

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXI-49

Gregory Conti. *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781108428736 (hardback, \$120.00); 9781108450959 (paperback, \$34.99).

3 July 2020 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-49>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor and Chair: Adam Lebovitz | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by Helena Rosenblatt, Graduate Center, City University of New York.....	2
Review by Richard Bourke, University of Cambridge.....	6
Review by H.S. Jones, University of Manchester.....	10
Review by Lucia Rubinelli, University of Cambridge.....	14
Review by Nadia Urbinati, Columbia University.....	17
Response by Gregory Conti, Princeton University.....	21

INTRODUCTION BY HELENA ROSENBLATT, GRADUATE CENTER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Greg Conti's *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation* is an important book on a curiously neglected topic in the history of political thought. It describes in fascinating detail the debates that nineteenth-century political thinkers, commentators, and actors in Victorian Britain had about "descriptive representation," democracy, and reform.

We knew already that they worried about democracy because the less well-off were thought to lack "capacity" and it was assumed that they favored a restricted suffrage based on property qualifications for that reason. However, we did not know about the wide swathe of thinkers who developed the idea that parliament should be a "mirror of the nation," in other words, that it should reflect the diversity of the population, including, to a certain extent, the poor. They debated how a "variety of suffrages" could regulate the vote so that that all classes of citizens had spokesmen in parliament who could partake in the deliberation necessary to obtain just laws.

Conti's book is erudite, intellectually rigorous, and compelling. Three of the four reviewers offer enthusiastic praise. They commend Conti for his portrayal of the debates on representation in all their complexity and richness. Richard Bourke calls it a "powerful study" and a "tremendous achievement" on a "captivating" topic. H.S. Jones praises Conti for his "remarkable" study based on "deep historical analysis." Nadia Urbinati calls it an "excellent book" that is "masterfully" argued. These reviewers also agree that it is a very well written book, Bourke calling it "eloquent" and Jones "elegantly structured." Lucia Rubinelli's review focuses more on criticism than praise, but she clearly agrees that it is a very valuable book on an important topic.

Each reviewer brings his or her own area of expertise to bear and, as is expected in a roundtable like this, offers some criticism and suggestions for further development. Urbinati would have liked more space to have been devoted to the idea of sovereignty and the role of political parties. Rubinelli thinks that the differences between French and British views of representation were not sufficiently addressed. Jones wonders why Conti did not discuss the idea of the referendum, which was important to one of his main characters and has reemerged as an important issue today. Bourke suggests that Conti might have spent more time on the evolution of the notion of representation over time.

Where there is some interesting disagreement among the reviewers is on the topic of Conti's methodology. The book is clearly interdisciplinary; it aims to contribute to both political theory and the history of political thought. Urbinati writes that Conti "succeeds admirably" in holding these two disciplines together. Jones compliments him on both his profound historical understanding and his sophisticated engagement with modern political theory. The other two reviewers see a bit of a problem, a lack of clarity, and some underdeveloped thinking. And, indeed, Conti *is* a bit confusing when he describes his own methodology, or his non-methodology. In the introduction, he comes close to saying that he does not *have* a method. His book, he tries to explain, was not written "in order to exemplify any particular method of doing either intellectual history of politically theory--at least not consciously." He only subscribes to a few notions that are "quasi methodological" (6). Perhaps this is what Conti means when he describes his historical material as a kind of "laboratory" in which political platforms can be "tested," but he does not explain further. Richard Bourke calls him on this and suggests that perhaps he missed a good opportunity to say something more about method, since it is important to his argument.

A question related to method has to do with the contemporary relevance, if any, of what Conti has to say. At several points, Conti hints that his book might offer lessons for us today, but he never elaborates and one is left somewhat dissatisfied. Bourke is pleased that Conti avoids "partisanship" on contemporary issues, but feels that the book has more relevance today than Conti is prepared to admit. Curiously, Rubinelli read the book very differently. She chastises Conti for having a "polemical target," namely the idea of having descriptive representation for marginalized groups today, particularly women and minorities. While Conti calls descriptive representation "undemocratic," Rubinelli believes that in today's environment, such representation would in fact be democratic. Here Bourke's suggestion that Conti might have discussed the evolution of notions of representation over time would perhaps have been helpful. He might just have said something more to clarify his own stand or not mention contemporary relevance at all.

It is surprising that none of the reviewers picked up in any sustained way on the important contribution this book makes to the scholarship on liberalism, of which there has been much in recent years.¹ Although it is not uniquely about liberalism, it does have some important and new things to say on the topic. For example, Conti adds considerable nuance to the overly reductionist and often anachronistic definitions of liberalism that continue to reign today. Rather than looking abstractly at a constructed concept called ‘liberalism,’ Conti does an admirable job uncovering *really existing* liberalism, in other words, what liberalism actually was in nineteenth-century England, which is usually regarded as the highpoint of liberalism, the age of so-called ‘classical liberalism.’ First, and perhaps most obviously, by focusing on debates among liberals, Conti shows that liberalism was never a fixed or unitary creed. Second, he shows that it was not such an individualistic creed as is often claimed. Today, whether it is among adversaries of liberalism, or defenders of liberalism, or scholars of liberalism, it is all about the individual and his needs, desires, rights and interests. It is clearly not about political participation and political deliberation about the common good. It is not really about politics at all, it is even depoliticizing. By looking at the liberals’ views of representation, Conti pushes against this mischaracterization.

As it turns out, real nineteenth-century liberals were not so uniquely focused on the individual’s rights or on limiting government. Conti shows how hard liberals worked to conceive of, and design, an electoral machinery that would enable the political participation of diverse groups of citizens, including workers. This is clearly not ‘democratic’ representation in the sense that most of us conceive it today, but it is a type of representation that was interested in giving some voice to the poorer members of society. It seems, then, that one of the things Conti reveals, although he does not say it outright, is that liberals were not so much fighting for the protection of individuals *from* government, as enabling them to participate *in* it. British thinkers and politicians were trying to design a form of government that would foster effective deliberation by representative groups on areas of common concern. Again, it wasn’t so much about *how much* the state was doing, but how it was constructed so that it would efficiently do what was good and right for *everyone*. Although this is not generally the way representation is viewed in liberal democracies today, it seems to be what nineteenth century liberals themselves believed that they were doing. Liberalism from this point of view cannot be said to be *depoliticizing* as so much current scholarship claims.

Nor was liberalism just about representing the interests of the bourgeoisie as some today continue to maintain. It was also about enfranchising workers in a way that reflected the ‘state of society.’ Finally, liberalism was not individualist, since it was diverse groupings and not solitary individuals that were to be represented. Conti explains that just as the unities to be represented through electoral institutions were not individuals, but groups, so the public opinion which was integral to their understanding of free government was not about counting heads. The public opinion that would be represented in the Commons and then deliberated over was communitarian or corporatist and not individualist.

Conti also has interesting things to say about the influence of the great French liberal historian and statesman, François Guizot, about whom much has been written lately. Conti suggests that Guizot was not a popular figure with his group of authors. Like many French liberals, British liberals regarded the downfall of the French liberal government in the Revolution of 1848 as a direct consequence of the July Monarchy’s very narrow franchise, which they thought had invited a backlash from those excluded. A most fascinating part of Conti’s story is that many key liberals in Britain thought of representation very differently from Guizot. Here Rubinelli’s critique is relevant in that the differences between the concept of representation in the two countries might have been highlighted more effectively. While Guizot and his allies believed that representation was about extracting and giving voice to the ‘sovereignty of reason’ from the nation as if this were *one*

¹ A small sampling of the many recent and/or much discussed books on liberalism from a variety of perspectives might include Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Alan Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe. The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003); Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, (New York: Princeton University Press, 2019), Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual. The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

pre-existing and unitary truth, the British envisaged an outcome produced by deliberation and negotiation by diverse groupings. For example, to the British writer Walter Bagehot, the clash of opinions in the Commons was good. To be effective, the legislature should express “the sentiments, the interests, the opinions, the prejudices, the wants of *all classes* of the nation” regardless of whether they conformed to some standard of public reason (82). Freedom, Bagehot thought, could only survive in a pluralist society in which various principles, ideas, and interests coexisted and were engaged in perpetual competition. While this is very different from Guizot’s views, Conti might still have overemphasized the Brits’ hostility to them. The notion that a government should reflect the ‘state of society’ is very closely associated with Guizot, so perhaps they took something from him after all.

In his response to his reviewers, Conti expresses pleasure and gratitude that the book was well received by such eminent scholars and responds respectfully to the comments. He deepens and expands his arguments, clarifies them where there might have been some misunderstanding, and pushes back in places. He devotes most space here to the methodological issues raised by his reviewers. He writes of the great difficulty in doing political theory and argues that if there are any normative lessons drawn from research in historical political theory they should be regarded as “at most happy accidents.” He questions the degree to which a “methodology,” which he puts in quotation marks, should direct the historian of political thought. This is confusing, since surely every good book in the field has a methodology of some sort whether it is overtly *stated* or not.

Conti also writes that “to seek to influence contemporary debate by insinuation or selective narrative... degrades the discipline” and proffers that he did not wish to engage in “partisan warfare.” Of course, none of his reviewers suggested that he do this. All in all, however, these discussions about methodology do not detract from the value of the book whose arguments stand regardless. What some of his reviewers are saying is that Conti did not *discuss* and explain his methodology enough, not that he didn’t have one that worked for him.

In the end, one has to agree with H.S Jones when he writes that the object of Conti’s interdisciplinary approach is to lead us to a better understanding of the issues at stake. What does it mean for an assembly to be representative? What is it meant to represent? Can democracy coexist with quotas? Conti does not provide answers to these difficult questions, but he helps us to understand their importance and how people in the past have struggled with them. Surely, the simple truth is that getting history right gives theorists better material to work with.

Participants:

Gregory Conti is assistant professor of Politics at Princeton University. He has written on a wide range of themes in intellectual history and political theory, including electoral systems and representative government; toleration and freedom of speech; and the relationship between liberalism and democracy.

Helena Rosenblatt is Professor of History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her most recent book is *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

Richard Bourke is Professor of the History of Political Thought and a Fellow of King’s College at the University of Cambridge. He has published on enlightenment and post-enlightenment political ideas, including on democracy, empire, sovereignty and political judgment. His most recent monograph is *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, 2015).

H.S. Jones is Professor of Intellectual History at the University of Manchester, UK. His works include *The French State in Question* (Cambridge, 1993); *Victorian Political Thought* (Basingstoke, 2000); and *Intellect and Character in Victorian England: Mark Pattison and the Invention of the Don* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Lucia Rubinelli is Junior Research Fellow in the History of Political Thought at Robinson College, University of Cambridge. Her book *Constituent Power: A History* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2020.

