

Liberalism and the Austrian state, 1848-1867

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines Liberal attitudes towards the Austrian state, in the years between the European revolutions of 1848 and the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. Much Liberal commentary in this period treated Austria as an antagonistic, autocratic menace, as had become conventional since Waterloo. But the 1850s and 1860s also saw the growth of a more substantial interest in the architecture of the Habsburg monarchy. Its transition from despotism to constitutionalism was used to affirm some of the basic claims of mid-Victorian Liberalism, and even to suggest solutions to broader problems in modern politics. At a time when Ireland and the overseas empire were posing serious political difficulties, moreover, British writers also began to find analogies between the Britain and Austrian imperial projects. This article explores how Liberal thinkers and commentators responded to two decades of rapid, complex, and sometimes contradictory changes in the shape of the Austrian state. It deals both with the periodical press, and with the developed analyses outlined by the historian Lord Acton and the political philosopher John Stuart Mill.*

KEYWORDS. Liberalism; international thought; empire; Austria; history of political thought.

Mid-Victorian Liberalism owed a significant part of its identity to European issues.¹ The most widely debated developments of the period were all connected with France, and there is a good historiography on Anglo-French attitudes and exchanges.² But nearly everything of importance which happened on the Continent in the 1850s and 1860s also involved Austria. The tendrils of the Habsburg monarchy spread out far enough to implicate it in all the leading questions of the age, both geographical and doctrinal: from Italy, Germany, and the near East, to nationality, imperialism, and constitutionalism. We know something about British thinking on each of these problems, especially the unification of Italy³ and the problem of nationality.⁴

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¹ Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity, and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment, and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Miles Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. chs 6-7; Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

² See esp. J.P. Parry, 'The Impact of Napoleon III on British Politics, 1851-1880', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 11 (2001); Georgios Varouxakis, *Victorian Political thought on France and the French* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³ Danilo Raponi, *Religion and Politics in the Risorgimento: Britain and the New Italy, 1861-1875* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Maura O'Connor, *The Romance of Italy and the English Imagination: Italy, the English Middle Class and Imaging the Nation in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Marcella Pellegrino Sutcliffe, *Victorian Radicals and Italian Democrats* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014); O.J. Wright, *Great Britain and the Unifying of Italy: a Special Relationship?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). On the wider historiography see Maurizio Isabella, 'Rethinking Italy's Nation-Building 150 Years Afterwards: the New Risorgimento Historiography', *Past and Present* 217 (2012). Still essential is Derek Beales, *England and Italy, 1859-60* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1961).

⁴ See recently Georgios Varouxakis, '1848 and British Political Thought on the "Principle of Nationality"', in *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought*, eds Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones

We know something also about British celebration of the heroes of resistance to Austrian rule after the 1848 revolutions: the Giuseppes Mazzini and Garibaldi in Italy, and Lajos Kossuth in Hungary.⁵ In all this work, however, the Austrian state lurks just out of focus. Specialist accounts of British opinion about the Habsburg polity deal mainly with diplomacy and strategic issues, and are not well integrated with the wider historiography.⁶ Austria appears in the literature on mid-Victorian visions of political order overseas mainly as the great representative of autocratic imperial power, and as the great enemy of European nationalities.

These historiographical emphases reflect an important truth. Mid-Victorian Liberals were more interested in the struggles of subject peoples to secure constitutions and establish nation states, than they were in the configuration of the atavistic territorial empire of the Habsburgs. Few Liberal politicians, certainly, seem to have monitored changes in Austrian government very closely. Gladstone could still draw cheers on his Scottish speaking tour of 1880 by describing Austria as ‘the unflinching foe of freedom in every country of Europe’, despite admitting that he was not fully acquainted with shifts in its internal administration.⁷ Leading Liberal intellectuals like E.A. Freeman and Arthur Evans remained similarly hostile.⁸ Numerous other British writers and thinkers, however, came to treat the government of Austria as a question which involved, and cast light on, core Liberal concerns: both as they considered Britain’s own imperial responsibilities, and as they reflected on the political frameworks most likely to secure ordered progress for European civilization. So it is worth examining attitudes towards the Austrian empire in the 1850s and 1860s a little more deeply.

Those who trained their lenses on the Austrian monarchy did not find it easy to fathom. Most contemporary estimates placed twelve distinct countries under the Austrian crown, covering over 250,000 square miles, with a combined population of well over thirty million.⁹ As the Liberal minister and Indian governor Mountstuart Grant Duff remarked in 1868, Austria was ‘a science in itself’, or indeed ‘half-a-dozen sciences’.¹⁰ The internal intricacy of the

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Richard Smittenaar, “‘Feelings of Alarm’: Conservative Criticism of the Principle of Nationality in mid-Victorian Britain”, *Modern Intellectual History* 14 (2017).

⁵ Gregory Claeys, ‘Mazzini, Kossuth and British Radicalism, 1848-1854’, *Journal of British Studies* 28 (1989); Zsuzsanna Lada, ‘The Invention of a Hero: Lajos Kossuth in England (1851)’, *European History Quarterly*, 43 (2013); C.A. Bayly and E.F. Biagini, eds, *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Derek Beales, ‘Garibaldi in England: the Politics of Italian Enthusiasm’, in *Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento: Essays in Honour of Denis Mack Smith*, eds John A. Davis and Paul Ginsborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The Hungarian politician Ferenc Déak, and the Czech leader František Palacký, also had strong presences in British political culture.

⁶ Tibor Frank, *Picturing Austria-Hungary: the British Perception of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1865-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press 2005) is the principal existing study here. It touches on some of the same questions as this piece, but focuses on Hungary, the post-1865 period, and the channels through which information about Austria-Hungary reached Britain. For diplomacy see David Brown, ‘Palmerston and Austria’, in *A Living Anachronism? European Diplomacy and the Habsburg Monarchy*, eds L. Höbelt and T.G. Otte (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2010); T.G. Otte, “‘Knavery or Folly’?: the British “Official Mind” and the Habsburg Monarchy, 1856-1914’, in *ibid.* Other relevant studies are unpublished: Donald von Hirsch, ‘British opinion in regard to Austria, 1848-67’ (PhD, University of Cambridge, 1945); Darwin Fran Bostick, ‘The British image of Austria, 1846-1878’ (PhD, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1971).

⁷ Quotation in *Times*, 18 Mar. 1880, 11; admission in *Times*, 25 Mar. 1880, 7. He was taken to task for his inattention in ‘Mr Gladstone and Austria’, *Examiner* 3765 (27 Mar. 1880). For context see D.M. Schreuder, ‘Gladstone and Italian Unification, 1848-1870: the Making of a Liberal?’, *English Historical Review* 85 (1970).

⁸ Georgios Giannakopoulos, ‘The Eastern Question and British Conceptions of Liberty’, *History of European Ideas* (forthcoming). See also e.g. Edward A. Freeman, ‘The Austrian Power’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 22 (1880).

⁹ ‘Eastern Europe and British Policy’, *British Quarterly Review* 11 (1850), 237-8.

¹⁰ Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *A Political Survey* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868), 28. Historians usually cite the version of this quotation in the epigraph to C.A. Macartney, *The Habsburg Empire, 1790-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), which puts it in the Commons in 1869, but this seems to be an error.

