, moreover, and when progressive parliamentarians were beginning to prefer the label 'Liberal' to 'Whig', Brougham's pride in the Whig tradition was palpable.[52] Even though he was personally estranged from much of the parliamentary party by the early 1840s, or perhaps as a gambit in one of his periodic efforts to re-ingratiate himself, Brougham's *Political Philosophy* paid warm tribute to several Whig leading lights. The third volume was dedicated to Earl Grey, as 'expounding the principles of Constitutional Polity that guided his brilliant and useful administration', while Brougham had originally asked Lord John Russell, the Whigs' leader in the Commons and torchbearer for their glorious past, to contribute the portion on the history of the British constitution.[53] For all Brougham's assertions of freedom from partisanship in his political science, his volumes carried heavy party-political baggage.[54]

Brougham wrote the *Political Philosophy* to pursue political goals, then, but he also wrote it to demonstrate his intellectual superiority. His starting point was that every other work on political science available in England was defective, due variously to being biased, outdated, or ignorant of important branches of the subject.[55] Brougham's aim was not to synthesise but to improve, and his text was packed full of straw men, including a number of figures whose influence on his own thinking was unmistakeable. There were intimations of approval for Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and James Mackintosh: but Edmund Burke's arguments had been warped by the French Revolution, Voltaire was vitiated by copious mistakes, and John

---

49 *PP*, I, p. 18.

50 *PP*, III, p. 154. This account was later repackaged as Henry, Lord Brougham, *The British Constitution: Its History, Structure, and Working* (London, 1861).

51 A. Hawkins, '"Parliamentary Government" and Victorian Political Parties, c. 1830-c. 1880', *English Historical Review* CIV (1989), pp. 639-69; Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, p. 227; J.A.W. Gunn, 'Influence, Parties, and the Constitution: Changing Attitudes, 1783-1832', *Historical Journal* XVII (1974), pp. 301-28, at 322-3, 328.

52 E.g. *PP*, I, p. 63. For these contexts see L. Mitchell, *The Whig World, 1760-1837* (London, 2005), ch. 9; J. Coohill, 'Parliamentary Guides, Political Identity and the Presentation of Modern Politics, 1832-1846', *Parliamentary History*, XXII (2003), pp. 263-84; Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, pp. 102-3.

53 *PP*, III, pp. v, 321. This must have implied some approval of Lord John Russell, *An Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution* (London, 1821), which also employed the language of 'mixed' government: for the overlap between Brougham and Russell on questions of parliamentary patronage and corruption see Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, pp. 112-14.

54 It is tempting to want to read Brougham's text as a riposte to Benjamin Disraeli's *Vindication of the English Constitution* (1835), and to the stingingly anti-Whig interpretation of English history Disraeli asserted more widely: see J.P. Parry, 'Disraeli and England', *Historical Journal* XLIII (2000), pp. 699-728.

55 *PP*, I, p. 31.

Locke's reasoning was 'vague, slovenly, and fallacious'.[56] In addition, William Paley had not really written political science, much of Adam Smith had been proven wrong, John Millar was often in error, Jean-Baptiste Say was obsolete, and David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and James Mill had only managed to deal controversially with small parts of the subject.[57] But these men were small fry: the *Political Philosophy's* most significant intellectual target was Montesquieu. Brougham was determined to demonstrate that the Frenchman's most celebrated work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was asinine. He argued that it had framed a 'fanciful system', premised on analogies and generalisations, which entirely lacked solidity.[58] It bent facts to suit theory, and was characterised by 'groundless statements', 'puerile love of point', and 'quaint conceit'. [59] Other Edinburgh Whigs, including Brougham's teacher Dugald Stewart, had been critical of Montesquieu in the past: but it was entirely characteristic of Brougham to insult perhaps the most admired political thinker of the time.[60] In fact, despite all the hyperbole, the *Political Philosophy* did not develop a sustained critique of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Brougham's account of despotic government built upon rather than subverted Montesquieu's, despite deliberate differences in the central categories of analysis. But Brougham's discussion of the subject was designed to serve alternative political purposes.

III. Brougham's concept of despotism

The first volume of the *Political Philosophy*, the longest of the three by several hundred pages, was dedicated to 'absolute monarchy'.[61] In it, Brougham dealt with the form of government in which sovereignty was centred in one person. He argued that categorical distinctions could be drawn between varieties of absolute rule, and that its operation was modified significantly according to the conditions and habits prevailing in particular nations.

Contemporary reviewers noted that the *Political Philosophy*'s version of a 'comprehensive' political science gave more space to monarchical government than was likely to appeal to the British public, who were congenitally more interested in aristocratic and representative institutions.[62] Brougham, however, was not entirely at home with post-1832 priorities. He had come of age during the French Revolution, and been in his political prime during the reigns of George III and George IV, when Whiggism had been preoccupied with possible encroachments by the prerogatives of the Crown upon hard-earned constitutional liberties.[63]

56 *PP*, I, Aristotle at pp. 89-90; Hobbes at p. 39; Mackintosh at p. 94; Burke at p. 86; Voltaire at pp. 230-42; Locke at p. 37.

57 *PP*, I, pp. 31-2; II, pp. 15-16.

58 *PP*, I, pp. 31-2.

59 *PP*, I, pp. 94-6. Brougham was far from the first writer to criticise Montesquieu along these lines. See e.g., for Jean Louis de Lolme, Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, p. 45.

60 Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, pp. 106-7. Presumably thanks in part to Stewart's teaching, Brougham had been intellectually hostile towards Montesquieu since his youth: see Henry Brougham, *An Inquiry into the Colonial Policy of the European Powers* (Edinburgh, 1803. 2 vols), II, pp. 14-15.