Nadia Urbinati is professor of political theory at Columbia University. Her most recent book, *Me The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

REVIEW BY RICHARD BOURKE, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

In the Introduction to his powerful study, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation*, Greg Conti raises the question of the purpose of political theory that is conducted within an historical frame. He begins, however, by disavowing the importance of the issue: “This book was not written in order to exemplify any particular method of doing either intellectual history or political theory,” Conti asserts (6). Given the steady appearance of often-superfluous methodological rumination in the human sciences, Conti’s reticence (or, perhaps, fatigue) is in many respects appropriate. Yet surely he is in danger of over-stating his indifference. “[T]he reader is entitled to an account of the basic convictions orientating the author’s research and writing,” Conti concedes (6). These convictions, he goes on, only really add up to “a few notions”—amounting, at most, to “*quasi-methodological*” reflections (6). Yet I think there is more to be said about Conti’s idea of what he is doing. In fact, I suggest that this conception is important to his conclusions.

Within the broad family of historical approaches to political theory, there exists a barely camouflaged suspicion of elaborate methodological prescription of the kind pursued between the 1960s and 1980s by Quentin Skinner—a suspicion (or even disdain) that is associated with the late Istvan Hont and, in certain moods, with Richard Tuck.¹ The squabble is, or was, a kind of turf war. Both sides had their unmistakable merits. Skinnerian methodology enhanced the profile of the discipline while the Hont-Tuck approach served the cause of interpretative flexibility. But whatever one’s preferences, we should all be able to agree that historians of political thought could still benefit from pondering how best to justify their subject. Conti, I believe, helps secure that aim. That in itself is a substantial achievement.

The promise of a boost to historical political theory is surely needed. Straussianism as a form of textual exegesis is in some kind of terminal decline. Many Arendtians have embraced assorted strands of agonism in a move that would have baffled their begetter.² J. G. A. Pocock is one of the only Oakeshottians remaining, and in any case his debts were always heavily qualified.³ At the same time, Hayekians for the most part have succumbed to ideal modelling while Berlinians have virtually disappeared from the scene. Equally striking, numerous Wolinites have steadily succumbed to postmodernism.⁴ Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Giorgio Agamben have acquired unexpected currency as political theorists. Meanwhile, a sort of modified New-Leftism is renewing old postures as if the 1980s and 1990s had never happened. Relatedly, neo-Marxism is preached without much sense of the critique of Marx, and ‘Empire’ has become a word for politics-misliked.⁵ Taylorians have retreated from Hegelianism into communitarianism, and neo-Hegelians are mostly focussed on questions of

¹ Paul Sagar and Christopher Brooke, “Introduction: ‘Istvan Hont as Political Theorist,’” *European Journal of Political Theory* 17:4 (Special Issue) (2018): 387-390; Richard Tuck, “History,” in Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit and Thomas Pogge eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 72-89.

² Bonnie Honig, “The Politics of Agonism,” *Political Theory* 21:3 (August 1993): 528-533.

³ Samuel James, “J. G. A. Pocock and the Idea of the ‘Cambridge School’ in the History of Political Thought,” *History of European Ideas* 25:1 (2019): 83-98.

⁴ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁵ Anthony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

epistemology.⁶ Habermasians have for the most part withdrawn into neo-Kantianism.⁷ In comparison with the era of David Easton,⁸ political science and comparative politics have grown remote from political theory, while political philosophers rarely communicate with historians. Perhaps even more troubling, historians are decreasingly interested in politics. We do, therefore, need to think about what we are doing.

It should be reiterated at this point that Conti's book is a tremendous achievement. To begin with, it contains an impressive body of scholarship. The author is conscious of presenting his argument via an "ensemble" of characters instead of by resort to a purely "star-driven production" (6). His reasons for this are cogent. The wider the trawl—within reason—the richer the material captured. And the sheer range of data is relevant to Conti's argument. Debate about representation, democracy and deliberation was remarkably variegated in the nineteenth century. This variation forces us to reflect on disparate combinations of values with electoral schemes and institutional arrangements. Comparison across variables is essential to Conti's objective: what setup, he wonders, is best matched with which values? So, too, is comparison across time-dimensions crucial, particularly across the period separating the Victorians from us. Hence the title of this review.

My claim is that the importance of Conti's understated "*quasi-methodological*" reflections lies inside these fields of comparative analysis. More specifically, it lies at the intersection of both domains. The book invites us to compare assorted norms and their realisation across epochs. Direct comment on this goal may in some respects be confined to the book's Introduction, but the issue resurfaces throughout the book. He asks: how should we think about Victorian problems in relation to our own? Conti's engagement with this question is central rather than peripheral. And while it is vital for his project, it is also essential for us.

Not the least of the virtues of this captivating book is its mastery of detail. The sheer multiplicity of schemes for a "variety-of-suffrages," (e.g., 22) constitutional regulation, representative theories, political principles and models of decision-making is treated with both command and relish. The author's attention to erstwhile Whig (and, latterly, Liberal and Conservative) ideas of descriptive representation from Burke to Bagehot to Lecky is both broad and discriminating. His rendition of various projects for proportional representation is exhaustive. And his account of a "uniform suffrage" (e.g., 158) under democracy is revealing. Time and again his *dramatis personae* are handled with subtlety and care: Mackintosh, Macaulay, Bentham, Chartism, Mill, Greg, Harris, Guizot, Kinnear, Bright, Dicey, Sidgwick, Maitland, Wallas, and Macdonald. But what does all this show?

Major advances in the scholarship of the history of political thought since the 1960s have largely been focused on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the stomping ground of Pocock, Tuck and Hont, with Dunn and Skinner concentrating on the earlier period, but periodically coming forward.⁹ Research in the nineteenth century, at least in Britain, has been comparatively modest. John Burrow and Donald Winch were outstanding figures, but they avoided political

⁶ See, for example, Amy Gutmann ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁷ Rainer Forst, *Das Recht auf Rechtfertigung: Elemente einer konstruktivistischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007).

⁸ David Easton, "The Decline of Modern Political Theory," *Journal of Politics* 13:1 (February 1951): 36–58.

⁹ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the "Two Treatises of Government"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

theory, and accepted prevailing historiographical narratives even while they challenged familiar textual interpretations.¹⁰ Gareth Stedman Jones is clearly a very major presence, but most of his work is driven by critical self-reflection on the significance and legacy of Marxism.¹¹ Only more recently has the nineteenth century witnessed original interventions, and Conti must certainly now be prominent among them. What, in particular, has earned Conti this distinction?

Historical scholarship covering Britain after 1789 has been dogged by ideological simplification. In fact, this generalisation applies to Europe, perhaps even to the Western world. Thinkers, movements and ideologies have been straightjacketed, and categorized with political intent. They have likewise been associated with positive and negative ‘tendencies,’ unwitting allies of hypostatised parties of ‘progress’ and ‘order.’¹² Such polarisation has largely been absent from scholarship on earlier periods. But it has been conspicuously present in the literature on the nineteenth century. In this context, Conti represents the rejection of this form of partisanship. To my mind, it is this that marks his book out as a model achievement. It is equally this feature that frees the author to think again about representation within a historical context, including the comparison of pre-democracy with post-Whiggism, or the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the twentieth and twenty first. Conti was taught the trade of political theory under Tuck and is thus an indirect descendant of the “Cambridge School.” Yet I believe that Conti offers us ways of moving forward that eludes the blockages that have sometimes maimed the coherence of “Cambridge” procedure.

Dunn and Skinner began their careers denying the “relevance” of past thinkers, only suddenly then to renege on this seeming announcement of their redundancy.¹³ Dunn opted to recover what was “living” in Locke from the husk of his mortal remains.¹⁴ However, the viable remnants were confined to marginal particles of doctrine, amounting to very general political truths. On the other hand, for his part, Skinner re-directed his historical labours to prove the essential “contingency” of hegemonic beliefs, but without explaining what would constitute good reasons for adopting old ones. At the same time Skinner moved to excavate “buried treasure” in past thought, recommending these as alternatives to our preferences in the present.¹⁵ The problem here was that a chasm separated past (“neo-Roman”) treasure from an allegedly impoverished liberal-democratic present. This chasm might be provocatively called “the history in between.” Across this expanse Skinnerian analysis can lay claim to rhetorical-normative resonance, but it lacks any ascertainable historical traction. Why did neo-Romanism bow out of world history? And what is the point of resurrecting components of the ideology in the absence of its enabling socio-political underpinning? These are the pivotal questions that Skinnerianism has been reluctant to answer.

Conti resolves to circumvent this impasse. His concern is not with belated norms but with determinate survivals. He declares: “For ‘Victorian’ dilemmas still course through the politics of modern democracies” (361). That is to say, aspects of

¹⁰ John Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study of Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1932–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

¹² See, for example, James Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

¹³ John Dunn, “The Identity of the History of Ideas,” *Philosophy* 43:164 (April 1968): 85-104; Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8:1 (1969): 3-53.

¹⁴ Dunn, “What is Living and What is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke?” in *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981–1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the world of the nineteenth century are still with us. For that reason, Conti at one point interestingly describes his historical materials as a kind of “laboratory” in which platforms can be “tested” without any risk of damage in the here-and-now (6). Yet there are shortcomings that come with the laboratory model. Instead of inspecting the interaction of fixed variables, the history of political thought studies adaptation. Its subject is not assorted experiments frozen in time whose conclusions are nonetheless applicable diachronically, but rather shifting and emerging variables shaped by processes of struggle. This requires the scrutiny of concepts as they alter, as well as assessments of the dynamics of change. This covers the continuities and discontinuities that afflict institutions and values. So we need to be fluently analytical and historical at once.

Modern democracy cannot be understood without carefully identifying its parts, which usually include: popular legitimation, parties, parliaments, rival chambers, expertise, bureaucracy, politicians, deliberative procedures, constitutions, the rule of law, executive power(s), representation, equal votes and mass elections. Each of these elements is obliged to operate against the background of what Conti has called an underlying “sociology” (362): that is, the character and constitution of social divisions, variously anatomised as “classes, interests, groups, stations, parts, opinions, ideas, sentiments, convictions, and views” (90). Now, nearly every component on our list of attributes comprising modern politics pre-dates the advent of democracy. We need to grasp that equal votes and mass elections intruded onto a scene with enduring arrangements in place. These arrangements are in our past and in our present—but now under new conditions. They happened upon the present as social forces unfolded, and thus as Conti’s “sociology” was transformed. Political theory requires us to keep both the list of attributes and their temporalities continually before our eyes. Such an enterprise is very different from the Skinnerian aim of resuscitating apparently superannuated ideals, or from neo-Wolinite endeavours to derive ‘normative payoffs’ from our own values projected into the past.