Habsburg polity made blanket generalisations about Austria's policies, purposes, or political character difficult to sustain. Austrian constitutional order, meanwhile, was a moving target. The collapse of the delicately balanced Metternich system in 1848 initiated two decades of complex, rapid, and sometimes contradictory changes in the machinery of the state. For ten years ministers at Vienna strove to construct a more coherent centralized despotism, at the same time as promoting Ultramontanism in the Church. In the 1860s, however, following the Risorgimento and in the face of continued Hungarian recalcitrance, their successors turned towards relatively advanced forms of constitutional government, and ultimately established co-ordinate dual parliaments in Hungary and Austria by the Compromise (*Ausgleich*) of 1867.¹¹ This last experiment was selectively probed, to important effect, in later-Victorian debates about the future of the Anglo-Irish relationship.¹²

This article explores Liberal political debate and thought on the Austrian imperial state, as it was recast between 1848 and 1867. Its main point is that the Habsburg monarchy came to be understood in this period not simply as a dynastic, conservative, authoritarian monstrosity, but also as a singular political formation facing intriguing, important, and relevant political challenges. The first section suggests that this had not been the case before 1848, in part because so little reliable information was available about Austrian internal government. The second section looks at how the empire was handled in Liberal periodicals in the 1850s and 1860s, focusing on attitudes towards its transition to constitutionalism, and on how it was connected with Britain's own problems of imperial rule. The last parts of the article examine the perspectives on Austrian empire associated with the Liberal intellectuals who took an interest in the issue: the historian Lord Acton, and the political philosopher John Stuart Mill.

The internal workings of the Austrian empire were not well understood in the opening decades of the nineteenth century.¹³ Austria's post-1815 foreign policy was self-explanatory, and friends of liberty were tireless in their condemnation of Vienna's exertions on behalf of the Holy Alliance and monarchist absolutism. But what was going on inside the Habsburg dominions was harder to say. This appeared to be a deliberate political strategy. It was widely argued in Britain that the central principle of Austrian rule was the strenuous pursuit of secrecy, to be achieved through rigid censorship and the suppression of dissent, and that this was why Austria remained 'a terra-incognita for the majority of the British public'.¹⁴ Analysis of the operations of Austrian rule was difficult while so little reliable information was available.¹⁵ Looking back from the 1850s, the *Westminster Review* remarked that Austrian imperial administration had been 'enveloped in a mystery' prior to the revolutions.¹⁶

¹¹ R.J.W. Evans, 'From Confederation to Compromise: the Austrian Experiment, 1849–1867', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 87 (1994). A vibrant new historiography around the Habsburg empire has emerged in the last decade: see esp. Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: a New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Jonathan Kwan, *Liberalism and the Habsburg Monarchy, 1861–1895* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); 'Forum: Habsburg History', *German History* 31 (2013); Axel Körner, 'Beyond Nation States: New Perspectives on the Habsburg Empire', *European History Quarterly* 48 (2018). See also Alan Sked, 'The Nationality Problem in the Habsburg Monarchy and the Revolutions of 1848', in *1848 and European Political Thought*, eds Moggach and Stedman Jones.

¹² Eugenio F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), *passim*; Frank, *Picturing- Austria-Hungary*, 140–7; Benno Gammerl, *Subjects, Citizens and Others: Administering Ethnic Heterogeneity in the British and Habsburg Empires, 1867–1918*, trans. J.W. Neuheiser (Oxford: Berghahn, 2018).

¹³ All attributions of anonymous articles below are taken from the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*.

¹⁴ 'Railroads and Steam Navigation in Austria', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 7 (1840), 234.

¹⁵ [J.H. Garnier], 'The Government and People of Austria', *London Review* 1 (1835), 487–8.

¹⁶ [Jane Frances Teleki von Szék], 'The Religious Policy of Austria', *Westminster Review* 15 (1859), 27.

This was, however, to overstate the case. In fact, considerably more light was being cast on the condition of Austrian government from the later 1830s. As the cause of Italian liberty began to gather steam, publicity-seeking works from political prisoners drew attention to the (alleged) brutalities of Austria's imperial judicial and penal systems.¹⁷ Disaffected Austrian officeholders started to publish similar claims.¹⁸ Perhaps most influentially, a spate of travel accounts offered treatments of culture, society, and politics across the Habsburg possessions, from the German heartlands to the Hungarian, Bohemian, and Danubian peripheries.¹⁹ And a newfound spirit of administrative openness in Vienna led to the publication of official financial and commercial statistics from the turn of the 1840s.²⁰ That these could be read as suggesting the existence of significant mercantile opportunities drove a spurt of interest in the condition of Austria in the commercial world.²¹

Insuperable difficulties involved in understanding the social and political system of the Habsburg empire continued to be acknowledged.²² But by the 1840s, its political dynamics were coming into focus. At this point, Austria presented a pair of distinct studies in the effects of despotism. Within the German lands, Austrian government was characterised by its so-called 'paternalism'.²³ Censorship reigned, and education was carefully calculated not to go past a certain point.²⁴ But in return for sacrificing their civil and religious freedoms, the Germans were governed with solicitous care for their personal happiness and wellbeing. Civic life may have been non-existent, but Austrian Germans lived frivolously and well, and without fear of crime.²⁵ Vienna was the gayest, and the most immoral, capital in Europe.²⁶ The empire's subject nationalities, however, experienced a different and darker variety of despotism. The Hungarians were insulated from its worst excesses by a semi-confederal system, but Austrian rule in Italy was generally accepted to be among the least becoming varieties of imperial government on the globe. It was clear, also, that there had been almost no assimilation between the different races connected by submission to Austrian authority.²⁷

¹⁷ See esp. *My Prisons: Memoirs of Silvio Pellico of Saluzzo* (Cambridge: Charles Folsom, 1836), and *The Imprisonments of Silvio Pellico* (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1839), 3-4; Alexander Andryane, *Memoirs of a Prisoner of State in the Fortress of Spielberg*, trans. Fortunato Prandi (London: Saunders and Otley, 1840), iii-ix. On the same theme, see earlier, A Lady of Rank, *Venice under the Yoke of France and Austria* (London: G. and W.G. Whittaker, 1824), and later, [Anthony Panizzi], 'Neapolitan Justice', *Edinburgh Review* 94 (1851), 491-2.

¹⁸ M. Koubrakiewicz, *Revelations of Austria* (London: T.C. Newby, 1846).

¹⁹ Most thorough on Austrian politics and institutions was Peter Evan Turnbull, *Austria* (London: John Murray, 1840). See also *Austria and the Austrians* (London: Henry Colburn, 1837); C.B. Elliott, *Travels in the Three Great Empires of Austria, Russia, and Turkey* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838); John Paget, *Hungary and Transylvania* (London: John Murray, 1839); and Frances Trollope, *Vienna and the Austrians* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838). On Trollope see W.E. Yates, 'Frances Trollope in Germany and Austria', *German Life and Letters* 34 (1980).

²⁰ [T.C. Banfield], *Austrian Statistics* (London: Richard and John E. Taylor, 1843); [Cyrus Redding], 'M.L. de Tegoborski on the Finances and Public Credit of Austria', *Foreign Quarterly Review* 32 (1844).

²¹ See e.g. [T.C. Banfield], 'Austria and her Resources', *British and Foreign Review* 11 (1840).

²² 'Railroads and Steam Navigation', 234.

²³ Whether this version of despotism was native or an external imposition was a matter of opinion: see [J.S. Blackie], 'Styria, and the Styrian Alps', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 10 (1843), 507.

²⁴ [Robert James Graves], 'Wilde's Austria', *Dublin University Magazine* 22 (1843).

²⁵ 'Austria in Italy', *British and Foreign Review* 10 (1840), 672.

²⁶ 'Kohl's Hundred Days in Austria', *Foreign Quarterly Review*, 31 (1843), 114.

²⁷ 'Kohl's Hundred Days', 92.

