Were the Victorians Ever Modern?

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wants to affirm in their own right. So perhaps we should get rid of them, and work with a more complex geological metaphor, in which there *are* persistent structures, or strata; but the strata may tail off, as well as break, and if they break, though several strata may break at the same point, the rupture will not necessarily cut through the entire structure.

Even geology may be an inappropriate metaphor for our purposes – for these are, in the end, geologies of the mind: *a* way, but not the only useful way of organising our perception of the world. If we employ Price's structures, we can I think hope to gain useful insights – but we'll obscure others from view. Thus, we'll tend to lose the insights we might gain if we thought of early eighteenth-century Britons as having continued to wrestle with problems that had confronted all their post-Reformation predecessors, and as having at their disposal to deal with these a fairly persistent repertoire of possible responses. Or indeed, from those we might gain if we thought of people of that era and beyond as having continued to struggle with problems that had faced their predecessors ever since the institutionalization of parliament and of magistrate-led local government, in the fourteenth century. Or, indeed, from insights we might gain if we took the 'reforms' of the 1830s as having in their own way *answered* certain long-standing problems, and changed the terms of the problems which succeeding generations faced (an approach which would among other things have the effect of affirming the novelty of 'the Victorian era').

Perhaps a kaleidoscope is the better image. We won't see anything at all if we keep just spinning the kaleidoscope, but let's not forget that (in the terms of this image) it *is* a kaleidoscope, and can always be turned.

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Were the Victorians ever Modern?

Timothy Alborn

To get into the proper spirit for reading Richard Price's *British Society*, it helps to bear in mind J.A. Hobson's quip concerning the 'mental consistency' of the British people, who had, he claimed, 'developed a curious … aptitude for entertaining incompatible and often self-contradictory ideas and motives'. Far from thinking this trait 'highly dangerous', as Hobson deemed it, Price defies a whole series of dichotomies on his way to presenting the period from 1680-1880 as an internally coherent transition between a clearly premodern Tudor-Stuart era and a decidedly modern long twentieth century. The key

to Price's narrative is his claim that ideas and motives which have long appeared, both to Hobson and to subsequent historians, as transparently at odds were in fact nearly always negotiable during the two centuries prior to 1880.

The snappiest one-liner in *British Society* is also its mantra throughout the book: 'Binary opposites belong in mother boards, not history' (10). In nearly every chapter, Price treats the reader to central dichotomies, which he restages as combinatory rather than oppositional forces. The British economy up to 1880 was marked by 'constraint and change' (23), impelled by a 'functional relationship' between the factory and the workshop (35). A mutually beneficial relationship linked British industry with trade and finance through the 1870s. Central and local government progressed symbiotically from 1680-1880, enjoying a 'healthy reciprocity' (157). And last but not least: 'order and disorder among the populace, respect and disrespect for authority and status, strength and weakness of the forces of law and order – all describe the qualities of British social relations' (292). The argument is not all that different from Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of the United States, which ascribed stability to a separation of social and political institutions. Just as Tocqueville discovered a unique organic whole amidst what others saw as the chaos of the early American republic, Price depicts British society during his period as a functioning unit that was recurrently shaken, but never transformed, by conflict.

As with most functionalist accounts, this is something of a just-so story – although, like Darwin's just-so evolutionary stories, this one is red in tooth and claw. What Price describes is not so much an extended age of equipoise as an unstable equilibrium, heroically held together for two centuries by the efforts of a prosperous, dynamic, and adaptable ruling elite. The most obvious case of this occurs at the level of national politics, where the revolutionary wresting of power from James II ushered in a 'possibility of radical politics' (241) that would not be matched for another 150 years. Price argues that the Whigs, to rein in the forces they had unleashed, anticipated Thermidor by eighty years when they passed laws like the Septennial Act; and claims that this process of retrenchment recurred in 1832, when the Whigs (again) succeeded in 'revitalizing the structures of virtual representation' (272). By recasting the reign of Queen Anne as a revolutionary hotbed and 1832 as a conservative *coup*, Price casts doubt on the popular tendency in British political history to situate the birth of 'modern' politics in the mid-eighteenth century, with its Wilkite pamphlets and shadow parliaments. Though he allows that the decades sandwiched by the Seven Years War and the American Revolution were full of conflict,

he denies that these developments were significantly new, and at the same time charges that they failed to alter fundamentally the political balance that had been achieved by the 1720s.