Historians sometimes pick out single items from the morass as essentially ‘modern’ features: for instance the idea of the ‘right to vote.’ Proceeding in this way, past advocates of what are termed ‘progressive’ values seem ‘nearer’ to us, while the protagonists of established principles seem ‘further away.’ Thomas Paine is thereby made to appear our contemporary, and James Mackintosh by comparison a relic. Conti convincingly demonstrates that these optics are all wrong. Descriptive diversity, he shows, is often claimed for modern democracy. Here we only need to think of the work of scholars like Robert MacIver, David Truman, Robert Dahl, Arend Lijphart, or Anne Phillips.¹⁶ Yet, as Conti is at pains to argue, the very idea is a residue from an older pattern of thought. Today the idea is being instrumentalised under conditions of population diversity fuelled by the economy, the legacies of empire, patterns of immigration, and a shifting gender balance in the workplace. In this situation, campaigns for quotas have increased in efficacy and momentum. Will extending such measures deepen or displace democracy? We might view the re-appearance of descriptive representation in the era of mass democratic participation as an historic irony, or perhaps as a source of unwanted political tension. However, tension is an ineliminable feature of politics. Many of the resulting conflicts stem from our relationship to our own history. It is our permanent fate to inhabit both the past and the present at once.

Historico-political analysis helps us distinguish and connect both moments. In this idiom, Conti’s eloquent book is a master class in refined historical differentiation. ‘Diversity’ is among the most potent yet undifferentiated concepts in contemporary politics. It is sometimes employed to improve the fate of constituencies afflicted by systematic injustice, yet it is also used to advance privileged cohorts within assumed ‘descriptions’ who factiously cleave to identity-based groups as a means of self-promotion in the context of social and professional struggles. Conti’s study encourages us to interrogate the sociology supporting these competitive identities, and to relate it to the existing political division of labour. In the process, the book reminds us that one of political theory’s tasks is to teach us where we are on the basis of examining where we have come from. Only from that position can we assess competing ideals in relation to the likely course of the future.

¹⁶ Robert MacIver, *The Web of Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); David Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York: Knopf, 1951); Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation. Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Representation Reconsidered

This is a remarkable book that combines profound historical understanding with a sophisticated engagement with modern political theory. I think of it in some ways as a British counterpart to the kind of thing that Pierre Rosanvallon has done for nineteenth-century France in a sequence of works stretching from *Le Moment Guizot* to *Le Peuple Introuvable*¹. That is, he provides a historically deep analysis of how nineteenth-century political thinkers, political commentators, and political actors thought about representation, the franchise, and democracy. There is the big difference that whereas Rosanvallon's writings are typically rather shapeless, opening up many more questions than they resolve, Conti's book is elegantly structured and sharply focused on the implications and transformation of a particular way of conceiving representation.

I start by outlining what I take to be Conti's central arguments.

First, he establishes that mid-Victorian opinion overwhelmingly held that democracy would threaten the ideal of deliberative parliamentary government. This is an important insight: one which is not wholly new, but worth establishing in detail, not least because it runs contrary to what has, until recently, been the conventional assumption in recent decades that democracy and deliberation are natural partners. The insight is timely: between the Brexit referendum of 2016 and the general election of 2019, Britain saw a sustained stand-off between the principle of parliamentary deliberation and a populist invocation of a single expression of the democratic will. In the nineteenth century, most British Liberals feared that universal suffrage would produce a homogeneous legislature dominated by the spokesmen of the working class, which was itself assumed to be homogeneous. A legislature lacking basic diversity would not be deliberative. This argument reinforces a growing body of literature on the genealogies of the theories of representation and of democracy – Bernard Manin is a notable contributor – in which a core argument is that they have distinct and in some ways opposite intellectual origins.² It also has obvious affinities with the argument advanced in another recent contribution to the Ideas in Context series, William Selinger's *Parliamentarism*, which tries to restore the deliberative parliament, capable of holding the executive to account, to its place at the heart of nineteenth-century liberalism.³

Second, Conti shows that the doctrine of representation that was deployed to support this critique of democracy was a mirror theory of representation – what he also calls, following Hanna Pitkin, a descriptive theory of representation.⁴ Again, this stands in contrast to the intuition that the descriptive model of representation is a natural ally of democracy. Democratic theorists and activists today commonly appeal to the assumption that a democratic legislature should mirror the electorate at large in certain key attributes. But Conti shows that nineteenth-century commentators mostly believed that a democratic legislature would fail to represent society accurately, since it would tend towards the representation of the numerically dominant class, the urban working class. This line of argument is more truly original than the first. There is relatively little literature on the genealogy of descriptive theories of representation, and Conti shows conclusively that this is

¹ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Moment Guizot* (Paris : Gallimard, 1985), Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen: histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris : Gallimard, 1992), Rosanvallon, *Le Peuple Introuvable: histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris : Gallimard, 2002), among other works.

² Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For a different perspective, Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³ William Selinger, *Parliamentarism from Burke to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁴ Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

rich terrain for historical cultivation. That is all the more so because the picture he paints is not peculiar to Britain: the mirror theory was much invoked in France by those who aimed to constrain the operation of universal suffrage, and for reasons very like those used in Britain.⁵

Third, and conversely, Conti demonstrates that the distinctive democratic response to this ‘variety-of-suffrages’ critique of democracy took the form of a denial that it was the proper function of a democratic legislature to represent society in a descriptive sense. There was no *a priori* way of determining what particular characteristics of society should be represented in the legislature. Should it be the interests of different social classes, and, if so, what determined which classes were worthy of representation and which not? Should differences of sex, age, educational background etc be represented? These are arbitrary judgements. Advanced Liberals in the 1860s – men such as Albert Venn Dicey and Henry Sidgwick – typically held that all restrictions on the adult (male?) suffrage were vulnerable to the criticism that they rested on arbitrary assumptions of this kind. This is the key argument of Chapter 3, which is by some distance the slightest of the five chapters, perhaps reflecting Conti’s primary interest in excavating the descriptive conception of representation.

Finally, in Chapters 4 and 5, Conti offers a new and wholly original account of the case for proportional representation (PR) as articulated by the Chancery barrister and Assistant Charity Commissioner, Thomas Hare. Hare is curiously little known, except as an ally of John Stuart Mill, but he is seriously in need of (re)discovery, and Conti’s is the best analysis we have of his political thinking.⁶ It might be supposed that the emergence of the PR movement marked the point when the descriptive conception of representation ceased to be a weapon used by critics of democracy and was instead taken up by its champions, but Conti resists that reading, pointing out that the early advocates of PR thought their cause to be just as workable in conjunction with a limited suffrage as with a democratic suffrage. The PR advocates agreed with the descriptive theorists in the value they attached to deliberation, and in fearing that a democratic franchise, if implemented alongside the existing plurality voting system, would produce a homogeneous legislature which would stifle debate. But they also agreed with Dicey and his allies that there was no non-arbitrary way of determining in advance which kinds of diversity should be represented in parliament and which should not. The electors must be trusted.

Conti notes the resilience of the ‘corporate’ theory of representation in Victorian political argument. This was the principle, as the prime minister William Ewart Gladstone put it in 1870, that each constituency was ‘in itself an integer’, a corporate whole, which must be regarded as a unity for electoral purposes. This principle was gradually eroded by the Second and Third Reform Acts. The 1867 Act made a tentative experiment with the ‘limited vote’, an early scheme for minority representation in which the elector in a multi-member constituency had fewer votes than there were MPs to be elected: two votes in twelve three-member constituencies, and three in the four-cornered City of London seat. Later, the Redistribution of Seats Act of 1885 recognized the principle of the regular redrawing of constituency boundaries to ensure a roughly consistent ratio between the number of MPs to be elected and the number of electors. Hare was an acute critic of the survival of the corporate theory beyond its time: an artificial grouping of small towns to make them large enough to compose a constituency, he noted, creates “but an arbitrary electoral district, in which all local developments and combinations are sacrificed to a constrained union, for the mere purpose of electing representatives, of people who are united for nothing else”.⁷ It was indeed Hare who wanted to push the abandonment of the corporate principle to its logical conclusion by establishing in its place the principle of the voluntary constituency, in which the voter could cast his vote for any candidate in any constituency: effectively, the single transferable vote would be pushed to its logical conclusion. For Hare, his system would put an end to the fiction of ‘virtual representation,’ and instead substitute a real representation in which every elector

⁵ For this point, see H.S. Jones, “Political Uses of the Concept of ‘Representation’: How the French Debated Electoral Reform, c. 1880-1914,” *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 4:1 (2000): 15-36, especially 17 and n. 9.

⁶ There is also a valuable study by F.D. Parsons, *Thomas Hare and Political Representation in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁷ Thomas Hare, “Representation of every Locality and Intelligence,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 61 (April 1860), 536.

could be said to have authorised an MP. It would also eliminate the need for parliamentary candidates to engage in the subterfuges and hypocrisies needed to attract a plurality of votes in a geographically defined constituency, and would therefore tend to raise both the moral and intellectual qualities of the membership of the House of Commons.

What is particularly significant here is that Hare saw his system of proportional representation as the electoral system best suited to the structure of modern society, a society grounded (as Sir Henry Maine taught) on contract rather than on status.⁸ It was, he declared, “the great political doctrine of modern times” (359); and, in the words of his most famous backer, John Stuart Mill, “the great discovery in representative government.”⁹ Conti lucidly traces the conception of liberty that underpinned PR in Hare’s mind. On the one hand, PR was the political analogue of free trade: just as the latter overcame “the pretensions of local protection and monopoly”, so the former went into battle against “the far less plausible and more insolent claims of dominant inhabitants of arbitrarily selected and privileged boroughs and districts to a monopoly of the great right of national representation” (236). But equally important – or more important, I would suggest – was Hare’s commitment to associational life as the essence of a free society. Modern civil society was marked by a rich variety of voluntary associations, and just as the voluntary principle underpinned civil society, so too it must be given free rein in the electoral system. Whereas the idea of the unitary constituency logically implied *Gemeinschaft*, the voluntary constituency was the expression of *Gesellschaft*.¹⁰

Conti here at least hints at something of the complexity of Hare’s political thinking. His scheme might look like the quintessentially individualistic electoral system, but in fact Hare was acutely aware of the dangers of atomization in modern society, and one of his deepest commitments was to trying to find ways of reanimating civic virtue in a modern industrial society. He was, like Mill, a keen supporter of the co-operative movement, which he saw as a key agent of working-class social inclusion; and in his work as a reformer of the endowed charities he saw an opportunity (aborted, in the event) to disendow the City Livery Companies, not in order to privatize that property but to entrust it to the co-operative movement, as the modern embodiment of the impulse for collective self-help that had originally animated the Livery Companies.