Enough was known about the Austrian empire by the eve of the revolutions for most organs of Liberal opinion to treat it as ‘an incubus upon European civilization’.²⁸ Thomas Arnold was one of vanishingly few Liberals in this period to profess a ‘tenderness for the Austrian government’, on which he did not elaborate.²⁹ The overwhelming majority found nothing to admire. We can take, for instance, G.H. Lewes’s discussion of Austrian rule. Published in the *Monthly Chronicle* in 1840, this was one of the more integrated and ambitious analyses of the pre-1848 period, but its main claims were commonplace.³⁰ Taking the Habsburg polity as a whole, Lewes argued that Austria inspired ‘the hate and contempt of the whole world’, and that all men must hope for the separation of its subject nationalities.³¹ He suggested that the security of the Austrian state lay only in the ignorance of its people and the vigilance of its police; that the whole population were spies, at least prospectively; and that they were encouraged in that career by their priests. High and low tyranny were practised as systematically at Vienna as in Italy, Hungary, and Bohemia, and Austrian domestic policy was ‘always grinding, aggravating, incensing, rather than conciliating and alleviating’.³² In short, Austria incarnated all the worst elements of European autocracy, in its internal government as much as in its foreign policy.

What we do not find before 1848 is any sustained public interest in the workings of Austrian government. Nor do we see any sense that Britain’s own imperial dilemmas – in Ireland, India, or the colonies – were meaningfully reflected in the Habsburg polity. The essential facts about the Austrian empire were that it propped up despotism across Europe, and that it was likely to continue doing so for the foreseeable future. There was no pressing reason to look very closely at its internal arrangements, and only so much material with which to do so.

Austrian imperial politics looked very different from Britain after 1848.³³ Revolutions across the Habsburg territories suddenly spurred acute interest in their recent political history, social condition, and administrative machinery.³⁴ Sustained Italian and Hungarian resistance to Viennese centralization over the next two decades continued to draw attention to, and to cast new light on, the government of the empire.³⁵ And towards the end of this period, the Habsburg state’s rapid transition to constitutionalism changed the discourse entirely. Writing on Austria in the 1850s and 1860s also became much more partisan: not least because

²⁸ ‘Revelations of Austria’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* 13 (1846), 589.

²⁹ Thomas Arnold to Sir Thomas Pasley (19 Oct. 1840), in *The life and correspondence of Thomas Arnold*, ed. Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (London: B. Fellowes, 1844), II, 225. It was later suggested that Arnold’s views were a ‘Rugby crotchet’: [J. or T. Hine], ‘Austria’, *North British Review* 32 (1860), 121-2. There may be something in this: cf. [Thomas Hughes], ‘An Austrian Country House’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* 14 (1866), 450-8.

³⁰ [G.H. Lewes], ‘Social despotism of Austria’, *Monthly Chronicle* 5 (1840), 500-8.

³¹ [Lewes], ‘Social despotism’, 508, 502.

³² [Lewes], ‘Social despotism’, 502.

³³ See more generally, on British political ideas and 1848, Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*, ch. 4; Leslie Mitchell, ‘Britain’s Reaction to the Revolutions’, in *The Revolutions in Europe, 1848-1849: from Reform to Reaction*, eds R.J.W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁴ The main histories were: William Peake, *The Empire of Austria, during its Late Revolutionary Crisis* (London: T.C. Newby, 1851); William H. Stiles, *Austria in 1848-49* (London: Sampson Low, 1852); [Walter K. Kelly], *History of the House of Austria, from the Accession of Francis I to the Revolution of 1848* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853). New editions of William Coxe, *History of the House of Austria* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807) were also produced in the 1850s.

³⁵ Alan Sked, ‘The Nationality Problem in the Habsburg Monarchy and the Revolutions of 1848’, in *1848 and European Political Thought*, eds Moggach and Stedman Jones; Axel Körner, ‘National Movements Against Nation States: Bohemia and Lombardy between the Habsburg Empire, the German Confederation and Piedmont’, in *ibid.*

Austrian, Hungarian, and Italian writers came to treat the British press as a battleground for control of the narrative about their clashing projects of repression, constitutionalism, and independence. This section looks in turn at currents of opinion among Liberal commentators on the Austrian empire, and at how they came to connect Austria with broader questions about imperial government.

Two preliminary structural points need to be made. The first is that very few Liberals were hostile towards multinational empires in principle.³⁶ The mid-nineteenth-century world was, after all, mainly one of empires, both territorial and colonial. Britain's own overseas possessions were the most extensive of any European state, and contemporaries offered virtually no criticism of the colonial empires of other European countries as such. Recent research has underlined, furthermore, that mid-Victorian Liberals were almost as anxious as Conservatives about the implications of the doctrine of 'nationality'.³⁷ For most commentators on these issues, there was no abstract reason why subject peoples should not realise necessary political freedoms within multinational imperial formations, which moreover had the potential to help to secure international stability and foster organic change. The sticking point was the provision of good, functional, free government. For Liberals, the problem with the Austrian empire was not that it was a multi-ethnic dynastic state: but that it was a state which had yet to evolve beyond governing by force, to governing by consent. If dynastic rule on the Austrian model was to find legitimacy, it had to have the support of public opinion and representative bodies. Until the Habsburg state was able to project these characteristics, it was likely to continue attracting criticism.

The second preliminary issue is about how geopolitics structured arguments over Austrian rule. Austria's traditional strategic role as an ally of England, and as a bulwark of the Continental balance of power, had for decades underpinned the case that its political arrangements had to be tolerated.³⁸ The utility of the Habsburg state as a buffer against Russian advances in the East, in particular, depended on the empire maintaining its martial and moral strength. After the events of 1848, however, it became much easier to argue that Austria was a source of vulnerability to the European order.³⁹ Revelations of Austrian military and diplomatic weaknesses in the transactions surrounding the Crimean war, the Franco-Austrian war of 1859, and ultimately the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, added weight to this interpretation.⁴⁰ Doubts about the long-term integrity of Austria's possessions in the Danube and Dalmatia, furthermore, grew after Russia began to assert itself in the region in the 1850s. In short, it became harder to argue that the existing arrangement of the Austrian empire obviously served British strategic interests. This helped create space for more radical thinking about Austrian politics, including speculation on the possibility, and possible consequences, of the empire's dissolution.⁴¹ For both philosophic and strategic reasons,

³⁶ I am grateful to Eugenio Biagini for stressing the points in this paragraph. On Conservatives and foreign multinational empires see Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: the History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61-2.

³⁷ See fn. 4. Most Liberals struck a balance between the principled encouragement of national aspirations, and the recognition of legitimate possession of foreign territories.

³⁸ E.g. Lord Palmerston, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, 137:882, 20 Mar. 1855.

³⁹ E.g. [J.B. Heard], 'Austria and the House of Lords', *Dublin University Magazine* 58 (1861), 753-62.

⁴⁰ For the high politics see Paul W. Schroeder, *Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War: the Destruction of the European Concert* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972); E.D. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); David Brown, *Palmerston and the Politics of Foreign Policy, 1846-55* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ [A.V. Kirwan], 'Naples, France, and Austria', *Fraser's Magazine* 60 (1859), 385; 'Austria in the Past', *British Quarterly Review* 30 (1859), 130; 'Austria in the Principalities', *Westminster Review* 63 (1855), 202.

however, most Liberals argued that the total dismemberment of the Habsburg polity would be retrograde and inadvisable.⁴² What most commentators claimed to want was a liberalised, more compact, but still strong Austria.⁴³

For a brief period in 1848, it seemed like this had been all but achieved. With revolutions in Vienna, Hungary, and parts of Italy forcing major constitutional concessions, there was widespread optimism that absolutism in Austria had collapsed forever. The Austrian state seemed to have determined that it would cease to be 'the model of oppressive and tyrannical governments'.⁴⁴ Given the function of the Habsburg monarchy as the main sponsor of Continental autocracy, events in Vienna were for many observers the most consequential events of the whole tumultuous year. Lord Beaumont trumpeted that the abdication of the Chancellor, Metternich, marked 'the complete downfall of irresponsible power in Europe'.⁴⁵ These celebrations were, however, evanescent. It quickly became clear that the new Emperor, Franz Josef I, was determined to roll back the gains of 1848.