Price sees two realms in particular where British elites struggled to maintain stability in the face of conflict, or (on the other side of the coin) growth in the face of decline. One of these may conveniently be referred to as *moral economy* and the other as *political economy*. In the realm of moral economy, he leans heavily on E.P. Thompson's conception of a paternalist 'field of force' that held sway in the eighteenth century, yet was regularly punctuated by 'rough music' and bread riots. Against Thompson, he insists that this model applies equally well to the 'Victorian' age that followed. Hence, for Price, the successive Victorian extensions of suffrage are less important than the coming of the secret ballot in 1871, since this brought to an end the span of nearly two centuries when 'the crowd' (in George Rudé's eighteenth-century meaning of the word) could influence British politics in unpredictable ways. Other legacies of the older moral economy that frequent Price's nineteenth century include JPs and parish officers, cottage industries, indirect taxes, and (above all) paternalism. These were not, he urges, relics of a bygone era, but integral elements in British society. He underscores their centrality by identifying, at many points, how several standard 'Victorian' reforms reinforced the pre-existing moral economy, albeit unwittingly. The Factory Act, for instance, was good for cottage industry since it kept women and children in the home – where they could continue to perform piece work for manufacturers. And the New Poor Law sparked concerted efforts among industrialists to avoid its cruel implications by borrowing paternalist governing strategies directly from the landed aristocracy.

Price focuses on *political* as well as moral economy, both in the sense of the 'dismal science' popularized in the early nineteenth century and the practical matter of industry, finance and trade. In this realm, the closest match to what he describes is the 'gentlemanly capitalism' recounted by Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins. Price provides a new name for this – 'commercial imperialism' – and modifies their thesis to include the manufacturing sector as an equal partner with the landed elites and financiers who ran the British economy. Like Cain and Hopkins, though, it is the political side of the economy that matters most for Price – as opposed to the 'consumer revolution' chronicled by Neil McKendrick *et al.* or the industrial Prometheus that Arkwright and Watt allegedly unbound. New consumption patterns mattered little throughout the nineteenth century, he claims, since only a tiny fraction of Britons could afford to take part in the market; and true transfor-

mation in industry had to await the 1870s, when new energy sources and technologies finally became thoroughly integrated into the economy. The only 'Victorian' innovation this leaves is trade policy, specifically the notion that free trade was both a symptom and consequence of the manufacturing sector's newfound power. Building on Cain and Hopkins (and on John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson before them), Price instead depicts free trade as commercial imperialism by other means: a rearguard action to stave off economic decline by offering competitors the lure of low-priced imports. In this telling, Richard Cobden's treaty with France in 1860 is far more important that the repeal of the Corn Law fourteen years earlier, and the Navigation Acts had as much to do with Victorian economic greatness as the railway.

Since they held together so many aspects of Britain's moral and political economies into the 1870s, landed elites play a leading role in much of what Price discusses. They commissioned the canals and sold the coal that provided the first engine of industrialization; they transmitted their paternalist governing strategies to the Victorian ironmasters and millowners; and, of course, they presided over the balancing act between democracy and absolutism that marked British politics at the national level from 1688 until the 1880s. Although their efforts may be heroic, however, the real heroes of Price's story are more typically the common people, whose role in the production of both popular and material culture loom large at nearly every turn. Indeed, one of his accomplishments is to rescue much of the nineteenth century from the sort of institutional history (including the history of working-class institutions) beneath which so many 'Victorian' bookshelves sag, where all the action is carefully minuted by a corresponding secretary and approved by committee.

Moving from historical actors to historians, one is tempted to suggest that the sort of overarching re-periodization proposed by Price is today mainly of interest to textbook writers, conference organizers, and journal editors. For all these people, it clearly matters if over half of the Victorian period is recast as a long postscript to the Hanoverian age. For most historians who spend their time writing articles and monographs, on the other hand, a long time has passed since 1837 (or even 1832 or 1815) has taken on any special significance. These people pick up their respective threads when things start to get interesting for them, and more often than not these threads stretch well back into the eighteenth century – or at least they display a sufficient appreciation for that century's relevance to the story at hand. To cite just a few recent major books, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* starts in 1780; Martin Daunton's *Trusting Leviathan* starts in 1799; Boyd Hilton's

The Age of Atonement starts in 1795; Margot Finn's *The Character of Credit* starts in 1740; and Cain and Hopkins's *British Imperialism* starts in 1688.

Price recognizes as much in his introduction, and freely incorporates many of these not-entirely-Victorian monographs into his narrative. In this regard, reviewing *British Society* in 2006 is a little like reviewing *Common Sense* in 1783: it seems more sensible than provocative from a present-day perspective. Among many other examples, Price builds on E.A. Wrigley's claim that the British economy continued to hinge mainly on domestic agricultural production well into the nineteenth century; draws on what we have learned from economic historians like Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson regarding the regional and workshop-based nature of industrialization; borrows from Daunton and Patrick O'Brien on taxation; and echoes Cain and Hopkins in his discussion of political economy. In some of these cases, Price (writing in the mid-1990s) prods historians to take sides in then-ongoing debates that have since settled down into a consensus. More typically, though, he wages battle with much older historical canards, which may still appear in textbooks but appear (if at all) as straw men in most recent monographs. David Landes's perspective on industrialization is one of these, and the so-called Victorian 'revolution in government' is another.