61 739 pages (76 asterisked, presumably due to a printing error), as compared to 393 for the second volume, and 426 for the third.

62 E.g. *Examiner*, no. 1782 (26 March 1842), p. 196; 'Political Philosophy,' *Monthly Review* II (1842), pp. 42-6, p. 42; and *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* XI (1844), pp. 529-30, which said that the work's third volume was the most important of the three. Serious critical discussion, or what little of it there was, largely began with the second volume: e.g. 'Aristocracy,' *Eclectic Review* XV (1844), pp. 1-24.

63 J. Parry, 'Patriotism,' in *Language of Politics*, ed. Craig and Thompson, pp. 69-92.

We will see in the next section that this spectre continued to haunt the *Political Philosophy*. Hostility to oppressive absolute government overseas, moreover, was a thread which had run through Brougham's public life. In both his journalistic and parliamentary careers he had condemned the degrading effects of despotic power, and its tendency to make men suspicious and selfish.[64] He had censured the activities of the Holy Alliance in the 1820s, and continued to maintain in the *Political Philosophy* that that body had represented 'a conspiracy against the progress of liberty all over the world'.[65] He welcomed the French Revolution of 1830 as a repudiation of 'lawless despotism', while criticising as 'despotic' Britain's suspension of the Lower Canadian constitution later on in that decade.[66] None of these positions was unusual for a Whig of Brougham's generation, but they signal a rooted antagonism towards the political associations and tendencies associated with 'despotism' in British political debate.

Some treatment of 'absolute' government was clearly required in a work which claimed to encompass the 'whole principles' of political science. But Brougham went into considerably greater depth on the subject than his closest British competitors.[67] Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), still a Cambridge textbook in the 1840s, offered only a summary account of the benefits and disadvantages of absolute rule, as part of what was in any case a relatively brief excursion into political philosophy.[68] George Cornewall Lewis's later *Treatise on the Methods of Observation and Reasoning in Politics* (1852) spent more time on the distinctions between 'Eastern' despotism and 'European' forms of government, but its analysis of absolute rule in general remained brisk.[69] A somewhat more sustained discussion of despotic authority can be found in the writings of Jeremy Bentham. Bentham returned constantly to the language of 'despotism', marking out clear categorical distinctions between 'free' and 'despotic' government, reflecting on the natural tendencies of despotic power, and commenting on the radical reforms necessary to prevent England's government from devolving into despotism.[70] Bentham and Brougham were personally acquainted, and argued about law reform: despite some stark differences of political principle between the Radical and the Whig, there were significant overlaps between their respective writings on political science, not least their shared distaste for the idea of 'despotism'.[71] Brougham in his

64 'Education of the Poor,' House of Commons Speech (8 May 1818), in *Selections from the Speeches and Writings of the Right Honourable Henry, Lord Brougham & Vaux* (London, 1832), pp. 67-70, p. 69; 'Foreign Relations of Great Britain' (1839), in Henry, Lord Brougham, *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (London and Glasgow, 1856), II, pp. 132-86. See also 'Dangers of the Constitution' (1816), in Brougham, *Contributions*, II, pp. 418-41; 'Law of Libel – Liberty of the Press' (1816), in Brougham, *Contributions*, III, pp. 150-82; 'Balance of Power' (1803), in Brougham, *Contributions*, II, pp. 3-49.

65 'Holy Alliance,' in *Speeches of Henry, Lord Brougham* (Edinburgh, 1838. 4 vols), I, pp. 625-76; *PP*, I, p. 482.

66 *Opinions of Lord Brougham* (Paris, 1841), p. 235; 'Maltreatment of the North American Colonies,' in *Speeches*, IV, pp. 183-304. On 1830 see also Hay, *Whig Revival*, pp. 167-9.

67 For Continental accounts see P. Baehr and M. Richter, eds, *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, 2004).

68 W. Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (London, 1785), pp. 450-1.

69 G.C. Lewis, *A Treatise on the Methods of Observation and Reasoning in Politics* (London, 1852. 2 vols), I, ch. 4; II, chs 15-16. Lewis did not cite Brougham in this closely-referenced work. See also G.C. Lewis, *An Essay on the Government of Dependencies* (London, 1841), pp. 16, 27-8.

70 P. Schofield, *Utility and Democracy: the Political Thought of Jeremy Bentham* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 239, 250-1, 190, 146-7. On despotism in contemporary Spain see also pp. 211-14.

71 Schofield, *Utility and Democracy*, p. 306 and ch. 12.

younger days was highly sympathetic to Utilitarianism, so it is no surprise to find that his theory of sovereignty, and aspects of his political analysis, had a Benthamite cast.[72] But quite naturally given Bentham's preference for imagining what might be, and Brougham's for describing what was, the *Political Philosophy* offered a far more systematic account of the nature and effects of 'despotic' rule than anything to be found in the older man's corpus.