For the next decade, the Liberal press gloomily charted the Habsburg empire's programme of centralization and reaction.⁴⁶ The balances and diversities which had characterised the Austrian approach to government in the 1840s seemed to have been replaced by a new and more vicious system.⁴⁷ As a consequence, the empire's politics had plumbed new depths. Metternich's successor, Prince Schwarzenberg, had 'Russianized Austria', and 'established the same system and spirit of government from the Sea of Archangel to the banks of the Tiber'.⁴⁸ Earlier gestures towards civil and religious liberty had been smothered, and a tyranny 'more arbitrary than has ever been known since the days of Atilla' set in its place.⁴⁹ As John Macgregor put it in 1852, '[a]t no period of the world's history has a tyranny flourished calculated more inexorably to enslave all freedom of opinion, and annihilate all civil, political, and religious liberty, than the despotism of the State and the Church in the present year, within the Austrian empire'.⁵⁰ George Eliot, writing in 1855, described the means by which Austria had knitted together central Europe as 'an almost unvaried tissue of the worst vices which belong to arbitrary government'.⁵¹ For James Martineau, Austria's aim was 'to work evil, to destroy freedom, to corrupt public virtue, to fetter thought, to enslave conscience, and to maintain an uneasy supremacy by fomenting the discords of her own wretched subjects'.⁵² This was short-sighted, not least as discontent in any part of the

This speculation included the possible translation of the Habsburg dynasty to Latin America: [R.H. Patterson], 'The Napoleonic Idea in Mexico', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 96 (1864), 85.

⁴² [W.E. Gladstone], 'Germany, France, and England', *Edinburgh Review* 132 (1870), 560; Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *A Glance over Europe* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1867), 33-4.

⁴³ E.g. Humphry William Freeland, *Austria and Venetia* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1862).

⁴⁴ [Anthony Panizzi], 'The Revolt in Lombardy', *Edinburgh Review* 88 (1848), 146. See also [W.B. McCabe], 'The Austrian Revolution and its Results', *Dublin Review* 25 (1848), 41-2.

⁴⁵ Lord Beaumont, *Austria and Central Italy* (London, 1849), 6.

⁴⁶ As they perceived it: for the more subtle reality see Christopher Clark, 'After 1848: the European Revolution in Government', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 22 (2012).

⁴⁷ [J.W. Wilkins], 'Austrian Nationalities and Austrian Policy', *Fraser's Magazine* 52 (1855), 170.

⁴⁸ 'The Career of Prince Schwarzenberg', *Bentley's Miscellany* 31 (1852), 563.

⁴⁹ [Macgregor], 'Austria and Rome', 197-8.

⁵⁰ [Macgregor], 'Austria and Rome', 198. See also [John Macgregor], 'Turkey, Austria, and Russia; or, Islamism, the Romish, and Russo-Greek Churches', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 20 (1853), 423-4.

⁵¹ [George Eliot], 'Memoirs of the Court of Austria', *Westminster Review* 7 (1855), 305. See also [Fernandino Eber], 'Austria and her Reforms', *Westminster Review* 19 (1861), 505; 'Austrian Secret Memoirs', *Eclectic Review* 12 (1856), 579.

⁵² [James Martineau], 'The Austrian Peace', *National Review* 4 (1856), 475.

monarchy fed dissatisfaction in others.⁵³ Even the conservative Liberal W.R. Greg, who had no time for democracy and who sincerely admired many of the great autocratic ministers in the history of the Continent, despised Austria. During the 1850s he wrote vividly about the abhorrent ways in which the Habsburg monarchy deployed the machinery of state and Church in order to repress mental development and intellectual freedom across the empire.⁵⁴

Liberals were particularly exercised by the papal Concordat of 1855, which handed the Roman Catholic Church considerably more independent authority in the Habsburg lands. This move put paid to the idea that the Austrian monarchy had, whatever its other faults, possessed greater religious liberty than other Continental states.⁵⁵ The Concordat was not without its defenders, including the not wholly disinterested Catholic Lord Acton.⁵⁶ For most of the Liberal press, however, handing more power to a heavily Ultramontane priesthood only lowered the tyranny of Austria to another level.⁵⁷ Accusations began to circulate that the government had taken to the systematic persecution of Protestants.⁵⁸ Increasingly Catholicism was seen as a pernicious principle of the Austrian system, though it was recognised that most of the nationalities standing in opposition to Austria were Catholic too.⁵⁹

This reinvigorated system of absolutist, clerical rule broke down in 1859. Austria's defeat in the war against France, and the loss of most of Lombardy, precipitated fundamental changes in its machinery of government. In 1861, a new constitutional assembly (the *Reichsrat*) was established, which embraced all the remaining parts of the empire. This quickly violated some of the key terms of the 1855 Concordat, which document became progressively more porous over the rest of the decade. This sudden transition of the Habsburg polity to a form of constitutional government did not immediately attract plaudits in Britain. The early years of the 1860s saw Vienna at loggerheads with Pesth, as the Hungarians refused to send representatives to the new pan-Austrian parliament. Whether the Austrians were again using arbitrary power to trample on constitutional rights, or whether the Hungarians were acting ungratefully and impractically, was not easy to determine. But it was of widespread interest that a great despotism seemed to be passing into a mixed and constitutional monarchy, including for those who cared little about Austrian affairs.⁶⁰ For some, this was 'one of the most remarkable political metamorphoses that have distinguished the present century'.⁶¹

The transition to a more robust viable constitutional regime came very rapidly after another military defeat, in the Austro-Prussian war of 1866. The centrepiece of this transformation was the institution of dual Austrian and Hungarian parliaments. The initiative took most British commentators by surprise, and required close investigation to confirm that the seeming liberalism of the scheme was genuine.⁶² For Liberals, the development was full of

⁵³ [John Macgregor], 'Lord Palmerston, Austria, and Italy', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 19 (1852), 609.

⁵⁴ [W.R. Greg], 'The War in the East and its Political Contingencies', *North British Review* 20 (1854), 551-2.

⁵⁵ [Teleki von Szék], 'Religious Policy'.

⁵⁶ [John Dalberg-Acton], 'The Political Working of the Concordat', *Weekly Register* (6 Dec. 1856), 8.

⁵⁷ [R.W. Monsell], 'The Emperors of Austria', *London Quarterly Review* 8 (1857), 144. For a different perspective see Cardinal Wiseman, *Four Advent Lectures on Concordats* (London, 1855).

⁵⁸ Alfred Michiels, *Secret History of the Austrian Government, and of its Systematic Persecution of Protestants* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), esp. x.

⁵⁹ 'Austria and Hungary', *Fraser's Magazine* 64 (1861), 520; [Eber], 'Austria and her Reforms', 504; [R.J. Gainsford], 'Austria and Hungary', *Dublin Review* 50 (1861), 351.

⁶⁰ Bonamy Price, 'Austria and Hungary', *Fraser's Magazine* 65 (1862), 385, 392; 'Austria', *Saturday Review* 24 (5 Oct. 1867), 421-2.

⁶¹ [J.H. Tremenhoe], 'The Resources and Future of Austria', *Quarterly Review* 114 (1863), 1.