That said, Price's re-periodization remains useful as a reminder to historians who are seeking to situate their special avenue of inquiry into a wider context. It would be hard today for an economic or imperial historian to avoid engaging with Cain and Hopkins, but easier for an historian of popular culture to neglect their contribution to British history. Price's dual emphasis on a 'paternal style' of governance and on Britain's position in the world economy provides two worthy frames for people who are interested in pulling back from a narrow to a wider angle on their topic at hand. It is even more helpful to non-historians who might wander unawares into a 'Victorian' thicket armed with a reading list that is two or three decades out of date. And finally, it is helpful as a corrective to eighteenth-century historians who might otherwise be too prone to follow John Brewer *et alia* in assuming that Hanoverian politics and society was a blueprint for modernity, as opposed to a crypto-modern episode in a not-wholly modern sweep of time.

If many Victorianists are relatively content to write their stories well back into the eighteenth century, even more seem to be satisfied to follow Price in seeing the period from 1870-1900 as the real crucible of modernity. In Price's account, this period ushered in a 'second industrial revolution', substituting steel for iron and joint-stock companies for family firms; witnessed the rise of mass marketing and mass politics,

replacing corner shops and riotous hustings; and gave birth to the forms of centralized national government that would later come to dominate Britons' lives for three decades following World War Two. More abstractly, Price argues that the 1880s marked the period when 'class' finally became the primary signifier of British social relations, moving from the vague realm of 'consciousness' to the tangible arena of national unions, legal strikes, and the Labour Party. Although some historians of the eighteenth century will persist in claiming modernity for that era, many Victorianists would agree that pre-1880 varieties of politics, society, economics, and even 'class' looked very different from what followed. By and large, the whole point of Victorian studies in recent years has been to map these varied transitions with more precision.

From the perspective of national history, there are clear implications in designating the period from 1870-1900 to be the watershed years when modernity appeared on the scene. Namely, these are also the years when Britain commenced a century-long decline from its status as world power. Hence, it is tempting to conclude that if Price is correct, Britain was not as good at being modern compared (for instance) to the United States, Germany or Japan. Put another way, denying that the early Victorian (or Hanoverian) period was modern is tantamount to denying Britain's role in leading the rest of the world down that path. This latter thought long stood as a consolation prize for an older generation of Victorianists, who could at least claim Isambard Brunel and Robert Stephenson as their own even as British Rail crumbled around them. What Price, echoing the American business historian Alfred Chandler, tells such people is that America owes its dominance to Henry Ford and US Steel, not to their Victorian precursors. Similarly, historians writing in the heyday of the British welfare state were proud to embrace Jeremy Bentham as its architect, in order to drape welfarism in respectably British (as opposed to Bismarckian) garb. Especially given the ease with which Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair have dismantled much of that edifice, few historians today are all that interested in demonstrating welfarism's Victorian roots.

Britain's failure to match the pace of modernity experienced by some competing nations raises a different question: Regarding Britain, as opposed to the United States, Japan, or Germany, is 1880 really the right endpoint for Price's long transition from *ancien regime* into the modern world? Some historians, like Tom Nairn, have been arguing for decades that Britain *never* became modern – that following the short steps it took in that direction in 1688, it got stuck in a cake of custom, growing mustier (and relatively more backward) with each passing year. Price

stops well short of following Nairn in writing off present-day Britain as a Victorian theme park, but he generally supports the notion that British modernity's lengthy gestation placed it at a disadvantage relative to countries like Germany and Japan, which (in comparison) modernized overnight. Part of this support derives from the primacy of the second industrial revolution in his definition of modernity. A modern state, for Price, is an American-style state, with a strong industrial base and a far-reaching mass market specializing in the exchange of consumer goods and political ideas. Other historians have claimed that such a definition is too narrow, since it ignores (for instance) Britain's continued influence in the realm of finance. In the future, when the United States and Western Europe have finished outsourcing most of their industrial capacity to countries like China, historians may well reperiodize British history once again. When that day comes, *British Society 1680-1980* might speak of a longer transition yet, from an pre-industrial old regime to a post-industrial (and post-modern) political economy.

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Partly autonomous? Literary-historical reflections on Richard Price, *British Society 1680-1880*

Francis O'Gorman

How might Richard Price's bold proposal seem to a professional reader of Victorian literature? Periods in *literary* history, certainly, are easy to contest and difficult to move. The starting question of whether it makes sense to speak of 'Victorian literature' is more than an idle one and it stands the chance of producing some useful knowledge. Whether it makes better sense to speak of 'nineteenth-century literature' or 'Victorian literature' matters both as an intellectual issue – the crucial question of Romantic legacies is buried here and other intriguing subjects like the nature of the 1830s in literary term – and it also matters as a pedagogic one. University English teaching needs borders; it cannot operate coherently without them. But few good period papers/modules will begin without productively and rightly interrogating their own chronological boundaries. Period margins in literary history are difficult to relocate partly because they are impossible for teachers to do without. But, of course, they make sense beyond this mere pragmatism. The boundaries of literary history, however susceptible to debate, acknowledge swathes of multiple differences even if they accidentally, and sometimes deliberately, disguise continuities. The literature of the