Conti also brings out just how rich the debate on proportional representation was: a fine instance of how deep-seated assumptions about politics can best be understood and evoked through a deep study of a specific political controversy. Among the most incisive critics of Hare’s system was the positivist Frederic Harrison, who insisted that voting was by nature a collective act, something that he thought Hare failed to appreciate (339-40). Similarly, the Fabian pioneer of empirical political science, Graham Wallas, thought PR fatally handicapped by a pervasive rationalism. In terms of the structure of Conti’s argument, Harrison, Wallas and others stood in much the same relation to PR as Dicey and Sidgwick stood in relation to the ‘variety of suffrages’ school: they held that a dose of well-grounded empirical realism was needed to cut through their opponents normative aspirations.

But why does this all matter? Answering this question is much easier now than it was when Conti started working on this project. In Britain, that is principally because the referendum of 2016 and the struggles over its implementation have brought into renewed focus the the conception of deliberative parliamentary government and the idea of democracy as the supremacy of the popular will. The idea of the referendum makes only a brief appearance in Conti’s text, but it is an important one, for the most important late Victorian convert to the cause of the referendum was one of Conti’s exponents of the democratic point of view in the 1860s, A.V. Dicey. Dicey’s politics took a markedly conservative turn in later life, but,

⁸ Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1861).

⁹ “Mill to Hare, 19 December 1859” in *The Later Letters of John Stuart Mill 1849-1873*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 653-654.

¹⁰ For these terms, see Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed. Jose Harris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

as Conti, notes he remained a committed democrat, but came to see an ‘appeal to the people’ as a brake on a radical government with a parliamentary majority.

But what can political theorists learn from a historically deep excavation of nineteenth-century arguments which were, as Conti himself highlights, very remote from ours? Conti, after all, writes as a political theorist, though one who is also a skilled historian: he is interested in the logic of arguments, rather than in the kinds of question a social or cultural historian might ask – he does not, for example, engage with or even cite Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, or the work of Patrick Joyce, James Vernon, Jon Lawrence and others who have applied cultural history methods to the study of Victorian politics.¹¹ Their questions are not his. Fundamentally, Conti wants to point us towards a deeper understanding of what it means for parliament to be representative. Is an equal and universal suffrage a necessary condition? And it is a sufficient one? Can a legislature that is, say, eighty percent male and ninety-five per cent white (roughly, the House of Commons 2010-15) be said to be representative of an electorate that is more than fifty per cent female and fifteen per cent non-white? Conti’s work does not provide answers, but he helps us understand that there is much more at stake in these questions than we normally recognise when we wrestle with them. Probably that is the best tribute to a study in historical political theory.

¹¹ Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in British Political Culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language, and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Many would not count electoral systems among the most exciting topics in political theory. Long-term victims of the academic division of labour, they have been systematically snubbed by theorists, whose interests tend to converge around ideal normative theory or text-based intellectual history. Yet this is an important loss, and *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation* demonstrates why. To start, it shows that the unpopularity of these systems is a relatively recent development. As the book argues with great strength, political thinkers across the nineteenth century believed institutions in general, and electoral systems in particular, to be of central concern. We thus miss a big part of what was going on in nineteenth century political thought if we are not willing to engage with historical debates about institutional design. Further, the book demonstrates that debates about electoral reforms were in fact about much more than the mere counting of preferences. They were the testing ground upon which different visions of modern politics competed. Reconstructing this ideological competition means bringing back to life the variety of value claims and visions of politics and society that made the nineteenth century such an eventful period of modern history. In what follows, I will focus on two sets of issues. The first is historical in scope and touches on the difference in logics between electoral reforms in France and England throughout the nineteenth century. The second set of issues is more general, as it raises questions about the specific understanding of democracy offered in the book and its relevance for contemporary debates about democratic politics.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation* is how it reconstructs the logic and purpose of a number of electoral systems. Gregory Conti clearly explains how the ‘variety of suffrage’ model was fundamentally geared toward mirroring the composition of the nation. This meant that what had to be represented were not the preferences of individual citizens, but rather the presence of different groups within society. The result was that numerically small groups, such as the landed aristocracy, had a disproportionately high number of seats in parliament compared to the lower classes, who constituted the majority of the population but were vastly underrepresented. Interestingly, representing the diversity of the nation was also the logic of proportional representation, even though this was conceived as an alternative to the variety of suffrage model. Diversity under proportional representation meant diversity of opinions, and not diversity of social groups. But these competing electoral systems shared, at least at a general level, the goal of representing the diversity of the English nation. This is worth comparing with what was going on in France.

As Abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès made clear in *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers-Etat?*, by 1789 France could no longer accept the division of society into orders. This meant that the newly established National Assembly could only be composed by representatives of the nation, and not by delegates of the clergy, the aristocracy, or the third estate. Sieyès’s idea was quickly appropriated by the National Assembly and became the cornerstone of post-revolutionary French politics. Not only was the nation taken to be the only legitimate object of political representation, but the emphasis was firmly on the necessity to represent its unity, as opposed to its diversity. This principle was then translated into plans for electoral reform, as is evident in the case of proposals advanced during the Revolution but also in its aftermath and throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. Surely, electoral plans differed widely even in France: some had restrictive property requirements, others were based on the principle of universal male suffrage. Some entailed the direct election of members of parliament, others were constructed in such a way as to filter the people’s choice through a series of intermediary elections, each with a progressively smaller constituency. The size, shape and function of electoral districts also varied widely depending on the proposed plans, some of which envisaged very small constituencies, while others called for just one single electoral district.¹ Yet all these plans unmistakably relied on the idea that the object of representation had to be the nation in its unity. This is starkly different from the English debate on electoral reforms as described by Conti. While in France electoral systems were, broadly speaking, designed to create the unity of the nation, in England they were meant to visualise its diversity.

¹ See, for example, Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Patrice Gueniffey, *Le nombre et la raison. La Révolution française et les élections* (EHESS, 1995).

Does this difference tell us something more general, something about two different and nationally-grounded visions of representation? Are the French focus on unity and the English emphasis on diversity to be ascribed to two fundamentally different understandings of parliamentarism, its role and functioning? And lastly, would it be correct to deduce from these differences that France and England were animated by two different understandings of what popular power meant? On this last point, one might be tempted to understand the book to be suggesting that the answer can only be in the affirmative. More specifically, although it does not discuss France in detail, one could draw the conclusion that, even when expanding the franchise, English electoral reformers were fundamentally committed to an ‘aristocratic’ vision of politics, one in which the quality of parliamentary deliberation was more important than political equality and where entrenched social divisions counted for more than the basic democratic principle of majority rule.² If Conti is right, then the temptation would be to interpret France’s emphasis on national unity as an anti-aristocratic move, one in which all votes weighed the same in an effort to build a nation of politically equal citizens.³ In other words, a possible interpretation of why France and England emphasised, respectively, unity and diversity in their plans for electoral reforms is that English parliamentarism was, at its core, aristocratic, while French electoral politics was, at heart, democratic. If that is the case, what does this say about the relationship between democracy and the very idea of national unity?

The second set of questions is more general and relates to the overall argument of the book, or at least to what I understand to be the theoretical point of the book. In multiple passages, Conti suggests that in different ways both the variety of suffrage and proportional representation systems were at odds with democracy because they were based upon the ideas of mirroring the composition of the nation, deliberation, and descriptive representation. All these ideas were, in Conti’s reconstruction, instruments of a worldview that was based upon the legitimacy of a society of orders. Yet at least some of these ideas travelled well beyond the nineteenth century and, with some modifications, have become part of our current way of thinking about democracy. Not only has deliberative democracy obtained a field of political theory on its own, but descriptive representation is commanding increasing levels of attention within democratic politics. We are all familiar with the argument according to which politics is truly democratic only if representatives in parliament mirror the composition of society. The relevant groups are no longer the property owners or the aristocracy, but rather historically marginalised groups such as women or non-white citizens. This type of descriptive representation is achieved, for example, via the use of quotas for under-represented minorities or by shaping electoral systems in such a way as to ensure that preferences go to men and women in equal proportion. Now, if Conti is right, and the idea of mirroring the composition of the nation is fundamentally anti-democratic, how did it come to be considered part and parcel of inclusive and egalitarian democratic politics today? One might argue that this reintroduction of ‘aristocratic’ elements in democratic politics is precisely the polemical target of the book, and I will come back to this later. But, for now, it might be worth asking whether there is any historical explanation for this shift in language, discourse, and values: how and why have a set of anti-democratic concepts and models of electoral policy become co-substantial with it?

As noted, the book discusses how the English vision of a society of orders, which favoured descriptive forms of representation, was repeatedly challenged, and contested by democratic movements. The latter mostly focused on two demands: universal uniform suffrage and procedures to ascertain the will of the majority. Conti suggests that these two demands constitute the core of what democracy means: majority rule under conditions of universal suffrage. This is certainly true historically, as most democratic struggles in nineteenth century England focussed on these two demands. But Conti is also keen to draw wider conceptual lessons from history: even today democracy is, at its core, majority rule. Any attempt to water down the majority principle by imposing limits on the will of the majority or by artificially weakening it through descriptive representation should be considered anti-democratic. This view of democracy appears especially convincing when juxtaposed to the other options described in the book, which tried, in different ways, to attribute different weight to different votes. It also trails in the distinguished tradition of minimalist and proceduralist theories of democracy,

² It should be noted that here and in the rest of the review I use aristocratic in a broad sense, a shortcut to indicate a vision of society that was content with its division in social orders and that accepted their hierarchical relations.

³ Who counted as a citizen though, was open to debate. See Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen. Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

made popular by thinkers such as Hans Kelsen and Joseph Schumpeter, among others.⁴ However, according to even the most minimalist theory of democracy, the existence of majoritarian elections with universal suffrage is not, on its own, enough to guarantee the existence of a democratic system. Instead, further procedures and institutions such as basic rights and constitutional protections for individual freedom need to be put in place for the will of the majority to be represented. The question then is: what type of democracy is Conti referring to in the book and how minimalist is it? Another way of asking the same question is to draw attention to the final pages of the book, where Conti presents Albert Dicey's support for the referendum as an example of how democracy should look: a clear-cut process of majority decision-making. But is a yes or no vote enough to guarantee democracy? Or do we need a series of parallel institutions that, while guaranteeing rights, freedoms, and checks and balances, make the decision of the majority meaningful?