⁶² 'Austria as a Liberal Power', *Saturday Review* 25 (4 Apr. 1868), 446-8; Eugene Oswald, *Austria in 1868* (London: Trübner and Co., 1868). An important source for accounts like these was *Austria, a Constitutional*

hope, even if the practicalities raised serious questions. The *Saturday Review* took pleasure in welcoming Austria as ‘the last new-comer into that political system which England has watched over with the anxiety of a parent for so many years’.⁶³ Mountstuart Grant Duff was pleased to find another nation ‘learning the compromises, the patience, the moderation, which are necessary in Governments like our own’.⁶⁴ He noted that the bitter hatred generally felt towards Austria in the 1850s had been rapidly superseded by warm wishes towards its efforts to improve its institutions.⁶⁵ Some writers even claimed that the new arrangements had converted Austria into the freest country in the world, and the guardian of peace in Europe.⁶⁶ Suddenly its populations were acting in harmony with the state, and cooperating in the attempt to reconstruct the Habsburg polity on the basis of social and political liberty.⁶⁷ To their own surprise, Liberal periodicals started to appeal to the Empire of the Kaisers as an example to Britain in the application of principles of liberty and self-government.⁶⁸ There were still, however, obvious difficulties to confront. Gladstone, for one, pointed in 1870 to financial problems, the continuing battle between Church and state, and the challenges involved in trying to make two ‘sovereign autocracies’ function as a single empire.⁶⁹ He concluded nonetheless that the present state of Austria was one of hope, in comparison to when ‘Metternich made war by his system alike upon morality, freedom, and the sentiment of nationality’, or when Ultramontaniam had triumphed in the 1850s.⁷⁰ He argued that Austria should have the sympathy of all liberal-minded men, as it strove to combine its races and provinces into ‘one firm and yet free political organism’.⁷¹

Stripping out the details, everything here is roughly as we might expect. The Austrian empire was condemned by British Liberals when it pursued policies of repression, reaction, and clericalism, and attracted expressions of praise and hope when it unilaterally adopted freer institutions and allowed greater religious liberty. The moral of its experiences between 1848 and 1867 was straightforward and satisfying: absolutism had brought the state to the verge of ruin, and liberty had retrieved its fortunes. The constitutional transformation of the Austrian empire, in other words, helped affirm some of the basic claims of mid-Victorian Liberalism.

Liberal writing on Austria in this period also used the Habsburg empire to reflect on broader questions in modern politics. Before 1848, the Austrian monarchy was mostly considered a law unto itself. After the revolutions, however, commentators started to argue that the political puzzles Austria was charged with solving might hold lessons for all of Europe. Those most optimistic about the Habsburg monarchy’s transition to constitutionalism argued that it might solve one of the great paradoxes of contemporary politics: the clash between the growing tendency for powerful states to absorb their neighbours, and the countervailing

State: a Short History of the Rise, Progress, and Development of Constitutional Life in the Austrian Dominions (London: Dulau and Co., 1867).

⁶³ ‘Austria-Hungary’, *Saturday Review* 25 (11 Jan. 1868), 33-4.

⁶⁴ Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *A Glance over Europe* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1867), 33.

⁶⁵ [Mountstuart E. Grant Duff], ‘Austria’, *North British Review* 44 (1866), 93. See also J. Lothrop Motley, *Democracy, the Climax of Political Progress and the Destiny of Advanced Races: an Historical Essay* (Glasgow, 1869), 27.

⁶⁶ ‘The Beust Regime in Austria’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* 18 (1868), 414. Debunkers had plenty to say about this late in the century: see e.g. W.J. Stillman, ‘Austro-Hungary’, *Fortnightly Review* 27 (1880), 785-800.

⁶⁷ [Aurelio Buddeus], ‘The Constitutional Development of Austria’, *North British Review* 12 (1869), 136.

⁶⁸ ‘Austria’, *London Review* 15 (28 Mar. 1868), 295.

⁶⁹ [W.E. Gladstone], ‘Germany, France, and England’, *Edinburgh Review*, 132 (1870), 557-8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 558-9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 560. Gladstone had earlier been unsympathetic to arguments for Italian liberty which could not demonstrate that Austrian rule was oppressive as well as foreign: Luigi Carlo Farini, *The Roman State, from 1815 to 1850*, trans. W.E. Gladstone (London: John Murray, 1851-2), I, ix-x.

demands of nationalities and cognate peoples for recognition. The soldier and Germanophile R.R. Noel, writing in the *Westminster Review*, argued that constitutional Austria held out some prospect that these conflicting tendencies of the age might be reconciled, offering a model of a modified federative system which authorised the conservation of individualities.⁷² Invoking the dominant philosopher of mid-Victorian Liberalism, Noel suggested that for those who ‘like John Stuart Mill, find in freedom and variety of development’ the true principle of liberty, Austria might soon approach the realization of their ideal.⁷³

It also came to seem like Austria might cast more specific light on British politics. By the end of the 1860s, claims like the one made by the *Saturday Review* that ‘the Government of Austria has to deal with very many of the same difficulties and problems which the English Government has to face’ had become a familiar refrain.⁷⁴ These difficulties and problems were, primarily, those of imperial rule. That Ireland was prominent in these discussions makes sense, given that it had experienced its own abortive revolution in 1848, and that Irish nationalists took a close interest in the Italian and Hungarian causes.⁷⁵ That the overseas empire was also brought into the picture is perhaps more surprising. The Austrian empire was, in many respects, glaringly unlike Britain’s own. The Habsburg monarchy had no colonies; government over distance was a problem of another order for Britain; and questions of race, ethnicity, and nationality worked in very different ways in Britain’s diverse (and often tropical) possessions, than they did in Central Europe. When contemporaries thought to compare the British empire with other nineteenth-century imperial entities, they turned most readily to the other seaborne colonial powers, especially France and the Netherlands.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, there was a clear sense after 1848 that Britain’s transoceanic projects and Austria’s territorial monarchy faced comparable political problems, in ways that blur the firm lines intellectual historians often draw between different varieties of empire.⁷⁷

The Irish comparison ran through writing on the Habsburg empire after 1848, in much the same way as historians have shown it did later on.⁷⁸ The analogies between Austria’s problems with its subject nationalities, and Britain’s issues in governing Ireland, struck commentators of all political stripes. The resemblances between recent Irish policy and

⁷² [R.R. Noel], ‘The Situation in Austria’, *Westminster Review* 85 (1866), 386-7; [R.R. Noel], ‘Dualism in Austria’, *Westminster Review* 88 (1867), 458.

⁷³ [R.R. Noel], ‘Austrian Constitutionalism’, *Westminster Review* 79 (1863), 375.

⁷⁴ ‘Austria’, *Saturday Review* 29 (1 Jan. 1870), 5-6. The tone of this article suggests it may have been written by James Fitzjames Stephen. On Stephen’s Saturday reviewing see Merle Mowbray Bevington, *The Saturday Review, 1855-1868: Representative Educated Opinion in Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941); for comparable articles by Stephen see Varouxakis, *Victorian Political Thought on France*, 29; Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad*, 93. I am grateful to Georgios Varouxakis for this suggestion. Stephen certainly thought that Austria and Britain faced similar dilemmas when it came to ‘nationality’ and their European possessions: see Merle Mowbray Bevington, ed., *Matthew Arnold’s ‘England and the Italian Question’: to which is appended ‘Matthew Arnold and the Italian Question’ by James Fitzjames Stephen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1953), 67-8.

⁷⁵ Nick Carter, ed., *Britain, Ireland, and the Italian Risorgimento* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Colin Barr, Michele Finelli and Anne O’Connor, eds, *Nation-Nazione: Irish Nationalism and the Italian Risorgimento* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2013). Comparisons between Austrian rule in Italy and British rule in Ireland went back even further: see e.g. Turnbull, *Austria*, II, 5.