The *Political Philosophy* did not deal with 'despotism' comprehensively. It dealt with the concept as a form of state organisation, and as a set of habits into which governments, individuals, and agencies could fall. It did not address John Stuart Mill's question about whether despotic government was a justifiable mode of securing process in underdeveloped polities, in the absence of diffused self-governing faculties and enlightened public opinion.[73] It did not spend much time – as some contemporary writers did – looking at despotisms as laboratories for political experiments, in which rulers could pursue radical political and social schemes inconceivable in polities governed via popular means.[74] Nor, most strikingly given that its author had forty years earlier published a pioneering two-volume work called *An Inquiry into the Colonial Policy of the European Powers*, had given so much of his life to the anti-slavery cause, and had recently been such a vigorous critic of the course of British policy in Canada, was the *Political Philosophy* seriously concerned with the problem of empire.[75] The text said almost nothing about colonial rule, or indeed about the post-colonial states of Latin America, with the single chapter on colonial establishments dealing summarily with the ability of more democratic states to govern their dependencies fairly.[76] Brougham justified this approach by arguing that colonial settlements were 'really only portions of another nation'.[77] He made little, moreover, of the fact that all the main despotic states dissected in the *Political Philosophy* were also territorial empires. Brougham, it is true, was writing before it was common to integrate discussion of empire and imperial expansion with other more established subjects in the science of government.[78] The result, however, was that he sidestepped increasingly combative public debates over Britain's own participation in 'despotic' rule – a theme which, as we have seen, he did engage with in other contexts – and which had been explored most extensively over the preceding decades in relation to British India, most spectacularly around the renewal of the East India Company's Charter in 1833.[79]

---

72 Pearce, 'Neo-Paganism', pp. 667-9.

73 This was a major practical and philosophical problem in early-nineteenth-century Britain, and not one on which attitudes divided neatly down partisan lines. See A. Middleton, 'Britain and the Paraguayan Dictatorship, c. 1820-1840', *Historical Journal* (advance access).

74 See e.g., for Walter Bagehot on this theme, A. Zevin, *Liberalism and Large: the World According to the Economist* (London, 2019), p. 93 n. 82.

75 Brougham, *Colonial Policy*. For some thoughts on his imperial ideas see J.W. Lew, 'The Plague of Imperial Desire: Montesquieu, Gibbon, Brougham, and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*', in *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830*, ed. T. Fulford and P.J. Kitson (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 261-78, pp. 269-71.

76 *PP*, III, ch. 17. Brougham did note that the power of the Crown was effectively unlimited in the British colonies: *PP*, I, pp. 508-9, though cf. III, pp. 14-15.

77 Brougham, *PP*, I, p. 35. For his ideas on colonial government see Brougham, *Colonial Policy*, II, pp. 9-59.

78 For the 1830s context see A. Middleton, 'Robert Montgomery Martin and the Origins of "Greater Britain"', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (advance access); and for the changing picture later on in the century, see Bell, *Reordering the World*.

79 See G.D. Bearce, *British Attitudes Towards India, 1784-1858* (London, 1961); E. Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1958); T. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. ch. 2.

The *Political Philosophy*'s focus, then, was on independent states. In prioritising the analysis of foreign despotisms, Brougham inevitably ended up falling back on many of the same central case studies used by his forerunners. The East was a central part of his scheme, and the *Political Philosophy* drew significantly on existing writing about 'Oriental despotism'. Like most of the better-known British thinkers of his age – Bentham, Macaulay, the Mills – Brougham was not persuaded by Enlightenment arguments that the paternal despotisms of Asia were in some institutional senses superior to contemporary Europe.[80] He would go to great lengths to elaborate their political infirmities, as the next section discusses. Much of the intellectual architecture behind Brougham's concept of 'despotism', in fact, seems to be shared with that developed in the Utilitarian James Mill's *History of British India* (1817).[81] Mill's distinctions between the varieties of Asiatic despotism, and especially his discussion of the checks which habitually arose upon the exercise of absolute power under such regimes, both look strikingly similar to the analysis which would later be presented in the *Political Philosophy*, though if the debt was direct then Brougham was not diligent about citing his sources.[82] But Brougham was more than an epigone. His attempts to produce a scheme which could make sense of the relations between Asiatic and European 'despotism' added new dimensions not present in existing treatments of the phenomenon.

In the *Political Philosophy*, categorical distinctions between forms of government came down to the location of sovereignty. For Brougham, as for Bentham, there was in all states a *theoretically* supreme, uncontrolled sovereign power.[83] As far as unmixed governments were concerned, there were three places in which that power could be found: in a person, in a class, or in the community at large. Hence, respectively, arose the three great divisions of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.[84] Here, in returning to this more straightforwardly Aristotelian classification, Brougham departed from Montesquieu's 'extremely incorrect' and 'superficial' fundamental positions.[85] *The Spirit of the Laws* had differentiated, famously, between despotism, monarchy, and republic as the three main types of government. Montesquieu had suggested that despotism was distinguished by the absence of fixed laws which could restrain the sovereign, and made to act by the principle of fear of the ruler.[86] Monarchical government, by contrast, was '*that in which one alone governs, but by fixed and established laws*', and its principle was honour – a form which Brougham would subdivide and qualify into the categories of 'constitutional' and 'mixed' monarchy.[87]

80 See Robert Kurfirst, 'J.S. Mill on Oriental Despotism, including its British Variant', *Utilitas*, VIII (1996), pp. 73-87.

81 James Mill, *The History of British India* (London, 1817. 3 vols).

82 Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam*, pp. 188-92. For J.S. Mill's later analysis, which understandably also had significant overlaps with Brougham's, see ibid., p. 197.

83 *PP*, I, p. 66. Bentham's arguments about how that power might best be controlled for the public good involved proposing radical, and in many cases visionary, securities against misgovernment; Brougham argued instead that Britain's mixed constitution, and the conventions associated with it, had largely solved the problem.

84 *PP*, I, p. 73.

85 *PP*, I, pp. 95-6.

86 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge, 1989), part I, books 2-3. See V.B. Sullivan, *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe: An Interpretation of the 'Spirit of the Laws'* (Chicago, 2017); D. Young, 'Montesquieu's View of Despotism and his Use of Travel Literature,' *Review of Politics*, XL (1978), pp. 392-405; R. Boesche, 'Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu's Two Theories of Despotism,' *Western Political Quarterly*, XXXIII (1990), pp. 741-61.