The last question is largely speculative. *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation* is mostly a historical book. Although some of its themes have clear resonance with contemporary politics, the political finale of the book is very much open-ended. However, I would like to advance one possible interpretation of the relevance of this history for today's politics and then offer some remarks. As mentioned, one is tempted to read the book as saying that contemporary democratic politics is riddled with demands for descriptive representation, as is evident in the ascendancy of 'group politics' and the consequent pressure to introduce electoral quotas. This, the book seems to suggest, bears an evident resemblance to the type of descriptive representation that was meant to include minority groups while stifling the rise of democratic politics and, with it, political equality. The result, both today and in the nineteenth century, is that a potentially irresolvable tension arises between equality and inclusivity. At first blush, this seems correct: whenever individuals are given more voice because of their belonging to certain groups, the principle of equality is sacrificed. However, I think that the parallel between nineteenth-century Victorian debates and contemporary politics ends there. Although the trade-off between inclusivity and equality persists today, the logics of contemporary descriptive representation are fundamentally different and, in fact, democratic. The goal of Victorian descriptive representation was to reflect, in parliament, the presence and importance of existing social groups. It was thus a photograph of the existing balance of power at any given time. Contemporary demands for descriptive representation, on the contrary, are meant not to reflect the existing balance of power, but to change it by temporarily giving more voice to groups that are systematically under represented, so as to bring them into a position of equality vis-à-vis other groups. Second, Victorian descriptive representation was meant to stimulate sound deliberation in parliament, while contemporary group politics is aimed at redressing historical injustice. Lastly, Victorian descriptive representation is justified in relation to a principled position, a conscious political decision about what is owed to each group in society, depending on their relative standing and social roles. Hence the trade-off between inclusivity and equality. By contrast, contemporary descriptive representation is only a transitional measure, which is justified by appeal to the very principle of equality that is the basis of democratic politics. In other words, Victorian descriptive representation was designed to entrench inequality, while its contemporary version is meant to promote greater equality, thus fulfilling the promise of democracy.

⁴ See Hans Kelsen, *The essence and value of democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013) and Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

REVIEW BY NADIA URBINATI, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

In his excellent book, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation*, Gregory Conti masterfully traces the political history of representation and deliberation in Victorian Britain through the idea of a parliament mirroring the nation. It is not an easy task, requiring the dynamics of the many discussions, dialogues, proposals and reforms that involved politicians and scholars from the main ideological tendencies of the time—liberal, conservative, and socialist—to be rendered into a single narrative. Yet, Conti succeeds admirably. He holds both political history and the history of political ideas together in a book that can be read from several perspectives: 1) as a document of the debate on “the variety of suffrages” (14) in liberal parliamentarianism’s golden age; 2) as a microcosm of the democratization of representation in post-Napoleonic Europe; or 3) as a history of the complex relationship between a unitary conception of democratic sovereignty (the French model) and a corporate and pluralist conception of the nation (the English model). Conti’s attentive and critical reconstruction of mid-nineteenth century debates about what we would today call the ‘politics of presence,’ or simply ‘group representation,’ allows us to reflect upon the permanent tension that characterizes the attempts of liberal democratic societies to interpret legal and political equality in light of social differences. In my comment, I propose that we situate these several paths, which Conti’s book studies in a specific time and country, within the broader process of political transformation which crossed all European countries, albeit in different forms and with different intensities—the process by which political parties were formed and legitimized, which ran parallel with the construction of representative democracy.

I might ascribe to Conti’s book an ambition that perhaps exceeds his intention; I note in my defense that Conti himself suggests the approach I am proposing. In his introduction, he makes the case that the issue of how to represent social pluralism has persisted throughout the history of representative government. Moreover, he argues that his historical research occurred in a time in which “democratic theory has witnessed a growth of sympathy for descriptive representation” (5). If this phenomenon escapes us it is for two reasons: first, democracy has now often come to be identified with the ‘general will’ tradition and political equality has been broadly identified with a homogenous collective of identical actors (the voters); second, descriptive representation has been relegated to the margins and judged not natural to democracy, but rather an exception to it, as it smuggles disproportional attention to a ‘part’—or some ‘parts’—of society against or instead of its ‘whole.’ One might be tempted to say that the hegemony of Rousseau’s model over representative democracy is at the root of the marginalization of descriptive representation, that is to say of the place of social pluralism in state sovereignty. Given the aforementioned important point that Conti makes in the introduction, one would have liked to see an analysis of these competing theories of sovereignty. To be schematic, scholars of sovereignty have taken one of two theoretical trajectories: one developed from the theory in Roman law of the principal power of the decision, which reached its acme with Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and one that engrafted Roman law within the local practices of corporate governance and reached its acme with Joannes Althusius and, moreover, le Baron de Montesquieu and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Predictably, the principles of democratic equality found themselves more at home with the former; yet representation would have played (and, indeed, did play) an important role in connecting that equality with pluralism and parliamentary politics. In the twentieth century, the tension between social pluralism and state sovereignty provoked dramatic outcomes.¹ Fascism was an experiment of social pluralism incorporated within and dominated by a centralized state. The post-World War Two constitutionalization of democracy was accomplished thanks, among other things, to the engrafting of voluntary participation within ‘political associations’ or parties. Since then, political parties (which are neither social groups nor agents of the state) have been the crucial actors in allowing social pluralism to manifest through political representation: both the Italian constitution (1948) and the German one (1949) contemplated citizens’ civic participation through political parties. The conclusion of Conti’s book hints at this comprehensive process by which the nondemocratic mirroring of social pluralism in Victorian Britain, eventuated in twentieth century party democracy.

A crucial medium in the trajectory from social pluralism to party pluralism was proportional representation, particularly once it was shorn of the single transferable vote mechanism, which led to its individualistic interpretation in the nineteenth

¹ Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 49-90.

century by Thomas Hare and J.S. Mill, and finally became the party list system.² This solution stabilized democracy in former totalitarian countries like Italy and Germany. In his conclusion, Conti shows how that translation was facilitated, and at times promoted, at the end of the nineteenth century by the “idealists,” or neo-Hegelians, whose conception of politics overcame ideas of Millian individualism and instead held that votes mirrored society’s complexity of opinions, as organized by ideologies (319-358).³ This is the aspect that casts light on the long march to liberal parliamentary government to democracy. Seen from this *longue durée* perspective, the political party appears in a new light: as a solution, whose functionality has been historically proven, to the problem of giving voice to social pluralism while sustaining the unity of the sovereign body. Conti’s book reconstructs the early stage of this long march through his analysis of the discussions accompanying the birth and decline of the theory of “the variety of suffrages” (14). In Victorian Britain, keeping the identity of the elector and the citizen together was not easy. The starting point of representative government was not the *fictio iuris* of the unitary nation as in the ideas of Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès⁴ and French constitutionalism, but the concrete social belonging of electors in professions, corporations, and localities.

Hanna Pitkin wrote in her seminal book that the goal of descriptive representation (“standing for”) is making an absent entity present in a pictorial sense.⁵ In the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, a parliament was legitimized by reproducing in miniature the parts of society, above all those parts that more prominently participated in the nation’s life. The principal task was that of having people recognize society when looking at the parliament. Yet the more the parliament became active in lawmaking—and lawmaking achieved prominence in a growing civil society needing more laws and regulations—the more the descriptive aspect of representation had to be supplemented with advocacy; descriptive representativity alone was no longer sufficient. The attempt to link “standing for” with “speaking for” marked the encounter of the “variety of suffrages” with the uniformity of suffrage, as this book explains brilliantly.⁶ The more the ‘voice’ of representatives in the parliament acquired prominence, the more the issue of the character and quality of the representative became relevant, as we see from the writings of the supporters of proportional representation, Hare and Mill particularly. Yet the more “advocacy” (Mill spoke of the representative as a *point d’appui*) achieved momentum the more the individualist solution to descriptive representation proved inadequate.⁷ The triangulation of liberal parliamentarism—a deliberative assembly, competent orators, and the public tribunal—was proportional representation’s strategy for ensuring the selection of a competent few in an electoral environment approximating democracy.⁸ In that context, the ‘speaker’ was meant to perform as an intermediary actor; yet a new kind of ‘similarity,’ a constructed, not pictorial one, was needed so that the assembly could perform efficaciously. The tension between pre-democratic representation (when suffrage was designed to mirror social groups in the parliament) and democratic representation (with the vindication of suffrage as a right) is visible

² Thomas Hare, *The Machinery of Representation*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Maxwell, 1857); John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 2nd ed. (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861).

³ See also Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 30-35.

⁴ Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Écrits politiques*, ed. Roberto Zapperi (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines, 1985).

⁵ Hanna Fennichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), chap. 4.

⁶ Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, chap. 5.

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), in *Collected Works*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 33 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) 19:459.

⁸ On parliamentary deliberation in Victorian Britain see William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

in Mill, who greatly valued the political participation of laborers' and women's social movements, but also thought that only a few virtuous advocates—and not parties—would represent them proficiently.⁹

In representation's transition from solely 'standing for' to 'standing for and speaking for' both conservatives and democrats had to interpret political equality. In the Victorian context, resisting universal suffrage by means of the variety of suffrages proved inadequate; Conti writes that it was a sign of a stubborn diffidence towards democratic uniformity and signaled a conception of sovereignty that mistrusted political equality in the name of an organic or corporate vision of society (an analysis of differing conceptions of sovereignty would be useful here). The issue was intriguing and full of potentialities, as shown by Hegel's political writings, which echoed the vicissitudes of representation in the British parliament.¹⁰ In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel frontally criticized the contractarian, but in effect Rousseauian, theory of sovereignty on two grounds: it did not respect the structure of society; and it undermined political freedom in the very moment in which it identified it with an equal individual vote. For Hegel, universal suffrage justified apathy and indifference towards the nation's interest because it reduced electors to bearers of votes that counted for little.¹¹ According to Hegel, the parliament should therefore reflect the complex structure of the nation and represent the main social functions: those related to land, industry, and exchange. The nation as a productive body of material and spiritual goods needed to be represented proportionally, but in a corporate manner. Pluralism was not Hegel's invention of course; as mentioned above, it was a constitutive component of the western tradition, and its acme came with Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. Hegel's theory of politics belonged to that tradition, as it endorsed British parliamentarism as an eloquent example of a 'corporate' conception of representation that fit the anti-contractarian style of nineteenth century political thought, particularly the anti-positivist turn of the century's end. That turn is the context in which the conceptualization of the political party as an intermediary body, one which is suited to democratic society, grew. This tradition, as Conti shows at the end of his book, played a seminal role in emancipating parties from traditionally being despised and making them vehicles which might transform social groups into pluralistic political agents, a move that helped democratization (352). When today we think about the 'political party' our minds goes to its critics, especially Robert Michels. We do not pay attention to the fact that Michels studied and criticized the party using a conception of democracy that was tailored to Rousseau's theory of sovereignty, and was thus unhospitable to pluralism and intermediation.¹² To understand the role of parties in representative democracy, we would do better to turn to the idealist tradition, which includes Johann Caspar Bluntschli and Antonio Gramsci, the seminal theorists of the role of parties in liberal and democratic representation respectively.¹³

Conti's book is therefore a political history of pluralism. More precisely, it is a careful study of how representation was capable of translating sociological pluralism into political pluralism. It ends by showing the role of political parties as facilitators of that translation, a task that changed representation from mirroring to constructing constituencies. This shift

⁹ Mill, *Considerations*, chap. VIII, "Of the Extension of the Suffrage."