⁷⁶ Alex Middleton, ‘European Colonial Empires and Victorian Imperial Exceptionalism’, in *The Force of Comparison: a New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World*, ed. Willibald Steinmetz (Oxford: Berghahn, 2019).

⁷⁷ Notably, comparisons between the Austrian and Ottoman empires also became more common: e.g. [Jane Frances Teleki von Szék], ‘Austria, and the Government of Hungary’, *Westminster Review* 73 (1860), 458.

⁷⁸ See above, fn. 12.

Hungarian policy were probed at length.⁷⁹ Austria's failure to assimilate the several nationalities it united under a single government, also, was increasingly compared with the seeming robustness of Irish nationality in Britain.⁸⁰ By the eve of the 1867 *Ausgleich*, the relevance of the Austrian imperial laboratory to Irish policy was already clearly established.

Comparisons with Britain's overseas empire worked in different ways. Sometimes they were a means of trying to cast light on the mechanisms of Austrian administration, as with references to the system of double government in British India prior to the imposition of Crown rule in 1858.⁸¹ Sometimes they were to do with questions of policy, as when Francis Newman lamented Britain's short-sighted destruction of rural municipalities in India in the same breath as condemning Austria's suppression of the Hungarian revolt.⁸² Sometimes they were a means of attacking British hypocrisy, as with references to Britain's disregard for independent nationalities when they happened to live in the Ionian Islands and other British possessions.⁸³ Importantly, perhaps, it does not seem to have been common in talking about the future of the Austrian empire to invoke Britain's contemporary concession of 'responsible government' to most of its settler colonies, in the late 1840s and early 1850s. This was the case even where substantively similar solutions to the Hungarian problem were advised, which suggests that the problem of settler colonial politics was seen through a different lens.

There were, nonetheless, broader imperial lessons to read in the recent political history of the Austrian monarchy. For many Liberals in the 1850s and 1860s, the success of the British colonial empire relative to its competitors owed something important to its respect for the historical peculiarities of the various races and nationalities it contained.⁸⁴ No such respect had been offered by the French to the inhabitants of Algeria since its invasion in 1830, which helped explain why that colony had failed so spectacularly.⁸⁵ But whatever else the Habsburg monarchy had done over the centuries of its existence, it had not overridden the natural distinctions between its subject peoples – that is, not until after 1848. Thereafter, Austria's travails were used to bolster a specific view of the policy and purpose of British imperial rule.

This argument was put best by the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, Henry Reeve. Reeve wrote quite extensively on Austria, and was unusually sympathetic to the Habsburg regime. At the moment when the gains of 1848 were being overturned, he argued that Franz Josef was attempting to regenerate the empire on the basis of the real wants and requirements of its peoples.⁸⁶ Even the Concordat of 1855 was interpreted in a positive light, as likely to make the clergy more loyal adherents of the Austrian state.⁸⁷ By the end of the 1850s, however, Reeve had recognised that the centralising policy Austria had pursued since 1848 had generated implacable resentments, and that its opportunity to govern its dependencies on more liberal principles had been lost. This was a warning to England. Reeve believed in empires: he argued that it was Britain's glory to have connected 'scattered dependencies with one great Whole infinitely more powerful, more civilised, and more free than any separate fragment could be'. He did not believe in hypocrisy, noting that it was repugnant 'to lend

⁷⁹ [Gainsford], 'Austria and Hungary', 353-6; Grant Duff, *A Glance over Europe*, 36.

⁸⁰ [Jane Frances Teleki von Szék], 'The Organization of Italy', *Westminster Review* 74 (1860), 387.

⁸¹ [J.H. Tremenhoe], 'The Resources and Future of Austria', *Quarterly Review* 114 (1863), 4.

⁸² [F.W. Newman], 'Austria and Hungary', *Prospective Review* 5 (1849), 370.

⁸³ [John Ball], 'Austrian Italy', *Bentley's Quarterly Review* 1 (1859), 307.

⁸⁴ Many Conservatives agreed: [Travers Twiss], 'Austria and Germany', *Quarterly Review* 84:167 (1848), 185.

⁸⁵ Alex Middleton, 'French Algeria in British Imperial Thought, 1830-1870', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16 (2015).

⁸⁶ [Henry Reeve], 'The Austrian Revolution', *Quarterly Review* 87 (1850).

⁸⁷ [Henry Reeve], 'The Austrian Concordat', *Edinburgh Review* 103 (1856).

encouragement to that separation of nationalities from other empires which we fiercely resist when it threatens to dismember our own'. Britain's job was 'to remind the world that this heterogeneous empire is not so much held together by the force of England, as by the respect she has ever professed for national usages, the desire she feels to carry self-government to the further practicable limits, and to attach her possessions to the Crown, not by the severity, but by the lightness, of her control'.⁸⁸ Austria had spent a decade ruling in a Procrustean and severe manner, and had reaped a whirlwind. Britain should not make the same imperial error.

In short, then, Liberal commentators gained two things from looking at the Austrian empire in the 1850s and 1860s. The first was an uplifting narrative about the shift from despotism to constitutionalism. The second was a set of questions about how multinational imperial entities could be made to work effectively. Both these ways of thinking about the Habsburg state attracted elaboration from conspicuous figures in the history of Liberal political thought.

It should be said that none of mid-Victorian Britain's leading Liberal intellectuals discussed the Austrian empire particularly extensively. Most did not take a close interest in it, and largely reflected the prevailing narratives already described.⁸⁹ Walter Bagehot characterised the Habsburg polity before 1859 as an 'empire of heterogenous provinces held together by sheer force'.⁹⁰ His brother-in-law W.R. Greg, as we have seen, argued that Austria in the 1850s presented the most indefensible political and territorial arrangements in Europe.⁹¹ Leslie Stephen, meanwhile, writing after a tour around the empire, diagnosed sclerosis. Austria had lost the war against the Prussians in 1866, he suggested, because the Habsburg polity had become 'a rotten, cumbrous, effete and utterly useless and tyrannical institution'.⁹²

The Liberal thinkers who engaged most seriously with Austria were the Catholic historian John Dalberg-Acton, later Lord Acton, and the political philosopher John Stuart Mill. Not coincidentally, the two men both took a particularly close interest in the question of nationality. For decades set up by historians on opposite sides of the issue, more recent scholarship has stressed the relative similarity of their perspectives.⁹³ As Georgios Varouxakis explains, both Acton and Mill approved in the abstract of the coexistence of different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups under a single state, on the grounds that these groups would ultimately enrich one another and produce an enhanced civilization.⁹⁴ This comes through in their remarks on Austria, which otherwise engage with different questions.

⁸⁸ [Henry Reeve], 'Austria, France, and Italy', *Edinburgh Review*, 109 (1859), 564-5.

⁸⁹ In addition to the figures below, Herbert Spencer made some disobliging references to Austrian policy, mainly in *Social Statics* (1851). Matthew Arnold's 1859 pamphlet on 'England and the Italian Question' said almost nothing about Austrian politics, focusing instead on France.

⁹⁰ Walter Bagehot, 'Are Alsace and Lorraine Worth Most to Germany or France?' (*Economist*, 24 Sept. 1870), in *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot*, ed. Mrs Russell Barrington (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1915), IX, 73. See also Bagehot, 'The Collapse of Caesarism' (*Economist*, 20 Aug. 1870), cited in *ibid.*, X, 421.

⁹¹ [W.R. Greg], 'The Significance of the Struggle', *North British Review* 24 (1855), 282. Though cf. [W.R. Greg], 'The Kingdom of Italy', *Edinburgh Review* 113 (1861), 281.