87 Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, pp. 10, 26-7.

'Despotism' was not, then, the headline category in the *Political Philosophy* which it had been in *The Spirit of the Laws*. For Brougham, the concept played a different and less sharply defined role. In essence he followed Paley, who in his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* had treated 'despotism' and 'absolute monarchy' as synonyms.[88] Brougham, committed to organising all forms of rule by an individual under the heading of 'monarchy', declared that the term 'despotism' stood for the purest species of the system – in which the power of the ruler was entirely unconstrained – rather than a distinct type of government. Both terms, for Brougham, signified 'the absolute and uncontrolled power of one master', but he noted that 'in ordinary language the word [despotism] denotes rather the abuse of monarchy than a separate form of it'.[89] Examples of this 'despotic' government could be found in all ages, and parts of the world. The *Political Philosophy* insisted that it was wrong to confine particular kinds of constitution to particular extensions of territory, and that Montesquieu had erred in claiming that despotism could operate only across larger spaces.[90]

But Brougham went on to clarify, following well-established lines of analysis emphasised most recently in James Mill's *History of British India*, that there was no such thing as *practically* uncontrolled sovereign power. The threat of popular rebellion and revolution was always present and powerful, even in the most rigorously absolute polities.[91] So even the worst tyrants could not outrage the basic feelings of human nature with impunity.[92] In practice, moreover, there inevitably tended to evolve more specific, systematic checks on the writ of despotic sway, such that even 'the purest despotism' was usually 'somewhat mixed and partaking of the aristocratical and oligarchical nature'.[93] Brougham's taxonomy of the varieties of despotic government was organised around the extent and quality of these checks.

Despotism in its purest form was to be found in the Near East.[94] For Brougham, as for Montesquieu and other eighteenth-century writers, the Ottoman and Persian empires remained the best examples of state systems in which the sovereign alone made law.[95] In those polities, all rank as well as all power flowed from the prince: no other members of society possessed any independent weight.[96] The Islamic religion, moreover, helped promote implicit obedience to the ruler.[97] Even here, however, there were limits to absolute authority.

---

88 Paley, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, p. 450.

89 *PP*, I, p. 73; see also III, p. 1. At times, Brougham did slip between the use of 'despotism' as a description of a particular locus of sovereignty, and its familiar contemporary usage as a term which denoted arbitrary cruelty and harshness: e.g. II, p. 288.

90 *PP*, I, p. 101; III, pp. 14-17.

91 *PP*, I, p. 25.

92 *PP*, I, p. 210; III, p. 117. The French Revolution of 1789 proved this: III, p. 342.

93 *PP*, I, p. 76.

94 Brougham said that Japan might also belong in this category, but that it was hard to be certain: *PP*, I, pp. 187-91. He noted that not all Near Eastern governments had been despotic, citing Lycia as an exception: I, pp. 478-9.

95 Malcolm, *Useful Enemies*; J. Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

96 *PP*, I, p. 102.

97 *PP*, I, pp. 103-4, 115-18.

Brougham argued that no large government could exist without placing some restrictions on sovereign caprice: commerce, the organisation of defence, ecclesiastical hierarchies, the need for complex administrative institutions, and (in Turkey) the codification of Koranic law, all stood in the way of purely arbitrary rule.[98] Even where laws could not in theory bind the sovereign, they could condition the behaviour of both rulers and their people when reduced to a known system.[99] Brougham conceded that the Ottoman government was 'still exceedingly bad', riven with cruelty and suffering; but he insisted that it was not as bad as in the smaller Eastern states, where the restrictive pressures of running a great empire did not apply.[100] In such petty autocracies, the closeness of the despot to the people meant that oppression was felt more sensibly.[101] Following the conquest of Constantinople, moreover, the proximity of civilized European nations had rubbed some of the sharper edges off Ottoman barbarism.

Brougham's second category of despotic polities were those which, despite being in theory similarly autocratic, had evolved more robust practical restrictions on the freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed by their rulers, China and Russia were his principal examples here: despotisms, certainly, but despotisms modified by established habits and circumstances such that they fell functionally somewhere between the monarchies of the East and the West. Brougham framed China, first, as 'the most singular spectacle in the whole social history of our species': a vast empire, in which popular obedience was sustained by minimal military force, and where institutional arrangements had not changed for thousands of years.[102] But the seeming completeness of the Chinese Emperor's authority was limited by entrenched maxims about how state power ought to be used, and especially by the existence of an empire-wide system of education, itself linked to progression in the public service. All this encouraged the use of the Imperial prerogative in a limited and regular way, though oppression and fear remained rife.[103] Russia, next, was constitutionally speaking as absolute as any of the Eastern monarchies.[104] Brougham rejected the argument that it possessed fundamental laws that in some way limited the sovereign's prerogative, and indeed asserted that the Ottoman empire was better governed than the Russian.[105] What restricted the power of the Czar was the fact that he was a European sovereign. He sent ambassadors to courts across the Continent, and his activities were discussed freely in foreign presses and assemblies: the need to consider the opinion of Europe imposed meaningful checks on his free exercise of despotic authority.[106]

Hereafter Brougham's categorisation became murkier. He recognised that many European monarchs were, by the letter of the law, effectively unlimited in their power. But he drew a

98 *PP*, I, pp. 110-11.

99 *PP*, I, p. 111.

100 *PP*, I, p. 112.

101 *PP*, I, pp. 646-8*.

102 *PP*, I, p. 162.

103 *PP*, I, pp. 167-75, 180-1.