¹⁰ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The English Reform Bill," in *Political Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 295-330.

¹¹ Hence Hegel could write that representation brings dissent into politics because in politicizing the social sphere it carries plurality and difference into the public; George W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Rights* (1821) ed. and trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 200-201.

¹² Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 73; Hugo Drochon, "Robert Michels, the Iron Law of Oligarchy and Dynamic Democracy" forthcoming in *Constellations*.

¹³ Johan Caspar Bluntschli, "What Is a Political Party?," abstract of his German book *Charakter und Geist der politischen Parteien* (1869), in Susan E. Scarrow, ed., *Perspectives on Political Parties* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 70-79; Antonio Gramsci, *Modern Prince and Other Writings* (London: International Publisher, 1957).

rendered Mill's belief that virtuous individual intellectuals were the best intermediaries an anachronism. The party did not simply unify professions, interests, and opinions; it also filtered them through a unitary image of society (91-92, and chap. 4). The party helped moderate the intensity of social interests and their self-image as parts of the whole. In short, it looked like a society in miniature, not for descriptive purposes but in view of achieving power: this allowed pluralism to act for a unitary purpose. As Elmer E. Schattschneider wrote in 1942, the political party is not merely an act of testimony or an irrational adhesion to a creed; if it is all of that, it is in view of better competing for power.¹⁴

We might therefore say that the party solved the problem of Victorian parliamentarianism. Moreover, it proved to be a true celebration of politics as an art of voluntary association and collective rhetoric that influenced all by deeply involving only some; thanks to the party, the 'minority' was neither quashed nor unduly celebrated, but became instead part of the fabric of political pluralism and antagonism. In addition to being a work of political history, Conti's book thus has a theoretical insight and invites us to treat political representation as a litmus test for the tension between society and state, between organic pluralism and the unity of the nation under common norms and agreed-upon rules of the game. The matter of how to resolve this tension without absorbing society into the state or disarticulating the state's legal order was the most daunting problem of the democratic transformation of nineteenth century liberal societies. Was that problem solved with party democracy? Perhaps not, if some important marks of that tension have today returned. Conti mentions the renaissance of identity politics and the call for descriptive representation, which coincided with the democratic rediscovery of representation starting in the 1990s. As a reaction against 'group representation' and the 'politics of presence' democratic societies register today a new assertion of the unity of the people, yet an assertion of partiality or the will of the largest portion against its parts, of the will of the many against that of minorities. What is missing in this new tension between pluralism and unity is the intermediary role of the party. Conti begins his book with a parallel between Victorian pluralism and identity politics in our time. Although captivating, the analogy to the present only partially succeeds, because while the Victorian claim for social pluralism had yet to experience the function of parties, today's claims for both the priority of the 'parts' and the assertion of the 'whole' over them comes as a reaction against party democracy. If the party has been the solution to the problem of pluralism in the early stage of democratization, what will be its solution in the age of post-party democracy?

¹⁴ Elmer E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (1942) with a new Introduction by Sidney A. Pearsons, Jr., (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

 RESPONSE BY GREGORY CONTI, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

First, let me say that it would at any time have been gratifying merely to have my book read by these four scholars, each of whom I admire greatly. But to have them comment in a manner at once generous and insightful is truly an honor. And for these essays to have arrived at this precise time, amid enforced isolation, makes them also, and sincerely, a source of some solace. It is both a pleasure and a relief to know that at least one republic, that of letters, is still functioning. I would also like to thank Adam Lebovitz for coordinating this roundtable and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins and Diane Labrosse for hosting it here.

These reviews are instructive in their own right, and I took much from each of them; one certainly need not have read my book to profit from them. In addition to providing clear-sighted recapitulations of my argument, Richard Bourke, Stuart Jones, Lucia Rubinelli, and Nadia Urbinati hit on a number of interesting themes and offer their own capsule interpretations of the material covered in the book. I cannot possibly do justice to the richness of their remarks. Instead, allow me to address four broad, and to a degree interrelated, topics raised by the reviewers.

1) National Unity

If one way of thinking about the basic theme of Western political theory since the decline of medieval Christian holism has been as a dialectic between the competing claims of unity and diversity, then it is certainly right to point out—as do Urbinati and especially Rubinelli—that my book is much more focused on the latter than the former.

Rubinelli elegantly distills the classic contrast between French monism and British pluralism on the questions of representation. This contrast is not just a useful mnemonic or teaching tool, but also tracks a central difference in political culture; I have leaned on this trope too. Given the generally Anglophilic cast of French political theory after 1815, the neglect of English ‘variety of suffrages’ theories across the Channel is surely telling. Nevertheless, we should be careful not to press the contrast too far. There were a few Frenchmen in the early decades of the nineteenth century who not only recoiled at what they perceived to be a deleterious obsession with uniformity in structuring the state, but who also actively sponsored reforms of the representative system in accordance with the “English” model of pluralistic mirroring or class-balancing.¹ Benjamin Constant, for instance, admired pre-Reform English legal pluralism as an aid to freedom, although he deemed it sadly unavailable for emulation by modern reformers in any sphere, let alone the electoral one;² and while he did not indulge in anything like the creativity in electoral design of the British writers I discuss, he castigated the effect that a “very exaggerated idea of the general interest” had had in hindering recognition of the truth that electoral representation was the province of the “partial,” the “particular,” and the “sectional.”³ Most strikingly of all, even Sieyès, whom Rubinelli rightly identifies as the progenitor of the unitarist conception of representation, idealized an assembly composed of “equal parts of

¹ I have touched on some of these figures in Gregory Conti “L’âme générale d’une assemblée’: A Neglected Parliamentarian and the Restoration Theory of Representation,” *Global Intellectual History* (forthcoming).

² Benjamin Constant, “Additions to the Fourth Edition of *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation*,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 155. (I mistakenly attributed this passage to the *Principles of Politics* in the book). In this excerpt we get a poignant reminder that the tragic sensibility about the threat to liberty posed by modern rationalism, often ascribed to Weber, was already a major preoccupation of liberalism in the 1810s.

³ See, for example, Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Representative Governments*, in *Political Writings*, ch. 5.

members from the three great areas of activity, the three great forms of industry which keep a society alive and make it prosper.”⁴

Sieyès’s “slip” into valorizing the balancing of diverse interests at precisely the moment he switched from a revolutionary polemicist to a constitutional author indicates, perhaps, just how difficult it is to think consistently of legislatures as vectors of unity. These are, after all, *numerous* bodies, and when pressed to justify this numerousness and not simply empower a single individual to make law, it is hard to avoid recurrence to the idea that a nation is composed of a great plurality of discrete communities, opinions, and interests, and that these should enter into a process of dialogue and negotiation if one is to make legislation that will be coercively imposed on the nation. As Mill wrote: “What can be done better by a body than by any individual, is deliberation. When it is necessary, or important, to secure hearing and consideration to many conflicting opinions, a deliberative body is indispensable.”⁵ Or in Sieyès’s own words:

In every deliberation there is a kind of problem to be solved. This is to know, in any given case, what the general interest would prescribe. When the discussion begins, it is not possible to identify the direction it will take to reach that discovery with certainty... hence the need for a clash and coincidence of opinions. What you take to be a mixture and confusion that serves to obscure everything is an indispensable preliminary towards enlightenment. All these individual interests have to be allowed to jostle and press against one another, to take hold of the question from one point of view, then, another, each trying to push it according to its strength towards some projected goal...Some [views] will fall while others will maintain their momentum and will balance one another until, modified and purified by their reciprocal interaction.⁶

The overt lauding of social-ideological diversity so characteristic of Mill’s prose is, naturally, absent from the Abbé. But perhaps their thought is not as far apart as we sometimes presume.

Moreover, modern European parliaments have a long genealogy. They developed out of the *ancien régime* system of assemblies of estates.⁷ The sense in which the Estates were *representative* was constitutively tied to regional plurality and to the plurality of natural-functional roles—“descriptions,” “orders,” “communities,” and “conditions,” as one late-Victorian writer evocatively put it⁸—within the body-politic. They existed to bring this diversity before the monarch who, in contrast, embodied national unity. Indeed, this purpose of re-presenting social diversity before the Crown long predated their status as deliberative bodies, as the medieval rule (to which England marked the earliest exception) was to *delegate* the representative, thus rendering it infeasible for a common will to evolve from an interchange between representatives and keeping them in an essentially expressive/consultative position before the monarch.⁹ The Crown thus remained the site

⁴ Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, “Views Concerning Several Articles of Sections IV and V of the Draft Constitution [First Thermidorian Intervention],” in *Essential Political Writings*, trans. Oliver Lembcke and Florian Weber (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 162.

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-91), XIX:424.

⁶ Sieyès, “View of the Executive Means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 39-40.

⁷ See, for example, Jeannine Quillet, “Community, Counsel, and Representation,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c.350-c.1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 520-572.

⁸ F.C. Montague, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Fragment on Government*, by Jeremy Bentham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 88-89.

⁹ E.g. Robert Lord, “The Parliaments of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period,” *Catholic Historical Review* 16 (1930): 125-144.

both of unity incarnate and of decision. For this reason one important mid-century liberal political scientist went so far as to argue that we should jettison the “very idea of representation [as] nothing but a relic of the *ancien régime*” and instead regard the parliamentary system as simply a mechanism for staffing the government that preserves the opportunity for opposition and criticism.¹⁰ In sum, and to put the point very crudely, a study of representative assemblies will by its very nature be preoccupied with plurality, and a political culture that seeks to uphold legislative supremacy will (the best efforts of Jacobins notwithstanding) be tilted toward appreciating social-ideological diversity.¹¹ Hence those who have most hungered after national unity have preferred executive hegemony legitimated by acclamation (e.g. Carl Schmitt) or plebiscites (e.g. Caesarists such as Napoleons I and III).