⁹² Leslie Stephen to O.W. Holmes (20 Sept. 1866), in *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, ed. Frederic William Maitland (London: Duckworth and Co., 1906), 182. Stephen sympathised with the Hungarian cause, while being unable to see how it could be compatible with the unity of the Austrian empire: [Leslie Stephen], 'Transylvania', *Cornhill Magazine* 14 (1866), 585.

⁹³ Georgios Varouxakis, *Georgios, Mill on Nationality* (London: Routledge, 2002), 7-8.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Acton unquestionably took a closer interest in Austria than any other major mid-Victorian intellectual. He travelled widely in the country, followed its politics, and wrote about them for publication in Britain.⁹⁵ His most interesting writings date from the early 1860s, as the Austrian polity was undergoing an intensive series of constitutional experiments. Aspects of his thought on the subject have been explored in a number of scholarly accounts.⁹⁶ His significance for our purposes is as the most sophisticated representative of a strain of post-1848 Liberal thinking on Austria which we have already seen the importance of: that which sought to detail and defend the advantages of multinational empire as a form of government.

Austria was a central element in Acton's thinking about the concept of nationality in general, which he explored at the highest level of sophistication in his 1862 essay, 'Nationality'. The Habsburg monarchy had, after all, taken the lead in repressing national movements after 1815.⁹⁷ Acton suggested that the triumph of the idea that national claims were above all other rights, and that not just oppressive government but foreign government of any kind was necessarily to be resisted, owed more to Metternich (alongside Napoleon I) than anyone else: because, as he explained, 'the anti-national character of the restoration was most distinct in Austria, and it is in opposition to the Austrian government that nationality grew into a system'.⁹⁸ All the stages in the development of the theory – from the protest against the domination of race over race, to the condemnation of states that included different races, and finally into the notion that state and nation must be coextensive – clearly threatened Austria.

The argument of Acton's essay was that liberty and diversity were mutually supportive. The coexistence of several nations under a single state was the best security for freedom, and an instrument of civilization.⁹⁹ Such an arrangement was more conducive to progress than was the national unity prioritised by modern (European) liberalism. It allowed superior races to raise up their inferiors, and dynamic new nations to revitalize exhausted ones. Capacities for government which had been lost under the pressure of either despotism or democracy could be restored by less demoralised races.¹⁰⁰ All this was only possible under one government: '[i]t is in the cauldron of the state that the fusion takes place by which the vigour, the knowledge, and the capacity of one portion of mankind may be communicated to another'.¹⁰¹

In theory, the Habsburg empire held more promise than nearly any other contemporary state. The Austrian polity, for Acton, clearly possessed the capacity for self-government. It met the necessary structural social criteria: its society was not atomic, but instead organised into the distinct classes and corporations which were required for the effective functioning of representative institutions.¹⁰² Happily, also, its several nationalities were at different degrees

⁹⁵ See Rowland Hill, *Lord Acton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Josef A. Altholz and Damian McElrath, eds. *The Correspondence of Lord Acton and Richard Simpson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971-5).

⁹⁶ Ágnes Deák, 'József Eötvös and Lord Acton: Meeting at the Crossroads of Liberalism and the Critique of Nationalism', *Hungarian Quarterly*, 37 (1996); Timothy Lang, 'Lord Acton and "the Insanity of Nationality"', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002); Hector J. Massey, 'Lord Acton's Theory of Nationality', *The Review of Politics* 31 (1969). See also, on Acton and nationality, Rocco Pezzimenti, *The Political Thought of Lord Acton: the English Catholics in the Nineteenth Century* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), 189-94; G.E. Fasnacht, *Acton's Political Philosophy: an Analysis* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1952), 126-39.

⁹⁷ [John Dalberg-Acton], 'Nationality', *Home and Foreign Review* 1 (1862), 12.

⁹⁸ [Acton], 'Nationality', 13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰² [John Dalberg-Acton, Ludwig von Meyer, and Richard Simpson], 'Notes on the Present State of Austria', *The Rambler* 4 (1861), 199.

of advancement, and no single nation had the power to dominate or to absorb the others. This provided for the widest variety of intellectual resources, constant incentives to progress through the example of more advanced peoples, and abundant elements of self-government. Liberty could achieve glorious results in such a political system; centralization and absolutism would be correspondingly destructive.¹⁰³

The problem was that Austria had badly misdirected its policy. Before 1848 its government had been a 'revolutionary despotism', and one which was 'hatefully oppressive'.¹⁰⁴ Franz Josef I's energetic centralising policy of the 1850s was not unsound in theory, but it had ignored both well-established historic traditions and the concessions made in 1848.¹⁰⁵ By failing to offer the promise of eventual freedom at the same time as he had reasserted central control, he had done much to prepare the way for the victory of the national principle. His conduct had been more clearly wrong than his enemies' doctrines.¹⁰⁶ Despite his restoration of self-government to the Catholic Church by the Concordat of 1855, the Emperor had no idea of applying the principle politically, failing to grasp the incompatibility of anything but representative institutions in the long run with civilization and progress.¹⁰⁷ Nothing had been done to strengthen the provinces of Austria in their diversity and autonomy.¹⁰⁸ Everything smacked, as a consequence, of decline and fall.¹⁰⁹ So while Acton's conclusion in 'Nationality' was that 'those states are substantially the most perfect which, like the British and Austrian empire, include various distinct nationalities without oppressing them', this came (in both cases) with significant caveats about how the stewards of both states had gone about their business.¹¹⁰ Austrian government, for Acton, was unquestionably a site of critical problems and possibilities in modern politics.¹¹¹

John Stuart Mill was not as interested in Austria as Acton.¹¹² Although he saw what Austrian rule looked like in northern Italy in 1855, and visited Styria and the Austrian Alps in 1872, his travels do not seem to have induced much curiosity about the monarchy's social or political state. The correspondence with his one significant Austrian acquaintance, the philosopher and classicist Theodor Gomperz, is not extensive.¹¹³ So there is no developed perspective on Habsburg government to be extracted from his writings. But he does, again, stand for an important strand of Liberal argument: that which followed Austria's transition to constitutional rule with interest, and which took its new system as a prompt to think more widely about representation and Ireland.

¹⁰³ [Acton], 'Nationality', 22. Acton reflected elsewhere on how the different communities encompassed in Britain's empire bore upon one another, from periphery to centre as well as vice versa: [John Dalberg-Acton], 'Colonies', *The Rambler* 6 (1862), 398, 394-5.

¹⁰⁴ [Acton et al.], 'Notes on the Present State of Austria', 194.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁰⁶ [Acton], 'Nationality', 15.

¹⁰⁷ [Acton et al.], 'Notes on the Present State of Austria', 198.

¹⁰⁸ [Acton], 'Nationality', 19.

¹⁰⁹ [Acton et al.], 'Notes on the Present State of Austria', 202.

¹¹⁰ [Acton], 'Nationality', 23.

¹¹¹ It should be noted that Acton's views on these matters were not fixed. He later confessed to Gladstone that he thought that nationality ought, in fact, to be accommodated where possible, and indeed went on to support Irish Home Rule: Varouxakis, '1848 and British Political Thought', 160, fn. 85; Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad*, 8. I am grateful to Georgios Varouxakis for this point.

¹¹² All references to *CW* below are to John M. Robson, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-1991).

¹¹³ Adelaide Weinberg, 'Theodor Gomperz and John Stuart Mill', *Cahiers Vilfredo Pareto* 1 (1963).