104 Russia was widely considered at this time to be the most oppressive of the European despotisms: see e.g. E.P. Thompson, *Life in Russia: Or, the Discipline of Despotism* (London, 1848). Brougham was less interested in the other widely cited candidate for this position, Austria, which barely features in the *Political Philosophy*.

105 *PP*, I, pp. 192-4, 210-14. Brougham had earlier claimed that Russia was as much Asiatic as European: (1823), *Opinions of Lord Brougham*, p. 139.

106 *PP*, I, pp. 217-9, 344.

qualitative distinction between 'Asiatic' and 'European' forms of absolute monarchy, arguing that the development of the feudal system across Western Europe had created institutions, social orders, and political imperatives which practically limited the scope of princely prerogative, and which made it impossible for rulers to overturn certain laws and arrangements.[107] European industriousness, and a native interest in mercantile and maritime pursuits, had worked alongside feudalism to prevent despotism from establishing itself.[108]

The gulf between the systems, however, was not wide. There were strong practical similarities between the legally unlimited power of one man, and the power of one man limited only by institutions over which he had considerable influence. Brougham made the case that the tendency of monarchy was always to degenerate into despotism, with the forms of rule being 'near akin' in origin and nature.[109] The feudal principles of subordination and allegiance had introduced to the West much of the sycophancy which characterised the world of the Eastern despots, while the purchase of fear within the upper classes was in some cases barely distinct.[110] And there were more specific analogies. Various kings of France, including Louis XI and Louis XIV, had sought to establish despotic authority, and usurpations in France sometimes resembled those in Asia.[111] Thoroughgoing absolutism was detected elsewhere in European history, as in the court of Ferrera, and in pre-revolutionary Naples, which had been as egregiously oppressive as the most corrupt despotisms of the East.[112] The closest European approximation to Asiatic despotism, however, was found in the government of the Popes. Rome was ruled with 'a peculiar species of influence calculated to weaken the indirect restraints imposed by the institutions that distinguish those governments from the despotisms of the East'.[113] Yet even the Papal government was restricted by certain checks, primarily the presence of so many men of learning and ability in the administration.[114]

To summarise, Brougham sought to outline a concept of despotic government which did justice to its varieties and complexities, and which in that sense improved upon (what he saw as) Montesquieu's excessively simplistic and symmetrical model. Despotism, Brougham argued, might have been defined by the concentration of theoretically uncontrolled power in the hands of a single sovereign individual, but it was always limited by both general and local conditions. So it was not quite as distant from European monarchical rule as others suggested.

IV. Brougham and the effects of despotism

The second stage in Brougham's treatment of despotism was an examination of its political and social consequences. He insisted that this should be a subject of more than academic interest to his British audience, and that contemplation of the evil effects of uncontrolled

107 *PP*, I, p. 330, chs 8-9. Nassau Senior was not persuaded by this distinction, and suggested that it would have been better to consider pure monarchy as a single form of government, modified by the character of its subjects: [Senior], 'Brougham's *Political Philosophy*', pp. 9-10.

108 *PP*, I, p. 338.

109 *PP*, I, p. 357.

110 *PP*, I, pp. 310-11, 321, 331-6, 363.

111 *PP*, I, pp. 452-3, 457-9, 373.

112 *PP*, I, pp. 558-9, 615*. There had been despotic phases in Britain's history: see III, pp. 244, 282.

113 *PP*, I, p. 569. Brougham compared the government of Rome with that of British India: I, p. 565.

114 *PP*, I, pp. 569-70.

power could not be 'without benefit even to the subjects of a Constitutional Crown'.[115] Observations on the effects of absolute government were studded throughout the work, and Brougham's arguments on the subject were unusually developed. Nassau Senior described them as 'eloquent and full', some of the highest praise he could bring himself to offer.[116]

The *Political Philosophy*'s case here was not carefully hedged. Brougham's contention was that despotism was 'the worst government which can exist'.[117] It was 'detestable', a 'hateful form of government', and a 'baneful infliction' upon its subjects.[118] In his best advocate's fashion, Brougham undertook to demolish every argument which could be submitted in favour of absolute rule, setting himself up against its (mostly unnamed) apologists. Modern 'lovers of pure monarchy' who maintained high Tory principles, defenders of the Turkish constitution, and others who claimed indulgence for particular despotic regimes because they were not as bad as others, were alike paraded before Brougham's sights, and shot down.[119]

The foundation of these arguments was a conventionally Whig account of the origins and purposes of government. Brougham explained at the outset of his text that government was, or ought to be, a trust for the people of a state. The 'Tory' doctrine that kings had separate and legitimate interests of their own was not only mistaken, but fatal to all improvement. It was for the good of its people alone that any government had a right to exist, and as such, there were (narrowly defined) circumstances in which resistance to constituted authority could be justified – the Glorious Revolution naturally being a case in point.[120] In assessing different forms of government, therefore, the central object to be considered was their bearing on the public good. Loading the dice further, Brougham insisted that the other great test for the legitimacy of any form of government was whether it took more liberty or property from its people than was imperatively necessary for the administration of affairs. Looked at from these angles, the *Political Philosophy* insisted, the authority of one man always failed to supply the public benefits derived from the deliberations of many.[121]

Brougham's method of political reasoning was also of the Whig school.[122] His approach was mechanical and structural: understanding a mode of government, or a polity, was essentially a matter of analysing the operation of its institutions, and tracking the social and moral consequences which flowed from them. Brougham recognised that national habits played a role in predisposing particular peoples to particular forms of rule, and acknowledged that no one type of government was necessarily to be preferred for all states.[123] He accepted that climate and geography mattered in forming these habits, though the theme was far less

115 *PP*, I, p. 576.