While we are on this topic, it is worth drawing out one peculiarity which I could probably have brought out more strongly. The book highlights the many paeans to diversity sung by Victorian proponents of proportional representation (PR), and shows some of the ambiguities involved in how PR advocates understood the diversity which they were devoted to translating accurately into the Commons. As Jones notes, Hare’s uncompromising system of the single-transferable vote (to which Mill was ever faithful) eliminated all involuntary constituencies in the name of individual liberty and thus set itself definitively against the idea that settled corporate entities had rights to be represented. Some of Hare’s supporters recognized that this meant that PR could make uniquely strong claims to the ideal of national unity. As a batch of his leading proselytes tellingly wrote: “the only corporate opinion of which proportional representationists recognise the claim in principle is that of the nation”; and a French follower made the pitch more poetically in complaining that on all non-proportionalist frameworks there was “from the electoral point-of-view, no longer a *patrie française*.”¹² While anti-proportionalists—including the British school of Hegelianism, Idealism¹³—attacked Harean PR for its predicted effects of weakening public spirit, dissolving common ties into a plethora of little factions, and hindering strong government, at the formal level Hare’s “great discovery” was hyper-nationalist; one might say that it removed from the electoral sphere all but individuals and the state.

Jones rightly notes that the technical individualism of Hare’s electoral system did not correspond to a normative individualism; he was as afraid as anyone of that bugbear of nineteenth-century social theory—atomization. Instead, Hare saw PR as aligning with, and importing into the electoral sphere, the British brilliance at forming voluntary associations and sustaining a free communal life. But as Urbinati points out, the associationalism underlying proportionalists’ optimistic projections about the moral benefits of their system did not make room for political parties of the modern sort. Nor was it only after a long experience of parliamentary democracy that their resistance to parties came under fire: already in the 1860s apologists for the nascent mass party rebuked Hare and his allies for what they felt was the arbitrary and elitist refusal to extend their associationalist appreciations to the modern democratizing party. Urbinati has, in her review here and in her own work, examined the rise of the party and its function in mediating between the unity of the state and the pluralism of civil society, and I could not improve on her account. I would merely quibble with one point: I’m not sure one can say that

¹⁰ F.A. Hermens, “L’erreur proportionnaliste et le régime parlementaire,” *Revue politique et parlementaire* 163 (1935): 429-57. Conversely, proponents of pluralistic forms of corporate or community-based representation have worn their affection for medieval institutions openly; e.g. some of the selections in *The Pluralist Theory of the State: Selected Writings of G.D.H.Cole, J.N.Figgis, and H.J.Laski*, ed. Paul Hirst (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹¹ Perhaps Andrew Rehfeld’s proposal of involuntary nonterritorial constituencies into which one is assigned randomly at birth, thus rendering each constituency as close to identical as possible, is the one true exception; Rehfeld, *The Concept of the Constituency: Political Representation, Democratic Legitimacy, and Institutional Design* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chs. 9-10.

¹² John Lubbock, Leonard Courtney, Albert Grey, and John Westlake, “Proportional Representation: Objections and Answers,” *The Nineteenth Century* 17 (1885): 312-320; Raoul de la Grasserie, *De la représentation proportionnelle de la majorité et des minorités* (Paris: Chevalier-Marescq, 1889), 15.

¹³ In her comment, Urbinati picks up my description of the significance of the Idealists in legitimating party conflict. She seems to imply, though, that they did so while supporting party-list PR, but in fact they were devotees of plurality-rule.

the party “solved” the vexing problem of “allow[ing] pluralism to act for a unitary purpose.” The modern disciplined democratic party is a very recent institution when judged against the long list of “components” of modern politics that Bourke gives; and if it is already in a state of terminal decline, then it may only have been a transitional device for an “early stage of democratization.” If I can indulge in a little armchair political diagnostics, there is some irony in what turned out to be the sources of the crisis of parties. Hare, Mill, and their fellow-travelers among the Victorian thinkers of representative government, as well as later thinkers they inspired such as the “elite theorist of democracy” Moisei Ostrogorski, feared that the party system would fail in its *pluralistic* dimension: that it would crush open discourse and impose an “artificial” uniformity on the development of public opinion.¹⁴ On the contrary, though, if analyses of “populism” are to be believed, it seems that the sputtering of the party system has been due rather more to the public’s belief that it has left the nation fractured, factionalized, and without sufficient *unity*.

2) Continuities and Discontinuities

Urbinati observes that my book does not attend much to the question of sovereignty. This is a fair critique. It stayed on the margins for a few reasons. First, it is perhaps the most common theme in the historiography of political thought, at least in its Cantabrigian stream, and I doubted whether I had anything substantively new to say. Second, the mid-Victorian period simply was not a high point for the sophisticated theorizing of sovereignty. To oversimplify slightly, between John Austin’s *Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (1832) and Albert Venn Dicey’s of *The Law of the Constitution* and the beginnings of British pluralism (mid-1880s) there lay a relatively fallow period for Anglophone debates on sovereignty.¹⁵

While I agree with the broad outlines that Urbinati traces of competing families of sovereignty theory, I would dissent from her assertion that a Rousseauian notion of a unitary “general will” as a unique bearer of popular sovereignty has in fact exercised hegemony. In some quarters of political philosophy it has, perhaps, and thus contemporary academic political theory felt it had to ‘rediscover’ descriptive or group representation and its panoply of associated concepts (such as standpoint epistemology or the ‘diversity trumps ability’ theorem, which are hardly innovations) from the 1990s on. But in practice this model hardly prevailed exclusively, even in France;¹⁶ and neither debates about if and how to represent social pluralism, nor particular mechanisms for doing so (e.g. quotas), have ever been absent from the lived politics of the democratic epoch. On this front there are traceable continuities of discourse and practice between the nineteenth century and today.

But of course, continuity and similarity are not *sameness*. Both Urbinati and Rubinelli note that I analogize Victorian mirror theory to certain aspects of what we loosely refer to as ‘identity politics’ today, and each of them points to a dissimilarity between the two. I am happy to concede these differences (although not perhaps all of the claims that Rubinelli makes). But of course, if twenty-first-century ‘identity politics’ and the nineteenth-century ‘variety of suffrages’ are not one and the same phenomenon, neither are they entirely disjoint—any more than the latter were either purely disjunct from, or merely replays of, the many ‘identitarian’ traditions and controversies of the *ancien régime*. In one of my favorite books of the last decade, the historian of religion Olivier Christin grippingly depicts how during the Wars of Religion “bi-confessional” French towns weighed whether or not the inclusivity achieved by institutions *paritaires* (those that would reserve a share of representation and decision-making power to each faith) undercut the notion of common (and even equal)

¹⁴ I have sketched this story in Gregory Conti, “Ostrogorski Before and After: Three Critical Views of Parties and Elites,” *Constellations*, forthcoming.

¹⁵ Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (London: John Murray, 1832); Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (London: Macmillan, 1885). Notably, as I have observed in a contribution to a collection in progress, sovereignty is not a prominent category in JS Mill’s thought; Gregory Conti, “Plural Voting and Popular Government in Victorian Britain,” in *Popular Sovereignty and Populism*, eds. Robert Ingram and Chris Barker (forthcoming).

¹⁶ See, for example, Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Modèle politique français* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2004).

citizenship.¹⁷ It would be foolish to assert that these sixteenth-century French debates were identical to the Victorian controversies my book analyzes; to debates about whether British rule ought to impose religious quotas on India and the continual legacy of various group-representation and consociational arrangements on the subcontinent; to modern clashes about identity and representation today. But it seems equally foolish to think they share nothing important in common, and that no illumination is to be gained by reflecting on them together. As Bourke points out, historical political theory tries both to “distinguish and connect.” If there was nothing distinct about the past, then no new perspective or insight could be gained from turning to it; but if there were no connections and parallels, then it is unclear how what we had learned could facilitate reflection on our current politics. It is, needless to say, a difficult tightrope to walk, and I would not claim that I have never fallen off.

3) Liberalism and Other Key Terms

The commentators treat my book as one that refines our understanding of the development of *liberalism*. I confess to finding this appraisal particularly pleasing: in recent years the revisionist historiography of liberalism has been one of the most vibrant literatures in the field, and I am happy if I have been able to contribute to it.¹⁸ Recently I have tried, in a co-authored piece, to sketch how I have come to think about the category of liberalism in the nineteenth century as result of writing this book, which I will not rehash here.¹⁹ But I would like to clarify that *Parliament the Mirror* was not written to be a new history of liberalism à la Helena Rosenblatt’s *Lost History*.²⁰ This is because—even within its specific domain of representation and electoral systems—my book only *in part* (although in a large part) covers liberalism, as well as only covering *a part of* liberalism. While many of the *dramatis personae* are liberals and the main action takes place during the “golden age of liberalism,” it also features writers of other partisan stripes and ideological sympathies. (Indeed, another scholar has perceived in the book an “unearthing of Tory radicalism.”²¹) One point I had hoped to prove was that mirroring parliamentarism garnered a remarkably wide range of allegiance from across the ideological spectrum in the mid-century. Now, it might be argued that this breadth of commitment to the mirroring ideal and its attendant values just shows to what extent liberalism underlay the beliefs of the mid-Victorian literati (and indeed, as glimpsed in the book, some figures were already taking that line during the period). There are versions of such an argument to which I would be sympathetic; I probably come close to saying as much at a few points in the book. But it should be emphasized that the roster of authors presented is not limited to self-conceived liberals, nor is the tracking of the deployment of the term ‘liberalism’ a principal effort of the book. And if partisans of the mirror theory were by no means restricted to liberals, it is also true that not all liberals subscribed to it. Along with mirroring, *capacity* was the second great lodestone of nineteenth-century liberal electoral theory;²² and the book addresses the latter only insofar as it inflected and modified the former. Now, this means that I did

¹⁷ Olivier Christin, *Vox Populi: Une histoire du vote avant le suffrage universel* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2014), ch. 1.

¹⁸ An excellent entrée into this scholarship is provided by a previous installment in this series: H-Diplo Roundtable XXI-4 (20 September 2019) on Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-4>.

¹⁹ Conti and William Selinger, “The Lost History of Political Liberalism,” *History of European Ideas* 46:3 (2020): 341-354.

²⁰ Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²¹ Max Skjönsberg, “The History of Political Thought and Parliamentary History in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Historical Journal*, forthcoming.

²² See, for example, Gianna Englert, *Capacity for Democracy: French Liberalism and the Language of Citizenship* (unpublished manuscript). Thanks to her for sharing this with me.

occasionally and inevitably need to address this theme, but the book should not be taken to be anything like a definitive statement of the capacitarian dimension of liberalism.