Mill's thoughts on Austria before the 1860s were expressed piecemeal, but seem to have developed largely in sync with wider shifts in Liberal opinion. Early in his career he referred to the government of the Habsburg monarchy as one which saw it as part of its duty to take care of the physical wellbeing and comforts of its people, and argued that direct Austrian rule in Italy might be preferable to governing through the 'detestable' native administrations.¹¹⁴ This was of a piece with his view that so long as peoples were incapable of self-government, it was often better for them to remain under the dominion of more advanced foreigners. But after 1848 it was clear that these conditions no longer applied.¹¹⁵ Mill thus condemned the centralizing constitution of 1849 for being 'as bad as anything pretending to be a constitution at all now dares to be'.¹¹⁶ As historians have noticed, he argued forcefully in 'A few words on non-intervention' that Britain should have intervened to prevent the subjugation of Hungary in 1849, and he was disgusted by Lord John Russell's refusal to do anything for Poland, preferring to maintain Austria in all its possessions, in 1855.¹¹⁷ Alongside France, Austria was the 'other great enemy'.¹¹⁸ For philosophic as well as strategic reasons, however, Mill sided with Austria against France in 1859 – bewildered to find himself, as a friend of liberty, hoping for its success against an even more retrograde power – and worried that Britain would be the loser if the Habsburg empire were to be crushed between France and Russia.¹¹⁹

Austria's refoundation as a constitutional state after 1859 piqued Mill's interest. He wrote to Gomperz that even when 'there is scarcely a spot on the globe where some great historical change does not seem to be either dawning or approaching its crisis, I do not know anything more important or more intensely interesting than the progress & chances of the political transformation of Austria'.¹²⁰ The Austro-Prussian war of 1866 he saw as a battle between 'an expiring feudality & a powerful Caesarism', and that 'to wish success to the last even against the first is to cast out devils by Beelzebub the prince of the devils'.¹²¹ But his most sustained commentary on the Habsburg monarchy came in shortly after the establishment of Austro-Hungarian 'Dualism' in 1867. Here, suddenly and unexpectedly, a new experiment had been undertaken in dealing with a problem which affected the interests of numerous European countries: how to reconcile constitutional and representative government in a polity embracing distinct races, each claiming separate rights and speaking different languages.

Mill wrote about this experiment most fully in his 1868 pamphlet *England and Ireland*.¹²² His main point, appropriately, was that the new Austria-Hungary was not – as a number of his contemporaries had been suggested – a good model for Anglo-Irish relations. His case was that while it was straightforward for the same power to rule two countries when their

¹¹⁴ *Claims of labour* (1845), CW4, 374; 'French News', *Examiner* (11 Mar. 1832), CW23, 423.

¹¹⁵ *Vindication of the French Revolution* (1849), CW20, 348.

¹¹⁶ John Stuart Mill to Harriet Taylor (14 Mar. 1849), CW14, 16.

¹¹⁷ *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* (1859), CW21, 124, and see Georgios Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: John Stuart Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); John Stuart Mill to Harriet Mill (8 June 1855), CW14, 488. Mill also supported the Ottoman Sultan's refusal to deliver up the Hungarian refugees to the Austrians in 1829: 'Czar and Hungarian Refugees in Turkey' (*Daily News*, 3 Oct 1849), CW25, 1142.

¹¹⁸ John Stuart Mill to Harriet Mill (8 June 1855), CW14, 488.

¹¹⁹ John Stuart Mill to Theodor Gomperz (16 May 1859), CW15, 621; John Stuart Mill to Pasquale Villari (28 Mar. 1859), CW15, 611; John Stuart Mill to Thomas Hare (4 May 1859), CW15, 618-9. Later, however, he stated his approval of France's 1859 intervention to free Italy from the Austrian yoke: John Stuart Mill to James Beal (17 Apr 1865), CW16, 1033.

¹²⁰ John Stuart Mill to Theodor Gomperz (21 Aug. 1861), CW15, 739.

¹²¹ John Stuart Mill to Theodor Gomperz (22 Aug 1866), CW16, 1197.

¹²² As mentioned in Bruce L. Kinzer, *England's Disgrace? J.S. Mill and the Irish Question* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 179.

peoples had only limited rights, and the government of both resided in a single will, constitutional liberty made it extremely difficult to maintain a connection between two countries without uniting them. The new Austrian system had had no trial, and achieving the unforced concurrence of both nations to the principal acts of government would be hard. The analogy between Ireland and Hungary, moreover, was a bad one. The Hungarian nation had had long experience in self-government, and there were no hostile feelings between the masses in Austria and Hungary. In both respects, the opposite was true in the case of Ireland.¹²³ Hungary, also, was a match in military qualities and resources for the rest of Austria, which further unbalanced the comparison. In any case, Dualism could not succeed in Ireland, because the Fenians would never be satisfied with anything but total separation.¹²⁴

The Austro-Hungarian system continued to interest Liberals for the rest of the nineteenth century. It was widely cited in the public debates over Irish Home Rule, and was privately studied by Gladstone.¹²⁵ Most writers, however, ended up agreeing with Mill. Dualism seemed to be a partially effective practical response to an almost impossible set of political exigencies, but it was not attractive in theory.¹²⁶ The overall trajectory of Mill's engagement with the changing shape of the Austrian empire, then, mirrored that of wider Liberal opinion.

This article has sought to show that mid-Victorian Liberals understood the Austrian empire as more than a container for a set of more interesting geographical parts. It is certainly true, as Tibor Frank has argued, that British liberal attitudes towards Central Europe were 'in a large degree determined by British imperialist interests': questions of geopolitical strategy, the balance of power, and the merits of non-intervention.¹²⁷ But the Habsburg monarchy also raised questions about government which went beyond the scope of diplomatic imperatives.

The process by which, as W.E.H. Lecky described it at the end of the nineteenth century, Austria was transformed 'from a reactionary despotism into one of the best-governed countries in Europe' was full of lessons for Liberals.¹²⁸ How Austria was perceived in its 'neo-absolutist' phase in the 1850s is important in itself, given that the intellectual history of despotism in Victorian Britain is an understudied subject.¹²⁹ Celebration of the Habsburg empire's transition to constitutionalism furnished another uplifting narrative for a mid-Victorian liberalism at the peak of its confidence, and the mode of that transition prompted serious thinking about problems of constitutional mechanics for John Stuart Mill and others. The even bigger questions which Austria presented, however, were about the merits (or otherwise) of multinational states and empires. For the Liberal press, and not least for Lord Acton, the British and Austrian empires increasingly seemed to speak to one another. By 1867, having adopted an innovative constitutional system, lost its Italian possessions, and been defeated in its German ambitions, the Austrian empire had become a great experiment

¹²³ John Stuart Mill, *England and Ireland* (London, 1868), 32-5.

¹²⁴ John Stuart Mill to John Henry Bridges (16 Nov. 1867), *CW16*, 1329. For Conservative criticism of the plan see e.g. [Gabriel Henry Cremer], 'Austria since Sadowa', *Quarterly Review* 131 (1871), 93; 'Austria & Co.', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 106 (1869), 360.

¹²⁵ A.J. Patterson, 'Dualism in Austria-Hungary', *Fortnightly Review* 38 (1885); David Kay, 'Home Rule in Austria-Hungary', *Nineteenth Century* 19 (1886); Edmond Fitzmaurice, 'Home Rule (No. II): in Austria', *Nineteenth Century* 19 (1886). For Gladstone see Biagini, *British Democracy*, 234.

¹²⁶ 'Austria-Hungary', *Saturday Review* 25 (11 Jan. 1868), 33.

¹²⁷ Frank, *Picturing Austria-Hungary*, 177.

¹²⁸ William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *Democracy and Liberty* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), I, 28.

¹²⁹ Historians have always been more interested in Victorian ideas about overseas radicals and revolutionaries, than about the authoritarian regimes they were struggling against.

in government. In many eyes, what the Austrian empire had ended up as was quite possibly to be preferred to the narrow sympathies of nation states. Either way, Austria played a major role in shaping ideas about European 'civilization' and liberty in mid-Victorian Britain.

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