116 [Senior], 'Brougham's *Political Philosophy*', p. 9.

117 *PP*, I, p. 114; also p. 144.

118 *PP*, I, pp. 639, 158, 139. For similar sentiments among the other early *Edinburgh* reviewers see Fontana, *Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society*, p. 42.

119 *PP*, I, pp. 62-3, 112-13, 158.

120 *PP*, I, pp. 55-64.

121 *PP*, I, p. 144.

122 In Angus Hawkins' terms: see Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, ch. 6.

123 *PP*, I, pp. 69-70.

significant for him than it was for Montesquieu.[124] But Brougham was not seriously interested in the cultural customs of political behaviour, in the way that would become common among writers on the 'science of politics' in Britain in the 1850s and 1860s. He belonged to a philosophical tradition – and indeed a generation – for whom political institutions acted *on* societies, rather than being embedded *within* them. Among the more prominent mid-Victorian constitutional theorists, he was much closer to his fellow Whig the third Earl Grey, than to writers like Walter Bagehot, who had started to pay more detailed attention to the social-psychological habits on which polities were founded.[125] Brougham's examination of the effects of despotic rule was conducted with these frameworks in mind.

Most of Brougham's arguments about the effects of despotism were conventional, both as considered against criticism of individual despotic regimes in early-nineteenth-century Britain, and against the wider history of political thought. Versions of all the claims he made can be found scattered across contemporary periodical articles and political speeches, and many of them can also be found in James Mill. But Brougham's aim here was less to innovate than to distil, before putting the distilled product to more specific political purposes. It may even have been that Brougham's assault on Montesquieu was in part an attempt to screen the undeniable similarities in their arguments.[126] For all his hostility to *The Spirit of the Laws*, Brougham did not reject its argument that the principle of despotism was fear. He also accepted the claim, commonplace in early-nineteenth-century British political discourse, that unlimited political power had a natural tendency to corrupt even the best natures.[127] Brougham's analysis did, however, build on his argument idea that despotism was essentially an unrestricted form of monarchy, as opposed to being a separate class of government. All monarchies, Brougham insisted, experienced and inflicted attenuated versions of the effects he specified, depending on how closely they approached to pure absolutism.[128] Brougham's arguments here, as such, were not just about pointing out the flaws in the governance of certain Eastern states, but touched on questions common to half the world's polities.

Brougham began with a series of structural political objections to despotic rule. First, he dismissed the claim that it offered stability. In fact, he argued, despotism was inherently fragile, a 'frail thing in its substance and groundwork', however fearful its outward form.[129] This was mainly because it could not offer 'that greatest of all advantages', the regular and uncontested transfer of supreme authority.[130] Depositions and usurpations happened with far greater regularity in despotisms than under other forms of government, because absolute rulers only ever had the willing support of a tiny constituency. Institutions which had not

124 *PP*, I, p. 338.

125 Hawkins, '"Parliamentary Government"'. For Bagehot see Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, ch. 2; and for the closely allied analyses of his colleague and friend W.R. Greg, see Middleton, "William Rathbone Greg".

126 A common habit among political philosophers: see J. Parkin, 'Straw Men and Political Philosophy: The Case of Hobbes', *Political Studies* LIX (2011), pp. 564-79, esp. p. 576.

127 *PP*, I, p. 678*. This was later to be crystallised by Lord Acton as 'absolute power corrupts absolutely'.

128 *PP*, I, pp. 157-9, 357.

129 *PP*, I, p. 119.

130 *PP*, I, p. 207.

struck roots into society could always be toppled more easily than those in which the masses held an interest.[131] The more unbridled the power of the ruler, the more unstable his polity.[132]

Despotism, next, was inimical to national prosperity. Arbitrary taxation, and an absence of robust property rights, naturally served to discourage industry.[133] But the main problem here was necessarily bad day-to-day government. This rested in part on the fact that autocrats were apt to consult their own interests before those of the public good, and more substantially on reasoning from first principles: the chances of misrule because of error or want of knowledge were clearly higher in polities where only one mind was brought to bear on great questions.[134] None of this was compensated, as Brougham's straw-man opponents ostensibly suggested, by promptness or consistency, because absolute rulers were just as likely to be irresolute as to be strong-minded.[135] So the administration of affairs was usually uncertain and unsystematic.[136] Brougham took aim also at the contention that despotism was less warlike than other forms of rule, arguing that the opposite was the case: more enlightened peoples were more peaceful.[137]

Improvement was another casualty of despotic rule. Brougham made the case that absolute rulers were necessarily hostile to change, since their possession of authority (and indeed their personal safety) was bound up with the defence of the established order. Political progress of any kind could not willingly be permitted where it must ultimately lead to the improvement of government: which would, in the *Political Philosophy*'s less than neutral terms, mean the limitation of the sovereign's power.[138] While refinement of manners, and distinction in the arts, were certainly not unknown in despotic states – indeed some autocracies, like Russia, saw these qualities develop to a very high level – the political necessity of discouraging reasoning and discussion meant that progress in science was similarly arrested.[139]

Here Brougham fell into some contortions. He was determined to refute the argument that the existence of 'enlightened' despots could be counted in favour of absolute rule. Against the idea that despotism might be desirable if the perfect man could be found, Brougham said that all men were imperfect creatures, and that the possession of absolute dominion would in any case make a ruler worse than he was by nature.[140] He insisted that the accident of a forward-thinking autocrat was historically rare.[141] But the *Political Philosophy* did not gloss over what examples did exist. It showed that able princes could draw a kingdom out of atavism and ignorance, as had happened in the Burmese empire, where foreign improvements had been

131 *PP*, I, p. 144.