Both the capacitarian and the mirroring logics could be made to accommodate democracy. Other scholars have shown the extent to which liberal justifications for democratization, when they finally came, rested not on the triumph of an abstract egalitarianism, but rather remained within the older capacitarian framework of judgments about fitness for political participation²³; one of my tasks was to show how (some) liberal mirrorers managed to reconcile their values with democracy. But certainly a major thrust of the book insofar as it studies liberalism was, if not to announce that liberalism and democracy had stood athwart one another (this has long been known, if easily forgotten when convenient), then vividly to impress just how deep the antagonism between the two went in liberalism's heyday. The peace that liberalism made with democracy was largely a matter of cohort replacement, a fact epitomized in my book by the adaptation of the third Earl Grey's ideas by the fourth earl of that name. It was a special breed of liberal who, before the 1870s at the earliest, could be said to be anything more than a *reluctant* democrat. While the book employs the label "reluctant democrat" on a few occasions, I regret that I did not make more use of it, for I increasingly believe that no stronger claim to democratic-ness can be made even for those Victorian liberals whose theorizing seems most indispensable to the course of democratic theory. Jones brings this out concisely in highlighting my demonstration that the PR movement in its salad days was not the vanguard of democratization but at most promised to *make democracy less harmful should it not be averted*. To take one salient example: even John Stuart Mill pronounced that "equal universal suffrage" was the second-worst electoral system, preferable only to the *ancien régime* systems of estates.²⁴ When James Fitzjames Stephen, who is known today principally as Mill's "adversary," bemoaned the pressure to "sing Hallelujah to the river god" of democracy, his most salient substantive departure from John Stuart resided merely in that he had nothing to "propose to substitute" in its place.²⁵

In addition to liberalism and democracy, I want to say a quick word about one more term which crops up in these commentaries: *individualism*. I hope my book helps put a dent in the oversimplification whereby liberalism (or at least *British* liberalism²⁶) is associated with an undifferentiated individualism.²⁷ The label can apply at many different levels and to many different subjects, and it was and remains perfectly possible to hold what are called "individualist" positions in regard to the state's regulation of conduct, the organization of the economy, or social-scientific method without believing that the reflection of individual preferences was the be-all-and-end-all of representative institutions. Without making such discriminations we risk badly misunderstanding Victorian political theory, especially its liberal face.

4) Method

Bourke lauds me (or does he? His tone is rather wry) for my reticence about methodological matters. Yet he manages to develop a much fuller "conception" of method out of my stray remarks than I would have thought possible; I am grateful for his sophisticated extrapolations. But while Bourke insinuates that some sort of principle might have been underlying my

²³ See, for example, Trygve Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976), ch. 10. An excellent contemporaneous encapsulation of this view comes in the Anglican Liberal/Christian Socialist F.D. Maurice's *Workman and the Franchise* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1866).

²⁴ Mill, *Considerations*, 477-478.

²⁵ James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, ed. Stuart D. Warner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993), 155-156.

²⁶ Larry Siedentop, "Two Liberal Traditions," in *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 153-174.

²⁷ As Eugenio Biagini, among others, has long been doing: see, for example, *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals, and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931*, ed. Biagini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

“indifference” on this score, in truth I kept my comments brief principally from a sense that the subject is so discussed these days that no one has anything new to offer. Reflecting on the state of methodological debate calls to mind the old baseball player Yogi Berra’s quip about his once-favorite restaurant: ‘it’s so crowded that nobody goes there anymore.’ So if that bit of the introduction was short, it was not because I was being deliberately withholding. That said, I feel I should say something in response to his provocative review.

First, I admit to taking pride in Bourke’s assessment that I’ve avoided “partisanship.” While I am quite pluralistic regarding the substance and style of writing the history of political thought, I do think it should never become advocacy by other means. Those who wish for a certain policy or perspective to triumph ought straightforwardly to argue for it. (Of course, the history of political thought might furnish some of the materials for such an argument.) To seek to influence contemporary debate by insinuation or selective narrative, as has too frequently proven the case among scholars of the history of ideas, degrades the discipline. Moreover, this practice calls to mind Max Weber’s indignation about professors abusing the lectern for political purposes: if one wishes to promote a political position, one ought to do so in a way that makes it perfectly evident *on what grounds one might be criticized*.²⁸ This does not mean that intellectual history cannot have a ‘moral’ and I would never want to erect a hard border between political philosophy and intellectual history. But there is ineradicably a gap between the reconstruction of a past controversy or body of thought and any particular lesson which one might wish to draw from it for the present, and the means by which one traverses that gap ought to be laid out as overtly as possible and not left to innuendo or tone.

Bourke notes that our field requires one “to be fluently analytical and historical at once.” This is right, but it is quite evidently a tall order, and it demands a balance of competing qualities and modes of reasoning for which it is difficult to prescribe anything more concrete than very general rules of thumb. Thus from within the perspective of the writer, at least, doing the history of political thought will always be much more a craft than a science. At this point in time—when the most distortive approaches have been largely discredited, even if they smolder on in some spots—it strikes me that overt methodological disquisition might still have a negative or defensive value in countering incursions on the terrain of history of political thought from hostile quarters of the academy. But the degree to which a “methodology” can positively direct the historian of political thought or historically-minded political theorist seems limited. Reading as much as necessary to have confidence in and substantiate one’s claims; striving to develop appropriate categories and terms in which to present the material; recurring to landmarks from the historical context in order to illuminate obscure and unfamiliar elements—when it comes down to doing the work, these strike me as our “methods,” such as they are.²⁹

But even if we inhabit this mindset of modesty about method, great difficulties still beset us. For as Iain Hampsher-Monk has put it, explicating Pocock, “the attempt to understand political theory is ineluctably also an attempt to clarify it. The process of giving an exposition of a political theorist’s work is also the process of ‘assisting it in its indefinite progress towards higher states of organization’.”³⁰ Thus even in performing with integrity and impartiality the acts that are constitutive of the field we risk distortion and falsification, providing coherence and cogency where it was absent—and thus unavoidably inserting our own preconceptions and habits of mind into what was ostensibly an analysis of another thinker or tradition or language of politics. This risk is rendered more acute when one considers that sustaining the energy to complete these studies often (although not invariably) requires the development of sympathy with the authors one is treating, which makes it all the more likely that coherence and clarity in reconstruction might mislead us about certain aspects of the thought being

²⁸ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 20-21.

²⁹ For an instructive if self-flattering list of the qualities demanded of a historical political theorist, see, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, Foreword to *Catholicism and Democracy: An Essay in the History of Political Thought*, by Émile Perreau-Saussine, trans. Richard Rex (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), vii-viii.

³⁰ Iain Hampsher-Monk, “Political Languages in Time—The Work of J.G.A. Pocock,” *British Journal of Political Science* 14:1 (1984): 89-116.

reconstructed. And it must be admitted that this danger becomes all the more pronounced the further a study strays from Political Philosophers with a capital-P and into the realm of public moralists, statesmen, shapers of popular opinion, and so on—as my book does. Moreover, there is the further complication of the unavoidable plurality of defensible readings. For any subject in the history of political thought but the most boring and simplistic—that is, for any subject that could actually sustain a monograph-length investigation—there will be more than one feasible, illuminating interpretation. In a sense, then, any author or tradition or controversy that merits having *a* book written about it will in truth be able to sustain several books that stand in tension with each other. Naturally there are an infinity of unsupportable and simply incorrect possible readings; our set is bounded, but it is plural. For this reason, histories of political thought partake more of the character of Weberian ideal types than we acknowledge,³¹ and they should be evaluated with this in mind: that is, in the interest of furthering understanding they provide one among a set of credible ways of depicting with coherence and systematicity a phenomenon that was necessarily more variegated and complex.

Allow me to conclude with two final, also rather Weberian, notes. Bourke and Jones observe that I do not aim to provide “answers” or “normative payoffs.” This is true, and from the preceding it will come as no surprise that I do not think scholars of political thought need set out in quest of such deliverables. (Again, I wouldn’t want to deny that normative lessons may result from research in historical political theory, and justly so, as long as they are not achieved by sleights-of-hand or motte-and-bailey maneuvers.) Further, I suspect that *not* setting out with eyes fixed on a particular normative lesson tends to yield better books, although that is only a hunch. Rather than injunctions or prescriptions for today, which must be regarded as at most happy accidents of this kind of work, what historical political theory always and by its very nature strives to attain is *clarity about the meaning of a body of thought*. For this reason, it is an enterprise more kindred to analytic political philosophy than is often admitted. In the history of political thought, however, this aspiration to elucidate the meaning of philosophies, discourses, *und so weiter* has a strange effect. Where Weber thought that (at least the pedagogy of) moral philosophy and the social sciences served the high ethical purpose of clarity by showing how many commitments were entailed by “responsible” adherence to a “fundamental ideological position,”³² the history of political thought tends to show just how great the gap between “base” and “superstructure” is, just how many routes there are by which one might travel from a value to an institution or policy, from a philosophical anthropology to a political platform, from a comprehensive doctrine to a specific set of prescriptions, and *vice versa*. I would not go so far as to identify the field as a “tool of the skeptic.”³³ But the history of political thought is preeminently the discipline for those who, by temperament, are averse to the claims made on their allegiance in public discourse, who almost always feel that when they are told “as an *x*, or given that you believe *y*, surely you must support *z*” the discussion has moved too quickly and a few necessary steps have been skipped. For out of many of the same pieces, the history of ideas tells us, quite other puzzles have been constructed. This is another reason why the field is unsuited to partisan warfare.

Finally, given that I do believe in the kinship of political philosophy and intellectual history, those of us in the latter camp probably ought to read more of the former. Anachronism is obviously an ever-present danger, and fear of slipping into it is salutary. But it is not anachronistic to draw classifications, distinctions, and insights from political philosophy to assist in characterizing and categorizing past views. As Weber thought the “concept formations” of sociology could serve the social historian, so the concept formations of political philosophy can serve the historian of political thought³⁴—so long as one keeps these concepts as aids to interpretation, rather than reifying them and according them some kind of explanatory

³¹ See, for example, Gianfranco Poggi, *Weber: A Short Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 26-27.

³² Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 26-27.

³³ Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 156.

³⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

power.³⁵ For good or ill, I could not have written *this* book without the constant exposure to what is unsatisfactorily called “contemporary political theory” that politics departments provide.

³⁵ As noted, for example, by James Kirby, “History, Law, and freedom: F.W. Maitland in Context,” *Modern Intellectual History* 16 (2019), 127-154.