132 *PP*, I, p. 126.

133 *PP*, I, pp. 107-8.

134 *PP*, I, pp. 143-4, 152. Cf. the arguments cited in Selinger*, Parliamentarism*, p. 24.

135 *PP*, I, pp. 147-8.

136 *PP*, I, p. 153.

137 *PP*, I, pp. 154, 151.

138 *PP*, I, pp. 145-6.

139 *PP*, I, pp. 155-7.

140 *PP*, I, pp. 143, 528-9.

141 *PP*, I, p. 126.

extensively introduced.[142] Leopold I of Tuscany had been a first-class arbitrary monarch.[143] But it was Mehmet Ali, the rebellious ruler of contemporary Egypt, who created the greatest difficulties. Having thrown off the Ottoman yoke, Brougham conceded, the Pasha had rapidly reformed every branch of his administration, from the education system, to the organisation of agriculture, to the abolition of the slave trade. Yet his government remained absolute, and continued to confiscate property at will. Brougham could only claim that while basic liberties were missing, and the possibility of corruption by uncontrolled power existed, progress could not be permanent.[144] So even long courses of good government in despotisms offered 'no argument in mitigation of the sentence which all reason and all experience pronounces'.[145]

Despotism was to be despised, finally, as much for social as political reasons. It poisoned the character of all those exposed to it. The existence of unconstrained power in the hands of a single sovereign, necessarily enforced by an order of subordinate petty despots, left subject populations in a condition of perpetual fear and alarm. It was 'the inevitable tendency of such authority to be grossly abused', corrupting those who possessed it as well as the state they nominally served.[146] Forced into constant efforts to evade arbitrary encroachments and expropriations, unattractive social traits came to dominate among populations under despotic rule. Falsehood, as one means of avoiding oppression, became pervasive. Bribery, as another, turned corruption into a guiding principle in all departments of state.[147] The prevalence of fear promoted habits of harshness, selfishness, and cruelty, with those tyrannised over in turn oppressing their own inferiors. In such circumstances, where members of a society could not invest confidence in one another, disinterested sentiments were impossible to cultivate.[148] In Brougham's analysis, all these negative consequences flowed mechanically from the location of sovereignty in a despotic state, and were not much affected by national habits, or race.

Brougham did not spend all this time probing the nature and effects of despotism because he feared its global resurgence. He accepted that the general direction of travel in modern politics was towards more liberal constitutional forms, and that no contemporary state was likely to alter its institutions to become more despotic.[149] Everywhere the exercise of absolute authority was being tempered by the spirit of the age, and it was in the interest of sovereigns to give their peoples more power, because – as he had tried to show – nothing could be more unstable or inimical to public wealth than despotism. Indeed he detected perceptible progress taking place even in the East, including in that most famously stationary state of all, China.[150]

Instead, Brougham aimed in his analysis of despotism to make two connected political points. The first was to show that the extremes of 'order' were not necessarily to be preferred to the extremes of 'liberty'. Writing at a time when fears of working-class unrest were at their

142 *PP*, I, p. 136.

143 *PP*, I, pp. 634-5.

144 *PP*, I, pp. 146-7.

145 *PP*, I, p. 678*.

146 *PP*, I, p. 109.

147 *PP*, I, pp. 140-2, 256.

148 *PP*, I, pp. 140-3.

149 *PP*, I, p. 644.

150 *PP*, III, p. 164-6.

nineteenth-century peak, and when the vast majority of Britain's political and literary class shared a powerful hostility to democracy, Brougham was arguing against overcorrection.[151] Arbitrary states, he contended, were at least as harmful in their social and political effects as turbulent commonwealths, and neither was to be favoured.[152] In extolling the benefits of a 'middle way' in the organisation of government, and of allowing space for the extension of popular political rights and liberties, the *Political Philosophy* aimed to erect political-scientific scaffolding around a characteristically Whig constitutional vision.

Secondly and more immediately, however, Brougham wanted to encourage vigilance. As we have heard, the particular version of Whig constitutionalism he sought to defend was of an unreconstructed and increasingly backward-looking kind. Having spent much of the 1810s and 1820s battling the pretensions of an over-mighty Crown, Brougham remained convinced that the threat of arbitrary encroachment upon the liberties of the people had not abated with the Great Reform Act of 1832, or with the battery of reforms passed by the administrations of Lords Grey and Melbourne over the following decade. As his peers turned their attention to the perfection of 'parliamentary' government, Brougham continued in the *Political Philosophy* to fight old skirmishes in a different medium.[153]

Brougham's argument was essentially this. Thoroughgoing absolutism was probably not coming back. But its effects lay on a spectrum: and the character and prosperity of any people would be impaired by moves in the direction of despotic power. Even the (ostensibly) temporary introduction of arbitrary practices into free states tended to create versions of the abuses for which despotisms were known. It was therefore vital to understand what those abuses were, in order to encourage popular watchfulness against their creeping growth.

These points were returned to throughout the *Political Philosophy*. Brougham was at pains to stress that Britain, despite being out in front in its constitutional development, was by no means immune from danger.[154] He pointed to a recent example from the era of the French wars: when Britain had suspended Habeas Corpus and introduced the Alien Bill, it had led to miscarriages of justice of precisely the same form as were common in Eastern despotisms. It was vital, Brougham insisted, to resist the vesting of large powers for temporary purposes in the government of free states, as such grants tended to be repeated, and the powers tended to be exercised even more harshly than in polities where they were customary.[155] Looking at despotisms taught, also, how education could be perverted to corrupt purposes. The exercise showed how unwise it was to remain satisfied with only the elements of popular education, and how important it was to watch political interference with the instruction of the people.[156] Despotism, Brougham concluded, could 'creep upon' a community where national character had become debased, or where it had been perverted by the 'arts of party'.[157] As such, he argued that 'every nation should jealously watch the conduct of its rulers and its own

151 Saunders, 'Democracy'.

152 *PP*, I, p. 648*.

153 Hawkins, '"Parliamentary Government"'.

154 Montesquieu had also argued that the liberty enjoyed in constitutional monarchies was never entirely safe, even in the places where it was most fully developed.

155 *PP*, I, pp. 158-60, 626-9.

156 *PP*, I, pp. 184-5.

157 *PP*, II, p. 350.

feelings, lest authority rise into domination and loyalty degenerate into subserviency'.[158] If Britain did not remain vigilant, it could end up like Spain collapsing again into absolutism: the stability and purity of the reformed legislature could by no means be taken for granted.[159] Brougham's examination of despotism, in short, was as much about asserting the continued relevance of a pre-Reform Whig agenda, and encouraging the close engagement of a wider working-class audience with British politics, as it was about dissecting a form of government.

V. Conclusion

Henry Brougham's *Political Philosophy* was an eccentric and in some ways an archaic text, which puzzled and exhausted the contemporaries who engaged with it, and which does not appear to have made any significant impression on its proclaimed target audience of working men. This article has suggested that it was nonetheless intended as a serious contribution, by a prominent figure, to a series of contemporary debates: about political education, the nature and limits of political science, and the workings and effects of government. Its unifying objective, however, was to make a scientific case for the Whig constitutionalism around which Brougham's career had been organised, and to demonstrate that conventional Whig preoccupations still counted in the political landscape of the 1840s.[160]

For a man born in 1778, anxiety about self-interested rulers encroaching arbitrarily upon the hard-won liberties of the people was among the most fundamental of those preoccupations, and Brougham's long-standing hatred of absolutism – combined with his aim to produce a 'comprehensive' political science – led him into an unusually expansive examination of 'despotic' rule. Downgrading 'despotism' from its place as one of the three cardinal forms of government in Montesquieu's energetically disparaged *The Spirit of the Laws*, Brougham framed it instead as the purest form of absolute monarchy. But he insisted also that the habits and abuses for which despotisms were known were ever-present dangers even in the most advanced polities. Parliamentary Reform was not a guarantee that England would maintain its political freedoms. If the nation's rulers were not watched, and if claims that there were redeeming qualities in absolute rule managed to gain purchase, liberty might be corroded. In fixing his readers' attention on the dangers of 'despotism' in this more capacious sense, Brougham underlined the significance of the Whigs' achievement in resisting the pretensions of absolute monarchy and corrupt power, and emphasised that the battle was far from over.

Brougham's arguments here were not at the cutting edge of contemporary political thought. Most reflective writers on British politics were by the 1840s already more anxious about how to channel the growing political awareness of the masses, than they were about the possible restoration of arbitrary rule.[161] It was the threat of a 'despotism' of the working class, or of charismatic tribunes of the working class, which would become the great fear in the second half of the century. The Whig party's lack of a compelling response to these developments

158 *PP*, I, p. 459.

159 *PP*, I, pp. 628-31. Brougham pointed also to the fact that the French had been on the verge of being enslaved again by an arbitrary monarch in 1830.

160 In this sense the work might almost be seen as a political-scientific counterpart to Thomas Macaulay's *History of England*, the first volumes of which were published in 1848. See Burrow, *Liberal Descent*, part I.

161 Anxieties about the strengthening of popular control over government were already building in the eighteenth century: see Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, pp. 24-5. Brougham dealt with aspects of these issues in the sections of the *Political Philosophy* which covered democratic polities and 'mixed' government, in the third volume.

was one of the factors which would contribute to its imminent collapse as an independent political force.[162] Brougham's attempt to supply the deficiency in his *Political Philosophy*, by appealing to the ability of a cross-class readership to apprehend rationally the merits of the mixed constitution, was characteristically ambitious, but it did not prove an effective strategy.

Despite its limited impact on the Victorian mind, then, Brougham's *Political Philosophy* forged an alliance between Whig philosophy and comparative political science which deserves to be taken seriously as an episode in the history of political thought. The other significant service the text performed was to gather and crystallise many of the scattered arguments about the failings of 'despotic' government which lay behind the pervasive, reflexive use of the term in early-nineteenth-century British political discourse. Where most contemporary reflection on the consequences of absolute government arose in the study of individual polities, the *Political Philosophy* scaled up, and sought to weld arguments about the varieties of foreign 'despotism' into a larger whole. Brougham collected a battery of explanations, familiar from other contexts, for why British readers ought to accept rationally what they already knew viscerally: that despotism was a form of rule to be feared and reviled. It promoted corruption, stifled progress, and perverted the character of societies. Brougham argued that improving despots could only ever be accidents, and aimed in his analysis to demonstrate the 'vanity' of thinking that there might be securities for the public good beyond regular and free constitutions.[163] In doing so, he made a distinctive contribution to the framing of a problem which had always been central to the identity of Whiggism in Britain, and which would prove fundamental to the language and character of Victorian Liberalism.

162 For this theme see D. Southgate, *The Passing of the Whigs, 1832-1886* (London, 1962).

163 *PP*, I, p. 531; also p. 678. These arguments proved no impediment to Brougham spending portions of his later life in Second Empire France, helping to develop the resort of Cannes, where he died in 1868.